

# A Critical Evaluation of The Text of **MARCUS GARVEY AFRICA AND THE UNIA: A UMUM PERSPECTIVE ON CONCENTRIC ACTIVITY IN THE PAN AFRICAN WORLD**

by Leandre Jackson copyright 1985

Organization is a great power in directing the affairs of a race or nation toward a given goal. To properly develop the desires that are uppermost, we must first concentrate through some system or method, and there is none better than organization. Hence, the Universal Negro Improvement Association appeals to each and every Negro to throw in his lot with those of us who, through organization, are working for the universal emancipation of our race and the redemption of our common country, Africa.

Marcus Garvey

Here we want to examine several variables that interact to offer a new and provocative perspective of Marcus Garvey, his work, and his colleagues in the mission of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Variable as defined here is understood to be a representation of an abstract construct. The constructs operate as stylistic or framing devices that aid in the delineation of both the intellectual ethos of the text as well as the evolving narrative. The variables identified as keys to a full reading of James Spady's text are: a) historiographic technique, b) narrative technique, C) pedagogy, d) cultural milieu, and e) musical themes. If one uses these variables as reference points then a much more effective reading of the book is possible. So let us begin with a variable not included in the list above, but is just as important as the others—graphics.

It is certainly not unusual to read historical texts include photographs or other types of graphics. However, it is not common to find the graphic structure and references so intimately linked to the text and the underlying philosophic impetus of the author. Therefore, a proper assessment of **MARCUS GARVEY AND THE UNIA** should begin with the monograph's extraordinary cover art.

The cover art, done by architect Isaac Foy, employs symbols and words—ancient and contemporary—to suggest concentricity (meaning literally to have a common center), cultural tradition, cultural context, and unconfined history/future of Africans in this universe. The protective wings of 'Africa' hover above a pyramid/triangle of which two respective sides are Marcus Garvey, the other the UNIA. Within the triangle/pyramid, are several geographic regions cities crucial to the evolution of Garveyism and modern African//American thought. These repositories are in symbolic motion. A concentric motion. Above the pyramid/triangle and the wings of Africa, man—original man—sees/looks in the many directions of a non—linear time. He looks ahead. behind. Above. Below. Drinking in the complex experiences of the many

in many places in many timeless forms.

Foy's cover introduces us to the theme repeated throughout the book, that of specificity symbolizing universality. The generic experience represented in the individual endeavor. For Foy's art

here-and elsewhere in his extensive portfolio—reflects the basic ontological position of the UMUM perspective and the author. That position recognizes and insists on the interrelatedness of the ancient and the modern, the spiritual and the secular, the culture of the mass created *by* the individual; the common but unique human center from which the African/American experience evolves and consistently draws upon. Concentricity. These symbols have specific meanings rooted in the culture(s) from which they spring, yet here they are combined to represent an expanding spectrum of ideas and meanings just as does the text. Thus, Foy's cover art must be viewed as a most appropriate precursor.

The small collection of photographs within the monograph continue the general theme found in Foy's cover graphics. The first two photographs the reader encounters in the book are representative of not only the internationally broad appeal of the UNIA but the permanence of the ideas advocated by Garvey.

The top photograph shows Garvey, the African Prince Kojo Hoenou, and G.O. Marke, in 1924. Below it is another photograph of a UNIA outpost still in use in Monrovia, Liberia in 1976! (The UNIA, as the book makes clear did not perish with Garvey). The following full page photograph reiterates the institutional nature of the UNIA, showing the five UNIA presidents to date along the columns of the Philadelphia division office. (As of 1987 the Philadelphia division was still alive and functioning, as were branches in Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., and Canada.)

Other photographs in the book not only return to the institutional and international elements of the UNIA, but they also expand the range of displayed experiences by showing the people, the men and women, that made the UNIA a viable organization. Each photograph in its own way is a reminder of the commitment, faith, planning and organizational qualities brought into the UNIA by Africans from all walks of life. These photographs are graphic illustration of the universality of the UNIA's appeal to the masses of black people. And they also underline the importance of the organizational infrastructure that supported the UNIA.

Anyone exploring or reconstruction the history of Marcus Garvey wades, in a figurative sense, into a metaphysical underbrush of myth, sociological theory, ethnic apotheosis, pseudo—intellectualism and media distortion. Some of the latter is strategically planted while some “just grew” as a consequence of chronic misinterpretation of Garvey and Garveyism. This monograph, however, through the author's historiographic and narrative techniques, provides a broad sense of the people and events that impacted on Garvey and the UNIA in a number of areas not usually discussed. Because, the author chooses to look at a comprehensive picture of circumstances affecting the UNIA the monograph does not become another review of Garvey's life. Obviously, there are a number of other texts covering the latter. So, it seems appropriate that the book actually begins in 1938 just 2 years before Garvey's death in London. We are immediately drawn into a world about to undergo a metamorphosis, as World War II looms on the horizon, and Marcus Garvey's death connotes a change in the African/American world, that will be a keystone for what came before him and what came after. But, as the author so clearly implies here, Garvey's death does not signal the death of struggle for change. For even as his death is on the horizon, there are “Fresh” ideas, “Fresh” approaches being born in places like the Sinkerly Elementary School in Philadelphia, PA at the Ethiopian Young People's League in New York City, and in the Nigerian Youth Charter. in the minds of Aime Cesaire in Martinique and Frantz Fanon. All bound together by the unique universality of global experiences peculiar to the African diaspora. Thus, in the face of Garvey's seeming physical demise the first concern is “Fresh”.

Spady's historiographic technique stresses the intertwining of the “official” documented history, i.e. publications, correspondences, official minutes from meetings, etc., and research by other Garvey scholars with oral history and a systematic analyses of people or events relative to the whole of action surrounding Garvey, the UNIA, and the African/American community at large. The reader is given a tangible sense of how the UNIA grew and persevered as an organization through a careful synthesis of the participants own words and his interpretation. Through the use of primary source documents, supplemented by a number of related reference texts—Amy Jacques Garvey's *Garvey and Garveyism* for example—the reader is given insight into the internal operation of the UNIA and the personalities that lead—or misled—the organization. Spady uses no less than 50 references or quotations from the personal correspondences of individuals like W.E.B. DuBois, Nnamdi Azikiwe—former president of Nigeria, Thomas W. Harvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, to name only a few. All associated in some way with the UNIA. At least ~/ of the correspondences used are letters to or from Thomas W. Harvey, a Philadelphia and former officer and successor to Garvey in the UNIA leadership.. The monograph exposes Harvey as a figure in need of greater study. Yet, the above tallies only point up some of the personal letters used as primary source documents. There is also the inclusion throughout of information obtained from personal interviews conducted with Harvey and others. (What insight into Garvey and the UNIA this man must have offered !) Clearly, this is a

issuing of history from the mouths of those who participated in shaping history. Additionally, there is information drawn from the minutes of the various UNIA meetings, conventions, and conferences. That information is further amplified by the use of unpublished manuscripts from the UNIA s course in African Philosophy, from William Servile, C.L.R. James. As we see this vast body of data synthesized and blended with the author s interpretation of events we are acquainted with the forces working for and against Garvey. Perhaps most importantly, we are exposed to crucial information that allows the reader to see the essential role played by the UNIA Rehabilitating Committee after Garvey's death. (Spady is of the opinion, which seems to be substantiated by the record, that Thomas W. Harvey and the Rehabilitating Committee are directly responsible for the UNIA s survival as an institution after Garvey s death.

When the words of Garvey himself are linked to the other data mentioned above the temporal/material and socio-political context in which the UNIA functioned has a psychic and spiritual immediacy. It is a tribute to the historiographic technique and the author~ s writing abilities that a successful blend is achieved.

Which brings us to the basic reason for such a complex technique’s success: The narrative form. That form is rooted in the author s contention that a linear discussion of history is not only incorrect, but intellectually constricting and rigid. The prevailing dialectic here calls for a discarding of Western/Euro-Centric views of time and the importance of chronology in the study of history. Instead the walls of time are understood to be thin veils continually pierced by the bonding events and peoples of the past/future/now.

The use of ‘Fresh’ as the opening concern (concentricity —remember) has already been referred to as a logical introduction to the book. But, looking closer, we see that in the context of the discussion here, it also is introduction to a fresh approach to historical narrative. For the author in rejecting the linear approach to history discusses events or people as they relate to each other philosophically, politically, not necessarily chronologically. Thus, an innovative feature of Spady s narrative form is the adept shifting of temporal venue as a means of underlining the timeless (UMUM)

perspective of the monograph. People/events are related on a global, experiential basis. Sometimes simultaneously sometimes otherwise. Implicit in this narrative form is the suggestion that to attempt to evoke historical contexts in the traditional chronological manner distorts the truth, confuses motives, and accords unqualified non—contextual importance to occasions that may or may not be critical. However, in a narrow isolated review of the historical circumstances how is one to judge who influences what? We may find an answer in the second concern “Back in Stride Again”.

In “Back In Stride Again”, Spady begins by describing a session of a UNIA convention held in August 30,1937. Moving to a detailed description of a Joe Louis fight that evening and a resolution placed on the convention floor by Garvey, the reader is shifted in time to the 1~34 Convention, where we are informed that “delegates unanimously supported the Five Year Plan emanating out of the Seventh International Convention of the UNIA held in Kingston Jamaica, August 1st to 31st, 1934. it was in this 1934 Convention that they decided to move the International Headquarters to London.” This item seems to be illogically placed in the middle of a description involving the 1937 activities. Until we read only a few paragraphs later:

With the International Headquarters settled in London for two (2) year~ prior to (the] 1937 Convention, the IJNLA had entered another phase of development, especially through its Five-Year Plan, a subject gaining much attention at this Conference. (p. 30-32)

The circle is closed. Beginning in ‘37, moving to ‘34, we the audience are shown how circumstances of 3 years before become a bridge linking events and people through time. It is a circuitous bridge, with metaphysical pylons rooted in the minute and immense actions of people named and unnamed. It is concentric motion.

The narrative style itself is consistent with the transcendent perspective of timeless concentricity. Another key element in the narrative style is the accessibility of the language. The use of syntax familiar to the contemporary reader, a potentially difficult and pedantic discussion is avoided. Instead, the text remains pedagogically sound, intellectually stimulating, but interesting through the periodic use of linguistic devices, informational inquiry and suggestions for further research. The following paragraph exemplifies Spady s approach:

There are several pertinent research entry devices present in Lewis s lucid essay on Garvey s London years. How did the membership composition of the U.N.I.A. in England change during Garvey s crucial five years there? As a dynamic being moving surreptitiously and curvically through several circles, what identifiable changes are present in Garvey s leadership style? Did these different experiences cause him to think with freshness just how best to concretize his dispersed followers? Did his decision to leave Jamaica and the Caribbean, coupled with his inability to return to the United States, place him in London at that most crucial period in the development of the anti— colonialist movement? (p.21—22)

Notice the use of questions as a pedagogical device and prod for further scholarly

research. Notice the diverse number of issues raised in this single paragraph, each worthy of intense future study. And study the original syntactic approach:

As a dynamic being moving surreptitiously and curvically through several circles, what identifiable changes are present in Garvey's leadership style? Did these different experiences cause him to think with freshness just how best to concretize his dispersed followers?

Erqo, the reader is not faced with the often turgid syntax sometimes found in historical texts. Further the narrative form is visually evocative. That is, the syntax is not only

an imaginative blend of style and information, but is designed to prick the reader's visual imagination, for example, the opening paragraph in the first concern, 'Fresh' does this brilliantly:

### Fresh

It was a quiet Spring day. Students ha[d] already assembled in their varied classes at the Singery Elementary School. The Principal could now settle down to many responsibilities for this day. A quiet spring day linked to the many seasons he'd already witnessed. Many seasons gone. Many thousands gone. Reflective moments. A new day beginning. Dawn. Sunlight. Sun shining brightly on those gathered at 22nd and Berks Street in the heart of North Philly. Fresh!!! Brand New. And, in 1985, there is a new Super Fresh Market in that same area. So quiet. So very transient. The Principal is planning for a New Day. Planning on this quiet spring day!

Later, Spady uses the language differently to construct individual personalities while giving a sense of the activity the individual was involved in. There is a frequent sense of motion, a sense of some task being performed, which in turn allows the reader to begin appreciating how the UNIA, its members, and others interacted on an organizational level. For instance, in the following paragraph helps the reader "see" Garvey in 1938:

Garvey spent the balance of 1938 solidifying his organizational base, preparing the final draft of the revised constitution, editing the Black Man and adjusting to a household without an immediate family. His wife, Amy Jacques Garvey and their two sons, Julius and Marcus, Jr., had returned to Jamaica upon "5.5. Casanare" in early September. She had made a tough decision described vividly in, Garvey and Garveyism: (p. 44)

This is a "picture" of a black man grounded in life's real tasks of working, coping domestically as well as the extraordinary efforts of leading an international political organization, and while writing and editing a newspaper. In addition, here, as well as elsewhere in the text, we are reminded that the historical record shows that Garvey did not fade away a beaten broken man after his

forced exile from the United States. Rather, up until he died in London, the author offers the impression that Garvey was intimately involved in the internal affairs of the UNIA until his illness and death in 1940.

Yet, though Garvey's efforts were certainly worthy of continuing admiration and respect, it is the collective effort of others of the UNIA leadership cadre that are given as much credit for holding the organization together when (Garvey was no longer physically present in the States.

The narrative weaves, and binds information from diverse sources to tell the story of the UNIA's survival, the near dissolution, the adaptation. The architects of the UNIA's new direction, post—Garvey, are identified. By the book's conclusion, the reader must come to appreciate the efforts of Thomas W. Harvey, Ethel M. Collins, Daisy Whyte, B.J. Spencer Pitt, and others on the UNIA Rehabilitation Committee. The combination of thorough historiographic technique with command of his narrative goals, makes the men and women of the UNIA and their actions, substantive and multidimensional.

Finally, there are two other major variables that give the monograph its distinctive place in Garvey studies. Culture and music. These two variables are closely linked as they are in life.

It is the use of musical ideas that provide a contemporary reader even more entry into the story being told. On the surface, a non—scholar might never express an interest in reading a 'His story of the UNIA'. Until, perhaps, he connects with the sections led by titles familiar to him. The concern titles: "Fresh", "Back In Stride Again", "Time After Time". Each is drawn from the contemporary popular musical world—Kool and the Gang, Maze, Miles Davis. This is a subtle emphasis on the interrelatedness of mass/pop culture and mass movements, and it is also another "hook" for another audience—another aspect of the seemingly natural mass appeal of Garveyism.

Marcus Garvey Africa and the UNIA is a book about time in the UMUM perspective. It is about history but written for the reader of today. It is written about then for now. Thus, the use of musical ideas in the text frame and reflect the spirit of the text. The third concern, "Time After Time, Miles After Miles" is just as well thought out in terms of its integration of imagery, ideas, and language.

It begins with Larry Neal's poem "Garvey's Ghost", acknowledging that the text to come is concerned with the history of the UNIA subsequent to Garvey's death. Further, the musical title, "Time After Time"—a blues piece as played by Miles Davis—returns subtly to the ever present timeless nature of the history of African/American people and ideas. But, more to the point could "Time After Time" also be the author's way of commenting on some of the themes evident in the forthcoming text? Is the type of conflict sparked by UNIA commissioner/President James R. Stewart of Cleveland Ohio new, or is there a certain familiarity with the type of power play attempted by Stewart? How many other great organizations have been threatened with an undermining from within? Spady writes:

As U.N.I.A. divisions elsewhere in the world established contact with the Parent Body, it was facing a crisis of another sort. A somewhat strained relationship between U.N.I.A. officials. Thomas W. Harvey, B.J. Spencer Pitt and Ethel M. Collins among others and James R. Stewart and his confreres. It was inevitable. 1942 was the year Garvey's term as President expired. Stewart called a convention that was considered "illegal and unconstitutional" by several longtime Garveyites such as Harvey. (p.78)

The blues theme of the music—Time After Time—is reflected in *the* text. For we read of the struggles faced by Harvey, and Ethel Collins in trying to hold the UNIA together when others in leadership roles had seemingly disappeared. We “see” the split forming between Stewart and others; the birth and success of the Rehabilitation Committee; the rejuvenating labors of Amy Jacques Garvey, Barrister J. Spencer Pitt, Freddie L. Thomas. The hope restored, another element of most blues forms, even though it may not appear so at the outset.

And as the last concern begins it certainly appears as though the UNIA would soon dissolve. But the hope wedded to labor, reverses the despair that enveloped many after Garvey passing.

So, even as the blues song may begin with a sense of despair and sadness, there is within the story being told a fundamental message of hopefulness, and belief in renewal. Clearly, this blues theme is a specific cultural variable growing out of the African/American experience. We see in this instance just one dimension of the culture-music bonding that appears throughout the text. A look at the other concerns will confirm this. Listen to the music, read the text, and discover that culture= music=people=UMUM. This is the context in which this text be studied.

The race needs workers at this time not plagiarists, copyists, and mere imitators, but men and women who are able to create, to originate and improve, and thus make an independent racial contribution to the world and civilization.

MARCUS GARVEY