“FOR THE FREEDOM OF THE RACE”:
BLACK WOMEN AND THE PRACTICES OF NATIONALISM,
1929-1945

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ABSTRACT

“For the Freedom of the Race” examines how a vanguard of nationalist women leaders—Amy Jacques Garvey, Maymie De Mena, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Ethel M. Collins, Ethel Waddell, and Celia Jane Allen, among them—engaged in national and global politics during the 1930s and 1940s. With the effective collapse of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—the dominant black nationalist organization in the United States and worldwide in the immediate post-World War I era—these women leaders emerged on the local, national, and international scenes, at once drawing on Garveyism and extending it. As pragmatic activists, nationalist women formulated their own political ideas and praxis. They employed multiple protest strategies and tactics (including grassroots organizing, legislative lobbying, letter-writing campaigns, and militant protest); combined numerous religious and political ideologies (such as Freemasonry, Ethiopianism, Pan-Africanism, and Islam); and forged unlikely alliances—with Japanese activists, for instance—in their struggles against racism, sexism, colonialism, and imperialism. Drawing upon an extensive evidentiary base of primary sources including archival material, historical newspapers, and government records, my study reclaims the Great Depression and World War II as watershed moments in the history of black nationalism and sheds new light on the underappreciated importance of women in shaping black nationalist and internationalist movements and discourses during this period.
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INTRODUCTION

In a 1942 letter to Seon Jones, one of the leaders of her organization, the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME), black nationalist activist Mittie Maude Lena Gordon carefully outlined instructions for the recently appointed executive council member to follow. “You are hereby held solely responsible for the success, harmony and peace, financially and otherwise of [the new division],” Gordon advised Jones. After explaining how Jones should conduct his affairs as a leader in the movement, Gordon ended her letter as she often did, alluding to the underlying driving force behind her political practice: “Yours for the Freedom of the Race.” To a large extent, these words capture the essence of this project. Spanning the period between 1929 and 1945, this study examines how black nationalist women engaged in national and global politics in their individual and collective struggle “for the freedom of the race.”

Drawing on an extensive evidentiary base of primary sources—including underutilized archival material, census records, historical newspapers, oral histories and government records—this study reclaims the Great Depression and World War II as watershed moments in the history of black nationalism and sheds new light on the underappreciated importance of women in shaping black nationalist and internationalist movements and discourses during this period. It shows how a vanguard of nationalist women leaders—Amy Jacques Garvey, Maymie De Mena, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Ethel M. Collins, Ethel Waddell, and Celia Jane Allen, among them—confronted racial and sexual discrimination and asserted their political agency in various locales throughout the United States and across the African diaspora.

1 Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Investigative Files on the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, File no. 100-124410, RG 60, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (emphasis added). All FBI files cited in this study were obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).
The study argues that the decline of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)—the dominant black nationalist organization in the United States and worldwide in the immediate post-World War I era—engendered a crucial space for women activists to engage in nationalist politics in new, idiosyncratic, and innovative ways. With the effective collapse of the UNIA during the mid-1920s, women leaders emerged on the local, national, and international scenes, at once drawing on Garveyism and extending it. As pragmatic activists, nationalist women formulated their own political ideas and praxis. They employed multiple protest strategies and tactics (including grassroots organizing, legislative lobbying, and letter-writing campaigns); combined numerous religious and political ideologies (such as Ethiopianism, Pan-Africanism, and Islam); and forged unlikely alliances—with Japanese activists, for instance—in their struggles against racism, sexism, colonialism, and imperialism.

The women of this study were politically active in a range of organizations including the UNIA, the PME, and the Nation of Islam (NOI). Regardless of their organizational affiliation, however, all of the women in this study maintained the view that black people constituted a "separate group or nationality by virtue of their African heritage, their shared historical experiences (slavery, segregation, ghettoization and other forms of oppression), and their distinct culture."\(^2\) They

\(^2\) Michael O. West, “‘Like A River’: The Million Man March and Black Nationalist Tradition in the United States,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (March 1999): 83. Also, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Moses argues that “black nationalism differs from most other nationalisms in that its adherents are united neither by a common geography nor by a common language, but by the nebulous concept of racial unity... It attempts to unify politically all of these people whether they are residents of African territories or descendants of those Africans who were dispersed by the slave trade...” (17). It is significant to note that scholars have yet to agree on a fixed definition of black nationalism. A survey of the literature reveals multiple, sometimes conflicting, definitions of the term. For earlier interpretations that were often critical or dismissive of black nationalism, see E. U. Essein-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York: Viking Press, 1970); Harold Cruse,
rejected mainstream white society and culture, and advocated Pan-Africanism, African redemption (from European colonization), racial separatism, black pride, political self-determination and economic self-sufficiency. For these reasons, the women chronicled in this study were, without question, ‘black nationalists’—a term they often used to describe themselves.

However, these women’s political ideas and activism were far more complex and fluid than this term suggests. This study highlights the *practices* of black women’s nationalist politics, which were by no means static or always consistent. Black nationalist women strategically shifted their political approaches, employed various protest strategies, and moved in directions that sometimes baffled their contemporaries. Yet, they were united by an unwavering belief that their efforts would, in fact, ensure the complete “freedom of the race.”

**Interventions**

This study joins a growing literature seeking to enrich our understanding of black women’s national and transnational activism during the first half of the twentieth century. Departing from much of the scholarship, which has emphasized black women’s activism in traditional protest organizations—particularly, the church, women’s clubs, and civil rights groups—this study joins recent works that move black radical women from the margins to the center of historical narratives

on the black freedom struggle. It challenges dominant scholarly narratives of the period that have privileged black middle-class activism within organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL). By examining the lives of a diverse group of women—including prominent individuals such as Amy Jacques Garvey and Maymie De Mena and lesser-known activists such as Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Ethel Waddell, and Celia Jane Allen—this study exposes the complexity and richness of black nationalist

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women’s ideas and practices and offers new insights into gender, black nationalism, and diasporic radicalism during the twentieth century.

First, this study shifts focus from the period historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses refers to as the “golden age of black nationalism” (1850-1925) and challenges scholarly representations of black nationalism as a declining influence in black political thought and practice during the 1930s and 1940s. I contend that black nationalism was a significant driving force in African American politics in the two decades after Marcus Garvey was deported in 1927. While scholars have typically focused on the rise and fall of Garvey and his organization, the UNIA, this study captures the enduring legacies of the Garvey movement and sheds new light on the crucial role women played in sustaining black nationalist politics in the United States and across the African diaspora. In so doing, it reveals that Garveyism had a much greater, more profound, and lasting global impact than existing scholarship have documented.

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Movement of Ethiopia (PME), which has been hidden in the historical record. By analyzing how nationalist women—working in different social and economic contexts and in various locales throughout the United States and across the African diaspora—confronted racial and sexual discrimination, this study situates women as leaders on local, national, and international levels.

Moreover, by uncovering the political histories of a diverse group of nationalist women leaders during the thirties and forties, this study reveals the complexities of these women’s gender and sexual politics. It captures the myriad ways women during this period articulated what historian Ula Taylor refers to as “community feminism”—a “territory that allowed [women] to join feminism and nationalism into a single coherent, consistent framework.” “At times,” Taylor asserts, “community feminism resembled a tug-of-war between feminist and nationalist paradigms, but it also provided a means of critiquing ideas of women as intellectual inferior.” While some of the women in this study publicly challenged male chauvinism and patriarchy in their writings and speeches, others were largely silent on these issues but maintained positions of leadership and authority over men and women and/or engaged in activities that challenged the gender and sexual conventions of their time. Like other radical women activists during this period, the women chronicled in this study engaged in discourse(s) about black sexuality, respectability, motherhood and femininity. However, their responses to these issues were by no means monolithic or static. By examining nationalist women’s political praxis in specific national locales and by transcending

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9 My research findings support my contention that the PME was the largest and most influential black nationalist organization established during the Great Depression. It also appears to be the largest nationalist organization founded by a woman. Curiously, while a number of historians have mentioned the organization in passing, they have yet to fully examine its significance or impact. This dissertation represents the first comprehensive study of the PME.

10 Taylor, Veiled Garvey, 2.
geographic and cultural lines, this study shows how nationalist women often adapted their actions and ideological messages to fit the settings in which they worked.

The focus on nationalist women differs from recent studies by Carole Boyce Davies, Erik S. McDuffie, Dayo F. Gore and others that center on black women’s engagement with the Communist Left, which is an important and complementary line of research, as black nationalism and Marxism were the two dominant—and often competing—ideologies in African American politics in this era. While they were not oblivious to the class dimension of their political struggle, the women in this study chose not to affiliate with the Communist Left for a myriad of reasons, and instead remained affiliated with the UNIA and/or sought to create alternative sites for political engagement. Examining these women’s ideologies and lived experiences captures the range and complexities of black women’s radical politics during the 1930s and 1940s. Significantly, they also reveal that black nationalism had a much broader base of support during this period than historians have acknowledged.

Finally, this study enriches our understanding of historical narratives of black internationalism that examine the global vision(s) of black people in the United States and their sustained efforts to forge transnational collaborations and solidarities with people of color. While

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recent studies have begun to address the vital role women and gender play within black internationalist discourse(s), much work remains to be done. This study foregrounds the writings, speeches, activism, and overseas travel of a diverse group of nationalist women in order to shed new light on the creative and critical ways women articulated black internationalism during the twentieth century. Importantly, this study expands the scholarly discourse on black internationalism by highlighting the grassroots internationalist activities of working-poor women with limited access to financial resources and as a consequence, overseas travel.\textsuperscript{14}

Sources and Chapter Outline

This project draws on a wide array of primary and secondary sources. Using material from more than a dozen archival collections—including underutilized collections such as the Theodore G. Bilbo Papers at the University of Southern Mississippi and the Earnest Cox Sevier Papers at Duke University—as well as records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), oral histories, and historical newspapers, the study tells the story of how nationalist women leaders engaged in national and global politics from the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 to the end of the Second World War in 1945. With the exception of Amy Jacques Garvey, the women in this study did not leave personal archives. However, evidence of their life’s work and political accomplishments can be found in the archival records of others. The records of a diverse group of individuals with whom nationalist women collaborated and corresponded provide rare glimpses into the ideas and practices of these women activists during the 1930s and 1940s. The same is true for other sources included in


this study such as FBI records, oral histories, census records, organizational records, photographs, and historical newspapers. Notwithstanding their limitations, all of these individual sources are invaluable ‘pieces of the puzzle.’ When used judiciously, and in combination with each other, these sources shed light on the lives and activism of nationalist women leaders who have been largely hidden in the historical record.

The study begins with an examination of the first generation of nationalist women activists whose lives were greatly influenced by the Garvey movement of the 1920s. It shows how the first generation of Garveyite women leaders and activists laid the groundwork for the vanguard of nationalist women activists who later emerged during the Great Depression and World War II. Chapter two offers a portrait of how activist Mittie Maude Lena Gordon facilitated a vibrant nationalist movement in the city of Chicago during the early 1930s, which culminated in an unprecedented emigration petition of an estimated 400,000 black Americans willing to leave the country. This chapter demonstrates how Gordon formulated her own religio-political philosophy by drawing on the teachings of Marcus Garvey and other religious and political figures of the twentieth century.

Chapter three shifts focus to the U.S. South, examining how activist Celia Jane Allen facilitated a grassroots nationalist movement during the late-1930s that galvanized Southern black sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the rural areas. Deploying Garveyist theory and rhetoric, including the tenets of black political self-determination, racial pride, and economic self-sufficiency, Allen worked within the organizing tradition as she attempted to garner support for West African emigration. Her political activities illuminate how nationalist women activists strategically adapted their actions and ideological messages to fit the local settings in which they worked. Significantly, they capture the myriad ways women articulated what scholars Michael O. West and William G.
Martin have referred to as “inspirational Garveyism”—a more fluid discourse that black men and women began to invoke in the absence of Marcus Garvey’s direct leadership and influence.  

Chapter four engages the works of literary scholars on performance and representation to illuminate the paradoxical and performative nature of black nationalist women’s political ideas and praxis. It offers a critical discussion of the lobbying efforts of women activists—including Ethel Waddell and Mittie Maude Lena Gordon—surrounding the 1939 Greater Liberia Bill and examines their unusual political collaborations with white supremacists. Chapter five shifts focus to diasporic concerns, exploring the complexities of black nationalist women’s ideas on Africa, African redemption, and black emancipation during the 1940s. By foregrounding women’s writings and speeches during this period, this chapter captures the complexities, tensions, and contradictions within nationalist women’s political ideas and activism; and illustrates how black women shaped, and were shaped by, Pan-Africanist movements and discourses of the period.

Chapter six highlights the writings, speeches, and activism of a diverse range of female actors to demonstrate the vital role nationalist women activists played in promoting Afro-Asian solidarity from the late 1930s to the end of World War II. Departing from the predominantly male-centric and top-down focus of much of the scholarship on the Black International, this chapter highlights the crucial role “nonstate [female] actors” played in pro-Japanese protest movements at the grassroots level, thereby revealing the creative means by which women articulated black internationalism during a global economic crisis and in a climate of government repression and censorship.  

In concert, the six chapters of this study shed new light on the enduring legacies of Garveyism, the richness and complexities of black nationalist women’s political thought and

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15 West, et. al., From Toussaint to Tupac, 13.
activism during the 1930s and 1940s, and the crucial role these women played in building protest movements aimed at ending sexism, colonialism, imperialism, and global white supremacy.
CHAPTER ONE

“THE NEW NEGRO WOMAN”: WOMEN PIONEERS AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER IN THE GARVEY MOVEMENT, 1914-1929

On April 19, 1924, Eunice Lewis’ editorial, “The Black Woman’s Part in Race Leadership,” appeared on the women’s page of the Negro World—“Our Women and What They Think.” A Garveyite residing in Chicago, Lewis crafted a succinct but powerful article that embodied the spirit of the “New Negro Woman.”17 “There are many people who think that a woman’s place is only in the home—to raise children, cook, wash, and attend to the domestic affairs of the house,” Lewis noted. “This idea, however, does not hold true to the New Negro Woman,” she continued. The “New Negro Woman,” Lewis insisted, was intelligent, worked equally with men, had business savvy and most significantly, was committed to “revolutionizing the old type of male leadership” in and out of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).18 Her comments, which coincided with the Harlem, or “New Negro,” Renaissance of the period, signified a shift that was beginning to take place within the Garvey movement.19

Established in Kingston, Jamaica in 1914, the UNIA was the dominant black nationalist organization in the United States and worldwide in the immediate post-World War I era. Emphasizing racial pride, black political self-determination, racial separatism, African heritage, economic self-sufficiency, and African redemption from European colonization, Marcus Garvey envisioned the UNIA as a vehicle for improving the social, political, and economic conditions of black people everywhere. Like many black nationalists before (and after) him, Garvey maintained a masculinist vision of black liberation and thus believed that black men would ultimately lead the way.\(^2^0\) Though he was not opposed to female leaders \textit{per se}, Garvey sought to maintain a patriarchal model of leadership in the UNIA, which allowed for women to serve as leaders only under the watchful eye of male Garveyites.\(^2^1\) Lewis’s call for “revolutionizing the old type of male leadership,” then, signified a direct challenge to the prevailing ethos of black patriarchy in the Garvey movement. Along with a cadre of women activists during this period, including Amy Jacques Garvey, Maymie De Mena, and Henrietta Vinton Davis, Lewis articulated a new and expansive vision of black women’s leadership in the UNIA and in the community at large.

This chapter examines the first generation of nationalist women activists whose lives were greatly influenced by the Garvey movement of the 1920s. I argue that the first generation of Garveyite women leaders and activists laid the groundwork for the vanguard of nationalist women


activists who later emerged during the Great Depression and World War II. By articulating what historian Ula Taylor refers to as “community feminism,” the first generation of Garveyite women activists created a space in the UNIA for women to have greater visibility and autonomy than Marcus Garvey had envisioned.\(^2\) However, these women's efforts to bring black women into nationalist leadership were not fully realized during the Garvey movement’s heyday (1919-1924). Garvey’s autocratic style of leadership and efforts to maintain a strict gendered hierarchy in the organization limited the leadership opportunities and possibilities for Garveyite women activists during the 1920s.

**Garveyism and Black Women’s Activism during the 1920s**

From the outset, women were actively involved in the UNIA. In 1914, when Marcus Garvey decided to launch the organization in an effort to “unit[e] all the negro peoples of the world into one great body,” Amy Ashwood, who later became his first wife, served as the organization’s first secretary and co-founder.\(^2\) While scholars debate the extent of Ashwood’s formal leadership in the organization, none deny the fundamental importance of her organizational skills and social networks to the UNIA’s success.\(^2\) The organization’s earliest meetings, for example, were held at the home of

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\(^{24}\) Although Amy Ashwood’s biographer, Lionel Yard, argues that she was co-founder of the organization, historian Tony Martin insists that Ashwood’s account was “probably fictional.” See Lionel Yard, *Biography of Amy Ashwood, 1897-1969: Co-founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Washington D.C.: Associated Publisher, 1990); Tony Martin, *Amy Ashwood Garvey: Pan-
Ashwood’s parents, and Garvey secured some of his earliest financial supporters through these contacts. When the UNIA headquarters relocated to Harlem in 1919, Ashwood remained actively engaged in the organization’s affairs. In October of that year, she and Garvey were married in a private ceremony in Liberty Hall, initiating what became a short union. Six months later, the two were embroiled in a bitter public divorce, and though Ashwood remained engaged in Pan-Africanist politics for the remainder of her life, she parted ways with Garvey and the UNIA shortly after the marriage ended. Meanwhile, other women became increasingly involved in the UNIA. When the organization relocated to Harlem, three of the organization’s six directors were women: Irene Blackstone, Carrie B. Mero, and Harriet Rogers.

These women joined a rapidly growing community of nationalist activists who turned to the UNIA amidst the social and political upheavals of the post-World War I era. The First World War (1914-1919), which mobilized thousands of black men to fight for the very same democratic rights and privileges they were being denied at home, marked a pivotal turning point in the history of the modern African diaspora. The labor shortage in the United States, which the war stimulated, opened up a crucial space for black men and women from various parts of the globe to gain employment in urban areas of the U.S. North. More significantly, though, the war dramatically altered the political consciousness of peoples of African descent in profound ways. In the war’s

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*Africanist, Feminist and Mrs. Marcus Garvey No. 1 Or, A Tale of Two Amies* (Dover: Majority Press, 2007), 2.

25 Yard, *Biography of Amy Ashwood*.

26 Martin, *Amy Ashwood Garvey*.


aftermath, black men and women across the diaspora rejected the postwar racial discrimination that persisted in the United States and colonial territories in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

When the war ended in 1919, Afro-Caribbean migrants, for example, who had served in the British West Indies Regiment revolted against the British in a series of uprisings that swept the region. These political uprisings, combined with a number of historical developments of the era including the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) in Russia and race riots of the Red Summer (1919) in the U.S., created an atmosphere in which Garveyism emerged as the largest and arguably most influential Pan-Africanist movement of the twentieth century, attracting an estimated six million followers. In Garvey’s teachings, black men and women found more than a panacea for the economic, political, and social problems facing “Africans at home and abroad.” Garveyism with its philosophy of racial pride, African redemption, economic self-sufficiency, racial separatism and political self-determination, became a significant political organizing tool around which activists across the globe resisted racial oppression and sought to advance universal black liberation.

For women, the UNIA functioned as an “incubator” in which many became politicized and trained for future leadership. During a period in which black women were generally confined to the

29 James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 50-91.
31 For a general overview of Garveyism, see Amy Jacques Garvey and Marcus Garvey, eds., *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey or, Africa for the Africans* (Dover: Majority Press, 1986); Martin, *Race First*; Grant, *Negro With a Hat*.
drudgery of domestic work, Garveyism provided a sense of empowerment and within the UNIA, women found opportunities to serve in a variety of both public and private roles.\textsuperscript{33} This was certainly the case for Ethel Maud Collins. Born in Brown’s Town, Jamaica (near Garvey’s hometown of St. Ann’s Bay) in 1892, Collins migrated to the United States during the years of the Great Migration.\textsuperscript{34} As thousands of black southerners abandoned life in the Jim Crow South, collectively resisting white supremacy and searching for better prospects in the urban North and West, Caribbean migrants also arrived in the United States in record numbers.\textsuperscript{35} From 1899 and 1927, more than 140,000 Caribbean migrants entered the United States. By the early years of the Great Depression, almost twenty percent of blacks in Harlem were of Caribbean origin.\textsuperscript{36}

When Collins arrived in Harlem in 1920, she joined a vibrant community of Afro-Caribbean men and women. While the organization’s base of support extended far beyond the city, the UNIA


\textsuperscript{34} Hill, \textit{Marcus Garvey and the UNIA Papers}, Volume X: 658; There are conflicting accounts of Collins’s actual birth date. Some records indicate that she was born in 1890 while others have 1896 or 1892 listed as the actual date of birth. However, I have decided to use the 22 March 1892 birth date, which Collins included in her application for U.S. Citizenship in 1927. See New York, Naturalization Records, 1897-1944, National Archives; Washington, D.C.; \textit{Petitions for Naturalization from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, 1897-1944}; Series: M1972; Roll: 530, Ancestry.com subscription database, \url{http://www.ancestry.com} (accessed 8 July 2013); Collins migrated to the United States in 1919. See 1930 U.S. Census Records, Manhattan, New York, Ancestry.com subscription database, \url{http://www.ancestry.com} (accessed 8 July 2013).

\textsuperscript{35} Irma Watkins-Owens, \textit{Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community}, 1900-1930 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); James, \textit{Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia}.

\textsuperscript{36} James, \textit{Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia}, 12.
in Harlem became a significant political space for Afro-Caribbean men and women, and other peoples of African descent, to engage in the struggle to end global white supremacy. Though the specific circumstances surrounding her decision to join the UNIA are unclear, Collins became an active member of the Garvey movement within a year of arriving in the United States.37 During the organization’s heyday, Collins frequently attended UNIA meetings in Harlem, doing clerical work for the organization and investing in the Black Star Line, Garvey’s largest and most significant business venture.38 A single woman who resided with her siblings in the city, Collins owned a beauty shop from her Fifth Avenue apartment to maintain a livelihood and likely used it as a space to disseminate Garveyism.39 By the late 1920s, she was appointed executive secretary of the Garvey Club in New York and acting secretary of the UNIA.40

Collins’s positions in the Garvey Club and UNIA provided an opportunity for her to hone leadership and organizing skills. Significantly, Collins’s position brought her into contact with other Garveyite women in Harlem at the time, including Amy Jacques Garvey. Born to a middle class family in Kingston, Jamaica in 1895, Jacques Garvey relocated to the United States in 1917, joining thousands of new Caribbean migrants in the burgeoning “Black mecca.” As new black residents from the South joined a growing community of Afro-descended people in the city, Harlem witnessed a flowering of black intellectual and literary expression through a variety of mediums including poetry, literature and music. The Harlem Renaissance, which began around 1918, also

marked the emergence of the “New Negro,” the antithesis of the submissive, passive, and accommodating “Old Negro.”

Arriving in Harlem during this period, Jacques Garvey joined the community of “New Negro” migrants. However, in Jacques Garvey’s case, the decision to leave her native country had little to do with social conditions in Jamaica. Facing chronic heart problems and frequent attacks of malaria fever, Jacques Garvey headed to the United States for what she thought would be a temporary respite from the island’s hot climate. A series of events, however, altered her plans. During the summer of 1919, Jacques Garvey attended a UNIA meeting on 138th street in Harlem out of sheer curiosity.

Although the specific details surrounding Jacques Garvey’s initial meeting with Marcus remain a mystery, this was the beginning of Jacques Garvey’s lifetime involvement in the organization. Like Collins, Jacques Garvey became increasingly active in UNIA affairs shortly after joining the organization, serving behind-the-scenes as a secretary in the main office. In 1922, months after Garvey’s divorce from Amy Ashwood was finalized, Jacques Garvey became Garvey’s second wife—a position that she skillfully used to leverage her involvement and leadership in the organization. By the mid-1920s, she became the most prominent woman in the organization, serving in a wide range of capacities above and beyond the moniker of “helpmate.” By helping Garvey write his speeches and articles, Jacques Garvey played a crucial role as co-creator of Garveyism, and when Garvey was imprisoned in 1925, she served as the de facto leader of the UNIA. From 1924 to

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41 See Huggins, Harlem Renaissance ; Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue ; Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance ; Ogren, “What is Africa to Me?” ; Baldwin, Chicago’s New Negro ; Curwood, Stormy Weather ; Chapman, Prove It On Me ; Baldwin and Makalani, Escape from New York.
42 Taylor, Veiled Garvey, 17.
43 Ibid., 18-40.
44 Ibid., 23.
1927, Jacques Garvey edited the women’s page of the *Negro World*, “Our Women and What They Think,” providing a significant platform for UNIA women to articulate their views without direct male censorship.\(^4^6\)

While Jacques Garvey’s leadership and influence was second to none, other women in the organization maintained vital positions in the UNIA, bringing a wide range of talents and skills ‘to the table.’ This was the case for Henrietta Vinton Davis, who became the organization’s first female president and later maintained a number of prominent leadership positions in the organization. Born in 1860 in Baltimore, Maryland, Davis was the daughter of Mary Ann (Johnson) Davis and Mansfield Vinton Davis, a “distinguished musician.”\(^4^7\) During her early years, she attended the Boston School of Oratory where she sharpened the oratorical skills that later proved beneficial to her involvement in the Garvey movement. In 1878, Davis became the first African American woman to be employed by the Office of the Recorder of the Deeds located in Washington, D.C.\(^4^8\) A close associate of influential black leaders such as noted abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Davis emerged as one of the most talented and prolific black actresses of the period and received widespread acclaim in several national newspapers.\(^4^9\)

Unlike Jacques Garvey and Collins who joined the Garvey movement in their twenties, Davis made the decision to join the UNIA much later in life. In 1916, at the age of fifty-six, the acclaimed elocutionist abandoned her acting career to become what one scholar describes as “a


\(^{4^9}\) Majors, *Noted Negro Women*; Seraile, “Henrietta Vinton Davis and the Garvey Movement.”
missionary in the cause of African redemption.”\(^5^0\) While her involvement in the Garvey movement certainly enhanced her visibility and propelled her political career, Davis had already demonstrated an interest in political matters since the 1890s—in one instance, she wrote to Populist Party candidate Ignatius Donnelly to express an interest in supporting his 1892 campaign in order to better “serve [her] race and humanity.”\(^5^1\) Especially drawn to Garvey’s teachings on race pride and self-reliance, Davis became an active member of the UNIA in 1916, quickly moving up the ranks. Within three years, she became the UNIA’s international organizer and concurrently maintained positions as vice-president of the UNIA’s shipping corporation and one of the directors of the Black Star Line. In the years that followed, Davis held a number of highly visible leadership positions in the UNIA including secretary general and delegate to Liberia in 1924.\(^5^2\)

One of Davis’s most significant roles was her unofficial position as mentor. During the mid-1920s, Davis advised Maymie Leona Turpeau De Mena, who became another leading figure of the UNIA.\(^5^3\) Born in San Carlos, Nicaragua in 1891, De Mena traveled to the United States on numerous occasions during the early twentieth century before joining the UNIA.\(^5^4\) The daughter of Isabella Regist and Francisco Hiberto de Mena, the minister of lands, De Mena received a private education while residing in Nicaragua. In the United States, she worked as a teacher and clerk-stenographer before she became one of the leading figures of the UNIA. While much of her early

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\(^{5^0}\) Seraile, “Henrietta Vinton Davis and the Garvey Movement,” 9.

\(^{5^1}\) Ibid.

\(^{5^2}\) Ibid., 7-24.


\(^{5^4}\) Hill, *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, Volume VI: 117; While Garvey scholars have maintained that De Mena was from Nicaragua (based on census records), Mwariama Dhoruba Kamau, international organizer and UNIA historian, maintains that De Mena was actually born in the United States (in the state of Louisiana) but misrepresented her birthplace to authorities for reasons that are unclear. Author’s interviews with Kamau, 16 January 2013 and 28 July 2013.
life is shrouded in mystery, it appears that De Mena’s entrance into the Garvey movement coincided with Garvey’s promotional tours in Latin American and the Caribbean. By the mid-1920s, De Mena was an active Garveyite, playing an instrumental role in promoting Garveyism throughout the African diaspora and on numerous occasions, serving as translator and organizer on UNIA promotional tours with Davis.55 A gifted orator, De Mena traveled with Jacques Garvey in 1925, visiting UNIA divisions across the United States, galvanizing black men and women and garnering organizational support in the wake of Garvey’s arrest for mail fraud and subsequent imprisonment.56 In the state of Virginia, for example, De Mena promoted Garveyism during the mid-1920s and oversaw the election of officers at the local UNIA divisions.57

These activists, who constituted the first generation of Garveyite women leaders, played a foundational role in the Garvey movement by serving in a variety of capacities on national and international levels. Drawn to the UNIA by a series of factors, these women represent the widespread reach of Garveyism, which profoundly altered the lives of black men and women from a wide range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds in various parts of the world. The global reach of the organization cannot be overlooked. As a universal movement, Garveyism provided a political platform for activists in the United States and abroad to agitate for the rights and dignity of peoples of African descent. Whereas other race organizations of the period, including the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL), maintained a membership base in the United States, UNIA chapters could be found in more than forty countries

55 Bair, “True Women, Real Men,” 162.
57 Bair, “Renegotiating Liberty,” 226; 228-230. During this period, De Mena played a vital role in helping to formally recognize the Daughters of Ethiopia (DOE), a female auxiliary of the UNIA that offered social services to black communities across the country. See Duncan, “The Efficient Womanhood of the UNIA,” 27, 105, 116.
worldwide including Costa Rica, South Africa, and Trinidad. The global organization captured the imagination of a wide range of Afro-descended people across the globe—crossing cultural, ethnic, and class lines.

During a period in which gendered ideas about domesticity and separate public/private spheres dominated the political discourse, the UNIA provided a space for black women to engage in political activities outside of the expected parameters of home and family. The ratification of the nineteenth amendment in 1920, which signaled an expansion of women's political power, ultimately failed to live up to its promises. For black women, and other women of color, the amendment did not have an immediate and total effect; it took more than four decades before they experienced the full benefits of suffrage. Largely shut out of the formal political process, black women in the United States found opportunities to engage in political activity through community associations and organizations such as the National Association for Colored Women (NACW). The advent of the “New Negro” era, however, marked the beginning of the decline of the black club women’s movement, thereby shrinking opportunities for black women to participate in national political

58 Martin, Race First, 15-6.
62 Baker, “The Domestication of Politics.” For an overview of black women’s political engagement in black women’s clubs and other religious and fraternal community associations and organizations, see Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: Morrow, 1984);White, Too Heavy a Load. It is significant to note that black men were also shut out of the formal political process during this period.
movements. Race organizations, including the NAACP and NUL, offered limited leadership opportunities for black women who were generally confined to behind-the-scenes roles, largely hidden from public view. With few visible leadership opportunities for black women during this period, the UNIA was, in some ways, one of the most progressive. Unlike many other race organizations of the period, women in the UNIA were “well integrated into the movement’s structure” and constitution. The organization “went beyond [simply] carving out an auxiliary niche for women by developing a system in which each local division elected a male and female president and vice president.” In this way, the UNIA provided a space for some women to maintain visible leadership positions.

This is significant. Yet, it should not obscure the reality that this was not the case for most women in the organization. The typical female Garveyite did not hold prominent positions or receive the recognition and visibility that Amy Jacques Garvey, Henrietta Vinton Davis, and Maymie De Mena received. In fact, the number of high-profile women leaders in the UNIA during the 1920s was vastly disproportionate to their actual membership numbers. Even though women comprised roughly half of the organization’s membership, only a handful of women served in visible leadership positions within the global organization.

63 White, Too Heavy a Load, 112-3.
65 Taylor, Veiled Garvey, 44. Although women were well integrated into the UNIA, the constitution did not guarantee equal participation in the organization.
The Politics of Gender in the UNIA

Although the UNIA provided a space for black women to engage in political activism during the 1920s, the prevailing ethos of the Garvey movement was patriarchal black male leadership. Based on a Victorian model of manhood, Garvey and other male leaders in the organization maintained a strict gendered hierarchy and advocated traditional gender roles. Garvey’s poetry, articles, and speeches reinforced women’s responsibility as nurturers and black men’s roles as protectors. Published in 1920, the “Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World,” one of the UNIA’s founding documents, also propagated this view, suggesting that males in the organization were charged with the task of protecting “the honor and virtue” of black women. Male Garveyites expressed similar sentiments in the organization’s newspaper, the Negro World. Established in 1918, the Negro World was the primary vehicle through which Garvey disseminated his nationalist ideas. With an impressive readership in diverse places such as Dahomey and Australia, it became one of the most influential black newspapers of the twentieth century. Through the pages of the Negro World, Garvey promoted a line of Black-owned businesses including garment factories, grocery stores, restaurants, and the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation.

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71 Martin, Race First, 151-173.
It was also through the pages of the *Negro World* that Garvey and other male Garveyites promoted male dominance. In a 1923 article, one male Garveyite insisted, “Let us go back to the days of true manhood when women truly reverenced us…for all true women will admire and respect a real man.”\(^{72}\) Another male Garveyite later added, “If you find any woman—especially a Black woman—who does not want to be a mother, you may rest assured she is not a true woman.”\(^{73}\) These statements underscore male Garveyites’s Victorian ideals on women’s roles and as a consequence, their desire to limit women’s leadership opportunities in the organization.\(^{74}\)

With the exception of prominent women—such as Jacques Garvey, Davis, and De Mena—women in the UNIA were relegated to supportive and subordinate roles.\(^{75}\) Very few women served on the UNIA’s executive board or maintained leadership positions such as editors of the organization’s newspaper.\(^{76}\) De Mena herself later made this observation, insisting that “women were given to understand that they were to remain in their places, which meant nothing more than a Black Cross Nurse or a general secretary of [a] division.”\(^{77}\) Modeled after the American Red Cross, the Black Crosses Nurses auxiliary was established by Henrietta Vinton Davis in 1921 in Philadelphia “for the purposes of providing education, medical aid, and community service” to black communities in the United States and across the diaspora.\(^{78}\) Operating in their expected roles as

\(^{72}\) *Negro World*, 9 June 1923.


\(^{74}\) Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still*; Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontent*.

\(^{75}\) Bair, “Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands Unto God” ; Bair, “True Women, Real Men” ; Satter, “Marcus Garvey, Father Divine.”

\(^{76}\) Bair, “True Women, Real Men,” 156.


nurturers, Black Cross Nurses performed social welfare and organizational functions such as providing clothing for the needy, running soup kitchens and visiting the sick. While men in the UNIA participated in the African Legion, the protective arm of the UNIA, female members of the Black Cross Nurses were involved in the ‘motherly’ duties of meeting the physical and emotional needs of black communities—especially those of children and the elderly.

If the UNIA’s African Legion represented the “most visible representation of Garveyite manhood,” as one scholar maintains, then Black Cross Nurses embodied the most visible representation of expected Garveyite womanhood. To that end, Black Cross Nurses initiated a series of community-based initiatives to improve the quality of health services in impoverished communities. The nature of these women’s political and social activism, however, varied based on the specific locale in which they worked. For example, in Belize, Black Cross Nurses emphasized what historian Anne McPherson describes as “a maternalist politics of racial uplift.” Significantly, while these women centered their social and political activism on improving conditions in black communities, they advocated a maternalism that sought to increase rights for middle-class Creole women while limiting opportunities for working-class women. While they attempted to assist

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80 Summers, Manliness and Its Discontents, 93.
82 MacPherson, ‘Colonial Matriarchs,” 509.
impoverished mothers, Black Cross Nurses in Belize “treat[ed] poor mothers as not only voiceless dependants, but as morally suspect ones.”

In addition to serving as Black Cross Nurses, women in the UNIA often served as “lady presidents” of local divisions or participated in the Juvenile Divisions and the Universal African Motor Corps, the female version of the African Legion. As a lady president of a local division, women were charged with the task of overseeing the local female auxiliary. In the African Motor Corps, Garveyite women learned military drills and a variety of automotive skills, including driving cars, taxis and ambulances. However, whether they maintained a position as a lady president of a local division, Black Cross Nurse or member of the African Motor Corps, these women held restricted leadership positions and were always accountable to males in the organization.

For these reasons, among others, women in the UNIA often challenged the organization’s leadership structure. During an afternoon session of the 1922 UNIA convention, a group of Garveyite women openly resisted their subordinate positions in the organization in a very public way. Though they could serve as delegates to the organization’s conventions, women encountered a number of difficulties being recognized by Garveyite men who presided over the sessions. Insisting that they had not received “proper recognition” during previous sessions, a group of women addressed the convention with a list of grievances. “We, the women of the U.N.I.A. and A.C.L.,” they stated, “know that no race can rise higher than its women.” Mirroring the rhetoric of the black women’s club movement, UNIA women went on to emphasize the value of women’s leadership,

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83 Ibid.,” 517.
86 Bair, “Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth,” 39-45; Lewis, Marcus Garvey, 68.
87 Bair, “Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth,” 45.
which they argued was critical to “refine and mold public sentiment.” Speaking on behalf of the women, Victoria Turner, a delegate from St. Louis, presented a list of resolutions designed to improve the status of women in the organization. Among the list of resolutions included a very specific request that a woman should be appointed the “head of the Black Cross Nurses and Motor Corps and have absolute control over those women.” In addition, the women requested that Garveyite activist Henrietta Vinton Davis, in particular, “be empowered to formulate plans…so that the Negro women all over the world can function without restriction from the men.”

Curiously, UNIA women made these and other demands while Garvey was physically absent from the room—a case of happenstance or strategic move on their part. When Garvey returned, he appeared to be indifferent to the women’s concerns, reminding them that the organization already recognized women as leaders. While Garveyite women’s actions at the 1922 Convention did not precipitate any immediate or monumental changes—Garvey passed an amended resolution that failed to take into consideration all of the women’s concerns—it was still a groundbreaking move. The women’s public grievances capture their growing sense of dissatisfaction in a male-dominated and masculinist organization, and their refusal to sit idly by as Garvey and other males in the organization openly reinforced traditional gender constructions that limited leadership opportunities for women.

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89 Hill, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA Papers, Volume IV: 1037 (emphasis added).

90 James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia, 138-140.
At the same time, women’s responses to male chauvinism in the organization were far more complex than this one incident suggests. The women’s page of the *Negro World* captures the multiplicity of nationalist women’s political ideas in profound ways. Introduced by Jacques Garvey in February 1924, the women’s page, “Our Women and What They Think,” significantly expanded women’s spheres of influence in the UNIA. Indeed, the page provided female Garveyites with an opportunity to express their views without direct male censorship. Importantly, its debut coincided with Garvey’s legal troubles and growing dissatisfaction among many of Garvey’s followers. A year prior to the introduction of “Our Women,” Garvey had been convicted on charges of mail fraud in connection to the organization’s Black Star Line. In February 1925, after his appeals were denied, he entered the federal penitentiary at Atlanta. During the period in which his leadership began to diminish, Jacques Garvey became increasingly involved in organizational affairs, serving as de facto leader in Garvey’s absence. With Garvey unable to wield full control from his Atlanta prison cell, Jacques Garvey used the pages of “Our Women” to address a range of topics of interest to women. Significantly, she used the pages of “Our Women” to openly denounce the “antiquated beliefs” of men in the organization.

From its very first issue, the women’s page of the *Negro World* openly challenged many of Garvey’s views on women, and the core principles of the UNIA. One of the featured articles, “The New Woman,” written by active Garveyite Saydee [Sadie] E. Parham, challenged traditional notions of gender roles. A frequent writer for “Our Women” and law student, Parham discussed the process of evolution by which all species experience growth and maturation. Along these lines, she implied that women’s roles and opportunities needed to expand in an ever-changing society: “From the

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91 Taylor, *Veiled Garvey*, chapter 4; Matthews, “Our Women and What They Think.”
brow-beaten, dominated cave woman, cowering in fear at the mercy of the brutal mate…from the safely cloistered woman reared like a clinging vine, destitute of all initiative and independence…we find her at last rising to the pinnacle of power and glory.”94 Another writer, Blanche Hall, reinforced these sentiments in her article, “Woman’s Greatest Influence is Socially.” “Show me a good, honest, noble man of character,” Hall wrote, “and I will show you a good mother or wife behind him.”

Addressing the important responsibilities that women held in society and emphasizing men’s dependence on women, Hall reminded readers that the UNIA could not advance without women’s assistance. “There is much that the woman can do to make this organization a success,” she noted.95

More than any other writer on the women’s page, Jacques Garvey offered a scathing critique of black men in the organization whose “antiquated beliefs” guided their actions. Jacques Garvey’s article, “Black Women’s Resolve for 1926,” is a striking example. Without mincing any words, Jacques Garvey insisted that women in the UNIA were determined to have equal opportunities and were unwilling to allow male Garveyites to hinder their progress. “If the United States Congress can open their doors to white women,” she wrote, “we serve notice on our men that Negro women will demand equal opportunity to fill any position in the Universal Negro Improvement Association or anywhere else without discrimination because of sex.” “We are very sorry if this hurts your old-fashioned tyrannical feelings,” she continued, “[but] we not only make the demand…we intend to enforce it.”96 Mirroring some of the women’s grievances at the 1922 convention, Jacques Garvey’s statements underscore UNIA women’s absolute frustration with male Garveyites who thwarted their efforts to obtain full gender equality within the organization.

95 Blanche Hall, “Woman’s Greatest Influence is Socially,” Negro World, 4 October 1924.
While Jacques Garvey and others demanded change in the organization along the lines of gender equality, they sometimes accommodated the very same traditional Victorian ideals they rejected. This ideological “tug-of-war,” which historian Ula Taylor has termed “community feminism,” was ever present in the articles of “Our Women.”  

Amelia Sayers, the same Garveyite activist who wrote numerous editorials demanding expanded opportunities for women, also upheld male supremacy in some of her articles. In her 1924 article, “Man is the Brain, Woman is the Heart,” Sayers affirmed traditional gender roles and demonstrated her belief in the essentializing differences between men and women. Reducing women to emotional beings, Sayers asserted, “The man is the brain, but the woman is the heart of humanity; he its judgment, she its feelings; he its strength, she its grace, adornment and comfort [sic]” “[T]hough the man may direct the intellect,” she continued, “the woman cultivates the feelings.” Sayers’s statements diminished women’s intelligence and wisdom, which she classified as exclusively male attributes.

Similarly, another Garveyite, identified only as Vera, reinforced sexist views on the pages of “Our Women.” Vera’s article, “The Ideal Wife,” offered a succinct description of the perfect wife: “The woman who winds herself into the rugged recesses of her husband’s nature, and supports and comforts him in adversity.” Echoing Sayers’s essentialist comments, Vera also employed the phrases, “softer sex,” and “ornament[s] of man” to describe black women. Vera’s statements, along with Sayers’s views, reinforced Garvey’s own metaphor of women as “nature’s purest emblem” and certainly undermined UNIA women’s earlier rejection of the prevailing notions of the “cult of

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97 Taylor, Veiled Garvey, 2.  
domesticity.” In so doing, they offer a glimpse into the myriad ways Garveyite women wavered between feminist and nationalist ideals.

Despite the contradictory views that often appeared on the women’s page of the *Negro World*, it was especially significant. The first of its kind, “Our Women and What They Think” provided a platform from which nationalist women could articulate their views on a range of topics including women’s issues. Prior to “Our Women,” the *Negro World* neglected to give a voice to women in the organization; when the newspaper did include statements from women, they were often “briefly paraphrased, while Garvey’s were usually printed word for word.” Therefore, the women’s page significantly expanded women’s spheres of influence. Moreover, the page serves as one of the few surviving chronicles of rank-and-file women in the UNIA, unveiling their views, conflicts, and their efforts to foster change in the Garvey movement—and within black communities at large. In so doing, the women’s page of the *Negro World*, perhaps more than the women’s auxiliaries, propelled UNIA women into greater political visibility. Its abrupt end on April 30, 1927 dealt a significant blow to Garveyite women but it did not thwart women’s efforts to challenge the UNIA’s structure of leadership.


101 While there were many other women’s pages and newspapers during this period that addressed these issues, the women’s page of the *Negro World* was the first editorial written by (and primarily for) black nationalist women. See Taylor, *Veiled Garvey*, 69.


103 Amy Jacques Garvey offered no explanation for her decision to discontinue the women’s page. However, it appears that she was having a difficult time getting women to contribute articles. See Adler, “Always Leading Our Men in Service and Sacrifice,” 358.
The experiences of Laura Kofey, a female Garveyite who rose to prominence during the mid-1920s, provide a striking example of how women leaders transgressed the bounds that had been established within the patriarchal UNIA. Described as an “eloquent orator,” Kofey became a key organizer in the Garvey movement—not long after Garvey’s 1925 imprisonment. The gifted speaker had the ability to draw crowds and in only a matter of months, thousands joined the UNIA through her influence. From 1926 to 1927, Kofey traveled throughout the U.S. South, establishing new UNIA divisions in Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida. In Tampa alone, more than three hundred men and women joined the UNIA under Kofey’s direction during the summer of 1927.

Kofey’s position of prominence, however, was short-lived. By the end of 1927, Kofey’s reputation became tarnished as other (mostly male) Garveyites became suspicious of her immediate success. In a telegram to Garvey in September 1927, J.A. Craigen, the executive secretary of the UNIA’s Detroit division, denounced Kofey as a fraud and sent a chilling warning: “If she is not advised to discontinue her activities in the association serious trouble will ensue which will entail serious complications.” In February 1928, Garvey openly denounced Kofey in the *Negro World*. “This woman is a fake,” the black nationalist leader wrote, “and has no authority from me to speak to the Universal Negro Improvement Association.”

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107 Quoted in Bair, “Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth,” 56.
Not long after her public dismissal from the UNIA, Kofey established the African Universal Church and Commercial League in Florida, teaching “a blend of Garveyism and religion.”108 Under her new organization, Kofey promoted West African emigration and economic self-sufficiency and encouraged black Southerners to engage in a series of transatlantic business ventures.109 Not surprisingly, Kofey continued to encounter resistance from male Garveyites in the movement who tried to discredit the activist. When their efforts failed to yield any results, a group of male Garveyites took matters into their own hands. During an evening service on March 8, 1928 and in the presence of her most avid followers, Kofey was assassinated. Claude Green and James Nimmo, two leaders of the UNIA’s Miami branch, were initially arrested and charged with murder in the first degree. Conflicting accounts, however, resulted in their acquittal not long after. While the two men were never convicted of Kofey’s murder, they were present at the 1928 service, and had threatened (and harassed) Kofey prior to the shooting.110

Kofey’s experiences underscore the patriarchal ethos of the Garvey movement, which limited the extent to which women could autonomously lead. While women maintained some positions of leadership, they were expected to remain under direct male control and oversight. Even after leaving the UNIA, Kofey remained subject to the patriarchal control of male Garveyites. Kofey’s bold decision to deviate from the socially acceptable gender roles and expectations in the Garvey movement ultimately cost the activist her life. But, if the assassination of Laura Kofey was meant to deter black nationalist women from stepping outside of the bounds of expected female leadership, then it failed to accomplish its intended purpose.

109 Duncan, “Princess Laura Kofey and the Reverse Atlantic Experience,” 221.
A New Phase of Garveyism

Nineteen twenty-seven marked the beginning of a new phase of Garveyism. In December of that year, eight months after the women’s page of the Negro World folded, Garvey was deported from the United States to his native Jamaica. The charismatic black nationalist leader had fought unsuccessfully to appeal his arrest and conviction on charges of mail fraud. From a New Orleans port, Garvey bid farewell to an estimated five thousand followers. While many of his opponents rejoiced in what they perceived as the complete demise of the UNIA, Garvey was determined to “devote every minute…to the great cause [of] universal freedom.”111 “The fight [has] just started,” he wrote optimistically to members of the Garvey Club, “and I want you to look out for a greater and grander organization.”112 Indeed, Garvey attempted to ‘pick up the pieces’ in the aftermath of his arrest, imprisonment, and subsequent deportation. In 1928, the black nationalist leader paid a visit to England where he presented a petition to the League of Nations.113 The following year, in the pages of the Negro World, he declared that “all roads shall lead [to] the 1st of August, 1929, where openeth the Sixth International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World.”114

Writing in the Negro World, Garvey urged “all [UNIA] branches and chapters…and all other organizations, societies and churches” to attend the 1929 convention to be held in August of that year. With plans to address a wide range of issues, including the launch of a new line of Black Star Line ships, Garvey predicted that the convention would be a “big time for the Negro race.”115 To some extent, he was right. By many accounts, the conference in Jamaica was just “as spectacular as

112 Ibid., 14.
113 Martin, Race First, 18.
115 Ibid., 311-12.
the earlier ones in Harlem.” While the number of official UNIA delegates present—one hundred and forty-five—waned in comparison to previous conventions, women leaders were well-represented at the conference. High-profile Garveyite women, including Jacques Garvey, Davis, and De Mena, were fairly visible in conference proceedings. For example, during the opening session, De Mena made a grand entrance during the street procession—“mounted on a grey charger with [a] drawn sword.” Her dramatic entry into the Convention was certainly representative of the colorful pageantry associated with the UNIA. But, even more, De Mena’s entrance foreshadowed black women’s ascendancy in the movement.

Other high-profile women leaders made their mark at the 1929 Convention. Curiously, though Garvey openly criticized Henrietta Vinton Davis for allegedly doing “nothing to give new life to the organization,” her very presence at the convention spoke volumes. A longtime Garveyite activist—whose involvement in the UNIA lasted for more than a decade—Davis was one of the most influential women in the organization. Davis, along with Jacques Garvey and De Mena, joined Garvey on the platform during the opening ceremonies, which attracted an estimated twelve thousand attendees. After Garvey delivered his opening address, a slate of UNIA leaders followed including De Mena and Ethel M. Collins. By all appearances, then, the UNIA was on the rise again, and women were at the forefront.

117 Hill, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA Papers, Volume VII: 317, 342. It also significant to note that Henrietta Vinton Davis played a central role in organizing the convention.
118 Quoted in Hill, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA Papers, Volume VII: 317.
119 Ibid., 315.
120 Duncan, “The Efficient Womanhood of the Universal Negro Improvement Association,” 77-125.
121 Hill, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA Papers, Volume VII: 317.
What onlookers might not have immediately noticed, however, was that the 1929 UNIA Convention was also a hotbed of conflict. Garvey’s public critique of Davis during his opening ceremony offered only a glimpse into the growing fragmentation and internal dispute taking place within the organization. Calling for greater centralization and a change in UNIA headquarters, Garvey requested that all branches report directly to his new base in Jamaica instead of the former main office in Harlem. Rather than resulting in the unification of UNIA chapters, Garvey’s suggestion further incited disagreements among his adherents. To be sure, these tensions had begun before August 1929, but the Convention was the ‘straw that broke the camel’s back.’

Fred Toote, a clergyman in the African Orthodox Church (AOC) who served as acting president general during Garvey’s imprisonment, became the center of much of the conflict. According to one article in the *Negro World*, Toote found himself “with his back against the wall of the conversation…while he answered scores of questions leveled against him both by delegates on the floor and the speaker…” Among the many issues on the table were questions over whether or not Toote, in his position as interim president general, fully complied with Garvey’s instructions on how to conduct UNIA affairs during Garvey’s imprisonment. Clearly frustrated by the public castigation, Toote promptly left the Convention, returning to New York where he and a group of loyal supporters established the rival UNIA, Inc. Although Garvey envisioned the 1929 Convention as an opportunity to revive the UNIA and bring greater cohesion to the organization, quite the opposite occurred. The Sixth International Convention resulted in even greater fragmentation and conflict.

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122 Ibid., 315.
123 Ibid., 304-5.
125 Ibid., 327.
Notwithstanding the UNIA leaders’ skirmishes over power, funds, and resources, one of the other underlying tensions at the 1929 Convention was the enduring gender politics in the organization—a fact that historians of Garveyism have largely overlooked. Much of the scholarly discussion of the 1929 Convention has centered on the fragmentation of the UNIA and the splinter groups that developed in its aftermath.\textsuperscript{126} However, surviving primary accounts also reveal that that the 1929 Convention was a site of “gendered strife and confusion.”\textsuperscript{127} First, Garvey’s public criticism of Davis during his opening ceremony underscores how easily women leaders could become scapegoats for the UNIA’s failures. Certainly, regardless of her influence, Davis could not have been the\textit{ sole} reason for why the organization was in a state of decline. By insinuating as much, Garvey attempted to undermine Davis’ leadership and inadvertently overlooked the activist’s long tenure of service, which had helped to catapult the organization’s visibility and influence.\textsuperscript{128}

While many attendees at the 1929 Convention witnessed Garvey’s public scolding of Davis, few noticed another conflict brewing between a woman by the name of Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and a group of male Garveyites. Gordon, who became a UNIA member sometime around 1923, decided to attend the Convention in hopes that it would prove beneficial for improving conditions for black Americans. By her own account, she traveled with members of the Garvey Club to Jamaica in July of that year—in what appears to be the activist’s only trip overseas. Though Gordon later claimed that she attended as a “private individual”—as opposed to a “an elected delegate or [UNIA] representative”—her arrival in Jamaica two months prior to the convention, and her claim that she

\textsuperscript{126} See, for example, Martin, \textit{Race First}, 18-19; Colin Grant, \textit{Negro With a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 426-428.

\textsuperscript{127} Here I am borrowing from Laura Edward’s seminal study of the same title. See Edwards, \textit{Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

resided in Garvey’s sister’s home, suggest that she was a leader (or at the very least, prospective leader) of the organization.129

Gordon’s experiences at the conference provide a glimpse into the enduring gender politics in the UNIA. According to one account, when Gordon arrived in Jamaica that summer, Garvey “asked her to take charge of the divisions of the UNIA in Chicago.” Apparently impressed with Gordon’s speaking abilities, Garvey tapped Gordon to be a new UNIA leader.130 Though the full extent of Gordon’s experiences remains a mystery, male Garveyites certainly resisted Garvey’s efforts. Gordon later claimed to have been “very disgusted with the manner in which certain officials were conducting themselves.”131 Briefly referencing the course of events many years later, Jacques Garvey indicated that “the men at the Head of the Organization as usual, tried to hamper [Gordon].”132 Jacques Garvey’s comments, while brief, are indicative of the persistent gender politics in the UNIA, which remained an underlying issue at the 1929 Convention in Jamaica. Ultimately, while Garvey desired to use the Convention as a launching pad for the organization’s next phase of success, the Convention brought more issues to the forefront and undercut Garvey’s leadership and his organization.

However, in other ways, the Convention did serve as a launching pad—though not in the manner in which Garvey had originally intended. The widespread fragmentation that marked the internal collapse of the UNIA served as a blessing in disguise for women activists. In effect, the

130 George McCray, The Universal Negro Improvement Association: As An Expression of Caste and Class Relations in a Negro Community (Unpublished Work), Box 57, St. Clair Drake Papers, 1935-1990, Schomburg Center for Black Research, New York, NY.
131 Gordon’s Statement to Richard W. Axtell and James E. Conerty, 21 September 1942.
132 Amy Jacques Garvey to Hilbert Keys, 5 April 1944, Amy Jacques Collection, Box 1, Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (emphasis added).
demise of the UNIA, as the most dominant mass organization of Afro-descended peoples, engendered a space for women to engage in black nationalist politics in new, idiosyncratic, and innovative ways. In the absence of a strong and centralized UNIA and Garvey’s looming presence, a number of women leaders emerged on the local, national, and international scenes, at once drawing on Garveyism and extending it. Not surprisingly, these included some of the same women who had been snubbed at the 1929 gathering.

Conclusion

In 1929, Gladys E. Holder, a Garveyite residing in New York, reflected on the contributions of three women pioneers of the Garvey Movement: Amy Jacques Garvey, Henrietta Vinton Davis, and Maymie De Mena. Writing in the Negro World, Holder posed a significant question to male and female readers alike: “Who can deny that these ladies have proven beyond a doubt their ability and loyalty to the cause?” They are internationally known,” she continued, “they are highly respected and listened to.” Moreover, she pointed out, they remained steadfast in their commitment to the cause of universal black liberation. “Have [these women] grown tired yet?” Holder rhetorically asked. Certainly, any active Garveyite reading Holder’s article immediately grasped the significance of Holder’s question. Surely, they understood Holder’s insinuation that these women activists were not only pioneers of the movement; their leadership was necessary for the future success of the UNIA.

In the immediate aftermath of Garvey’s deportation, Holder might have maintained misgivings about the future of the organization, which had been in a state of decline since the mid-1920s. But, by reminding readers of the contributions of these high-profile women activists, Holder was articulating a significant shift in leadership that was taking place within the organization and in

133 Quoted in Hunter, “Feminist Consciousness and Black Nationalism.”

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the movement in general. If readers missed the meaning behind Holder’s line of questioning, they could not have misunderstood Holder’s main point: “There are scores of women workers, full of zeal, courage and initiative, scattered throughout... who are capable of rendering greater service to the race if placed in higher positions.”

Indeed, while Holder acknowledged the (female) shoulders on which the UNIA stood, she also emphasized the need for more visible women leaders—equally as gifted and determined to improve conditions for black men and women across the diaspora. Her statements called for widening the gap of women’s leadership opportunities in the UNIA.

But, if Holder desired an expansion of women’s leadership opportunities within the UNIA alone, her vision would have been limited. While many of the women pioneers of the movement including Jacques Garvey, De Mena and Davis, went on to engage in nationalist politics in new and more expansive ways, “scores of [new] women workers” also emerged. During the years of the Great Depression and World War II, a new generation of women activists appeared on the black nationalist scene, building on, yet also extending well beyond, the earlier experiences of women pioneers in the Garvey movement. During the thirties and forties, this new generation of nationalist women activists, some of whom remained involved in the UNIA and others who parted ways with the organization, joined forces with some of the UNIA’s pioneering women in the global struggles against sexism, racism, white imperialism, and colonialism. Together, these nationalist women—regardless of their organizational affiliation, level of education, or socioeconomic background—were, in the words of Ethel M. Collins, committed to “serving a principle and a cause.” This mantra became a guiding light for black nationalist women in the difficult days ahead.

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134 Ibid.
135 Ethel M. Collins to Amy Jacques Garvey, October 5, 1942, Box 1, Garvey Memorial Collection, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee.
CHAPTER TWO

“OUR AIM IS TO RETURN TO OUR MOTHERLAND”: MITTIE MAUDE LENA GORDON AND THE FIGHT FOR WEST AFRICAN EMIGRATION, 1932-1936

Standing before a crowd of black Chicagoans in December 1932, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon made a bold statement. She insisted that she had a solution for black Americans who bore the brunt of the Great Depression. As she peered into the sea of faces at the “old Jack Johnson boxing ring,” she passionately defended West African emigration, arguing that “the Negro would escape from the economic, racial and political problems which confronted the race in the United States.” The forty-three year old activist stood five feet three inches tall and had a heavy build. She was light brown in complexion and had brown eyes with black straight hair that framed her oval face.

Described as a “very forceful and effective speaker,” Gordon commanded attention when she opened her mouth and that evening, she delivered one of the many passionate speeches that she would give across the city. While some of Gordon’s detractors dismissed her as a “rabble rouser” and others described her as “uncouth,” Gordon attracted a following of hundreds of black men and women residing in Chicago and across the nation. Within months of what appears to be Gordon’s first documented public speech in December 1932, she emerged as one of Chicago’s leading nationalist “street scholars,” speaking for the interests of the black working poor during an

1 Brief History of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia to President Roosevelt Pamphlet, March 1939, reel 243, American Colonization Society Records, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
2 George McCray, The Universal Negro Improvement Association: As An Expression of Caste and Class Relations in a Negro Community (Unpublished Work), Box 57, St. Clair Drake Papers, 1935-1990, Schomburg Center for Black Research, New York, NY.
3 Anonymous Informant, 19 June 1942, Chicago, IL, Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Investigative Files on the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, File no. 100-124410, RG 60, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
economic crisis. “Grounded in specific, lived realities,” historian Ula Taylor argues, “street scholars” are not only in the forefront of giving voice to the complicated issues of the day but are what Gramscian theorists refer to as ‘organic intellectuals.’

Similar to Amy Ashwood Garvey and Ella Baker who emerged as “street scholars” in Harlem during the 1920s, Gordon defied “traditional expectations of middle-class black womanhood” in order to disseminate her nationalist philosophy during the Great Depression era. After the decline of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Gordon became a key player on the black nationalist scene, spreading many of Garvey’s ideas throughout Chicago and other areas of the urban North. However, while she drew inspiration from Garvey, Gordon formulated her own philosophy, blending aspects of Garveyism—including racial pride, African redemption, economic self-sufficiency, racial separatism and political self-determination—with the religious teachings of Noble Drew Ali, founder of the Moorish Science Temple (MST).

This chapter offers a portrait of how Gordon popularized her idiosyncratic religio-political philosophy and initiated a vibrant nationalist movement in Chicago during the early 1930s, which culminated in an unprecedented emigration petition of an estimated 400,000 black Americans willing to leave the country.

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5 Taylor, “Street Strollers,” 154. Antonio Gramsci uses the term, “organic intellectual,” in order to reject the binaries between elite intellectuals and working-class non-intellectuals. In his formulation, members of the working-class also play a central role as intellectuals of the people, drawing their strength and power directly from the social group from which they emerge. See Gramsci, “The Formation of the Intellectuals” in Quintin Hoare, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 134-147.
The Making of a Black Nationalist

Gordon’s early childhood years were critical in shaping her interest in black nationalist politics as an adult. Born Mittie Maude Lena Nelson on August 2, 1889 in the small rural Webster Parish of Louisiana, Gordon spent her early childhood in Louisiana, but it was not long before her family moved to Hope, Arkansas in an effort to find better job and educational opportunities.  

The education system in Webster Parish thwarted her parents’ plans to provide a descent education for Gordon and her nine siblings. According to Gordon, “[S]chool facilities for colored children were so bad in Webster Parish, that the third-grade was as high as one could go, because pressure was so strong against educating [N]egroes.” Local resistance against black education coupled with vast disparities in quality between white and black schools confirmed her parent’s decision to move out of Webster Parish in 1900. The family moved to Hope after Gordon’s father, Edward Nelson, became a minister in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) that year and asked to be transferred to Arkansas.  

To his dismay, however, the educational opportunities for African Americans in Arkansas were no different from what he had left behind.

Nelson, the son of a former slave who had been denied access to formal education, was determined to secure the best educational opportunities for his children. When the local school districts in Arkansas failed to provide viable options, Nelson began to homeschool his children with the limited education that he had received. This choice had a significant impact on the formation of Gordon’s nationalist ideology. According to Gordon, her father devoted much time to the teachings of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, laying the foundation for her decision to embrace Garveyism later

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7 Mittie Maude Lena Gordon to Earnest Sevier Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Earnest Sevier Papers, 1821-1973, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

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in life. An itinerant African Methodist Episcopal (AME) preacher, Turner began advocating emigration after his political prospects abruptly ended after Reconstruction. Convinced that extinction was the only likely outcome for African Americans barring emigration, Turner appealed to African Americans to leave the country during the late nineteenth century. His writings underscore his nationalist vision and strong affinity for Africa—ideas which Gordon began to embrace at an early age.

During these formative years, Gordon was also exposed to the harsh realities of Jim Crow and the scope of the black condition in America. As she traveled with her father to church events across the South, Gordon encountered the same racial disparities that she witnessed in her own community. She wrote, “In travelling, I found thousands of people suffering under the same conditions as we.” It was during this period that she began to develop a deep sense of race consciousness, which only intensified after witnessing a lynching in 1898, two years after the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation. As Gordon later explained, “I saw a lynch mob of 1600 men pass my home when I was nine years old. They lynched this man, Will Streake, near Dorlean, Louisiana. Since that day I have been the most unhappy person that ever lived.”

Gordon’s encounter with a lynch mob certainly altered her perspective, but growing up in Arkansas laid the foundation for her decision to embrace Garveyism later in life. In the aftermath of Reconstruction, the state became the site of one of the most fervent back-to-Africa movements of

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9 Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers.
11 Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers.
Largely driven by the widespread racial oppression they encountered and deeply influenced by Bishop Turner’s teachings, African American residents in Arkansas turned to the American Colonization Society (ACS) for financial aid to leave the country. A religious organization, the ACS was initially founded in 1816 by Reverend Robert Finley and a coalition of white slave owners and Quakers who opposed slavery in the United States. But, while they supported abolition, members of the ACS maintained racial prejudices and established the organization on the belief that African Americans could not peacefully coexist with whites. From 1817 to 1866, the ACS played a significant role in relocating an estimated thirteen thousand African Americans to Liberia, and in 1822, established the nation as a colony for free blacks. While interest in emigration rapidly spread across the country during this period, more than a third of the emigrants who relocated to Liberia originated from the state of Arkansas alone. Although this “Liberia fever” had significantly declined by the early twentieth century, it helped to lay the foundation for black southerners’ interest in the teachings of Garvey and earlier black leaders such

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as Booker T. Washington and Bishop Turner.\textsuperscript{17} With headquarters in Harlem, local UNIA chapters were rapidly growing throughout the southern states during this period. By 1919, black residents in Arkansas were already circulating copies of the Garvey movement’s official periodical, the \textit{Negro World}, and some were making efforts to form UNIA chapters.\textsuperscript{18} Within seven years, black Americans in Arkansas established more than thirty UNIA branches in the state, representing more branches than in the state of New York.\textsuperscript{19} It is likely, then, that Gordon had been first exposed to Garvey’s teachings while living in Arkansas.

However, her relocation to the urban North marked a key turning point in her life. Like many other black southerners who collectively resisted Jim Crow and white supremacy during the World War I era, Gordon headed North during the early years of the Great Migration.\textsuperscript{20} Sometime around 1913, she arrived in East St. Louis, Illinois as a widowed mother of two young children, Lucille and John.\textsuperscript{21} Ten years prior, Gordon had married Robert Holt, a brick layer who was more than thirty years her senior, in Hampstead, Arkansas.\textsuperscript{22} When Holt passed away in 1906, Gordon became a dressmaker in an effort to take care of her children before relocating to East St. Louis in


\textsuperscript{18}Rolinson, \textit{Grassroots Garveyism}, 100.

\textsuperscript{19}Martin, \textit{Race First}, 15.


\textsuperscript{21}Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers; Statement of Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, 21 September 1942, FBI Investigative File no. 100-124410.

Her life was forever shattered in the summer of 1917 when the East St. Louis race riot erupted over growing white resentment towards the rapid influx of black Southerners.\(^{24}\)

While the full circumstances are unclear, it appears that Gordon’s ten-year-old son, John, sustained significant injuries during the riot, resulting in his untimely death shortly thereafter.\(^{25}\) Gordon offered no details on the matter in any of her personal writings—a likely indication that she did not want to recall the painful incident—but one can easily imagine that the riot sparked many intense emotions in the grieving mother. When Marcus Garvey, the charismatic black nationalist leader, delivered an impassioned speech denouncing the riot on July 2, 1917, Gordon might have heard about it, or read its transcript in a local newspaper.\(^{26}\) Describing the riot as “one of the bloodiest outrages of mankind” and a “crime against the laws of humanity,” Garvey called on black Americans to “lift [their] voice[s] against the savagery of a people who claim to be the dispensers of democracy.” “White people are taking advantage of blackmen,” Garvey added, “because blackmen all over the world are disunited.”\(^{27}\) Garvey’s powerful comments might have resonated with Gordon.

In the immediate aftermath of the riot, Gordon relocated to Chicago, joining thousands of other black residents pouring into the city. Between 1917 and 1918 alone, 50,000 black southerners migrated to the city in search of better job and educational opportunities, primarily in industrial and

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\(^{23}\) Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers.

\(^{24}\) The riot was a result of racial tensions and labor-related conflicts. See Harper Barnes, _Never Been a Time: The 1917 Race Riot that Sparked the Civil Rights Movement_ (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 2008); Charles L. Lumpkins, _American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics_ (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008).


\(^{27}\) Garvey, “The Conspiracy of the East St. Louis Riots, 300-1; 306.
domestic service. While Gordon and other new migrants in Chicago inevitably faced a host of social challenges, including many of the same ones they encountered in the South, urban migration still offered some glimmer of hope. Abandoning the New South power structure, Gordon and other working-class “New Negro” migrants joined a thriving black consumer culture and intellectual community in the city. Shortly after relocating to Chicago, Gordon married William, a fellow southerner. Born in Thomasville, Georgia in 1873, William Gordon worked as a farmhand in Florida until the age of eighteen, when a local railroad company employed him. He relocated to Chicago in 1918, and within two years was employed as a laborer at a local iron mill.

While it is unclear exactly how the Gordons initially met, the two were married in 1920. Sometime in 1923, they both began attending UNIA meetings located not too far from their home. According to Gordon, she had joined “every movement…that claimed to better [the] race’s condition,” but was especially drawn to Garvey’s teachings. “I had a greater hope in the U.N.I.A., than any other movement,” she later explained. Similar to Queen Mother Audley Moore, a leading

30Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers.
black radical activist, Gordon found Garvey’s message of African pride and black self-sufficiency appealing. “[Garvey] gave us light on Africa and taught us nationhood,” Gordon noted years later.33

Wholeheartedly embracing Garvey’s teachings, Gordon became an active member of the UNIA, quickly moving up the ranks. After only two to three years of joining the organization, she was appointed “lady president” of a local UNIA division. This position gave her the responsibility of overseeing the women’s division but her authority was limited because women who served as lady presidents did not lead autonomously.34 In each UNIA division, the lady president was expected to answer to the male president, who had the final say and often amended women’s reports to the division at large.35 Notwithstanding its limitations, Gordon’s tenure as lady president provided a meaningful opportunity for her to hone leadership and organizing skills, and brought her into contact with hundreds, if not thousands, of Garveyites.36 Moreover, the position allowed Gordon to work alongside notable Garveyite women including Amy Jacques Garvey and Maymie De Mena, who became Assistant International Organizer for the UNIA in 1926.37

35 Bair, “‘Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth,’”41, 45.
36 Some of the largest UNIA branches were located in Chicago. See Martin, Race First, 17.
37 Maymie De Mena held a number of prominent positions in the UNIA. See Duncan, “The Efficient Womanhood of the Universal Negro Improvement Association,”121-2.
Gordon’s leadership in the UNIA would be short-lived, however. In 1929, two years after Garvey’s deportation, Gordon attended the UNIA’s Sixth International Convention in Kingston, Jamaica, where she encountered male resistance to her leadership. As Jacques Garvey later noted, “the men at the Head of the Organization as usual, tried to hamper [Gordon].” These challenges, combined with a major UNIA split that resulted in two separate factions—one led by Garvey in Jamaica and another based in the United States—clearly frustrated Gordon, who decided to part ways with the UNIA.

The Emergence of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia

Determined to advance nationalist politics, Gordon set out to find other political alternatives in Chicago. Her restaurant, located only doors away from her apartment on State Street, proved especially crucial for her engagement in nationalist politics. Like many other Garveyite leaders and members of the rank-and-file who embraced Garvey’s belief in economic development, Gordon and her husband were small businesses owners. In addition to building a livelihood, business ownership also bolstered African Americans’ engagement in politics. These spaces “gave African Americans a place to hide, a place to plan.” Similar to Amy Ashwood Garvey—Garvey’s first wife who helped establish the UNIA in 1914—who owned a London restaurant that became a central meeting space for Pan-African leaders during the mid-1930s, Gordon used her restaurant as a physical space to strategize and develop relationships with potential allies. Moreover, the restaurant provided an

38 I discuss Mittie Maude Lena Gordon’s experiences at the convention in the first chapter of this study.
39 Amy Jacques Garvey to Hilbert Keys, 5 April 1944, Amy Jacques Collection, Box 1, Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
40 Martin, Race First, 18.
41 Tiffany Gill, Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 32-60.
avenue through which the activist was able to engage in the production of what cultural theorist Davarian Baldwin calls a “marketplace intellectual life” of Chicago’s ‘New Negroes.’

During the early 1930s, Gordon used her restaurant as a central location for intellectual exchanges with a wide range of individuals including a man who called himself Ashima Takis. Born in the Philippines in 1900, Takis, whose real name was Policarpio Manansala, moved in radical circles in Chicago, posing as Japanese. Sometime in 1931, Takis met with Gordon at her restaurant and shared plans to establish the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World (PMEW), a pro-Japanese organization that supported the unification of people of color globally. According to Gordon, she found the PMEW particularly appealing because of Takis’ support for black political self-determination through West African emigration: “I had already decided to go ahead with the organization, after I found there was no hope of our going to Africa through the U.N.I.A.” The two collaborated in the months that followed, circulating an emigration petition in Chicago and later in Indiana, until their relationship began to unravel over financial and ideological differences. While their collaboration was short-lived, it offers a glimpse into Gordon’s global vision and growing

46 *United States of America v. Mittie Maud Lena Gordon*, Reply Brief for Appellants, Box 34, Cox Papers.
47 Hill, *FBI’s Rat on*, 524.
interest in black internationalist politics. In the ensuing years, Gordon amplified her efforts to forge transnational solidarities with activists of color from various parts of the globe.\textsuperscript{48}

In the aftermath of her falling out with Takis, Gordon decided to establish her own organization, bearing a name that was strikingly similar to Takis’ organization. In December 1932, Gordon held another meeting at her restaurant as she had done only months before. But, this time, she met with a group of black Chicagoans including three women—Selma Brown, Clara Kramer, and Mrs. C. Q. Howard—and laid out plans for what would become the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME).\textsuperscript{49} According to Gordon, the process of arranging the first meeting was a rather difficult task: “[The] people had lost confidence in men after the defeat of the U.N.I.A., and refused to follow another man.” Gordon insisted that she only accepted the position after failing to locate a “strong man” to do the job, yet she had already secured her position as founder and president by planning, initiating and facilitating the first meeting.\textsuperscript{50} Moreover, ten men were present at the PME’s founding meeting including Gordon’s husband, William, who had also been active in the Garvey movement during the 1920s. Gordon’s suggestion, then, that there were no “strong men” available, along with her apparent apprehension and attempt to underplay her own leadership role, strikingly resembles “community feminism,” the struggle that many race women endured as they advocated for an expansion of women’s leadership roles on the one hand, while reinforcing traditional roles and expectations on the other.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} I offer a discussion of how nationalist women engaged in black internationalism during the 1930s and 1940s in the sixth chapter of this study.

\textsuperscript{49} Peace Movement of Ethiopia, \textit{One God, One Country, One People; also, a Brief History, Memorial to President, Funeral Oration and Burial Ceremonies, Battle Hymn of the Peace Movement} (United States: s.n., 1941), 14. [Hereafter cited as Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution].

\textsuperscript{50} Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers.

\textsuperscript{51} Taylor, \textit{Veiled Garvey}, 2.
Despite these apprehensions, Gordon went through with plans to establish the PME, drawing inspiration from Garvey’s UNIA. The PME’s motto—“One God, One Country, One People”—was a rephrasing of the UNIA’s motto—“One God, One Aim, One Destiny.” Likewise, the PME’s official constitution reflected the same tone and language from Garvey’s 1920 Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World. For example, it underscored Garvey’s “race first” philosophy and strong commitment to emigration: “Our aim is to return to our motherland, to our true name, to our own language and to our true religion. Therefore, let Africa be free for Africans, those at home and those abroad. We believe in the National-Hood of all Races, and the right of all national movements.” To further reinforce the influence of Garvey’s ideas, Gordon included a short but significant clause in the PME’s constitution: “We freely coincide with [the] Nationalistic principles laid down by the Hon. Marcus Garvey.” With these words, Gordon revealed much about how she envisioned the organization; rather than pledging full allegiance to Garveyism, she chose instead to “freely coincide,” indicating an effort to draw some distance from Garvey.

It is not surprising, then, that Gordon drew on other ideologies besides Garveyism. This is best exemplified in her decision to embrace Islam as the organization’s primary religious affiliation. Although the UNIA was not directly affiliated with any church or religious organization, it did appeal to black churchgoers and Garvey’s own Christian faith certainly influenced his beliefs.

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52 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 2.
56 Martin, Race First, 68.
Garvey used religion (and religious rhetoric) to advance his “race first” philosophy and received significant support from members of the African Orthodox Church (AOC).\(^{57}\) While not a religious organization \textit{per se}, the UNIA was closely affiliated with the AOC and many of its members embraced a black reinterpretation of Christianity.\(^{58}\)

Unlike the UNIA, the PME openly promoted Islam. Emphasizing Noble Drew Ali’s teachings and the principles of the Moorish Science Temple (MST), Gordon encouraged her followers to “[trust] in Allah, [follow] their leader, and [look] East to Africa.”\(^{59}\) The specific circumstances surrounding her conversion are unclear, but Gordon crossed paths with Ali during the early 1920s, when Ali arrived in Chicago and began to actively recruit black men and women for his religious group. Advocating Islam as the true religion of black people and emphasizing an alternative identity, Ali taught his followers that they were “Asiatics” and “descendants of Moroccans” rather than “Negroes,” “blacks” or “colored people.”\(^{60}\) Blending together elements of Islam, Freemasonry, Christianity, Theosophy and Pan-Africanism, Ali published the \textit{Holy Koran} (or \textit{Circle Seven Koran}) in 1927, which maintained that African Americans—along with a host of other

\(^{57}\)Ibid., 68, 72-3.
\(^{59}\)Quoted in PME Report, 28 May 1942, Exhibit No. 53, FBI Investigative File no. 100-124410. Also see D.S. Kemp Bey to Gordon, 7 April 1933, Exhibit No. 227, FBI Investigative File no. 100-124410.
\(^{60}\)Ali initially established the Moorish Holy Temple of Science in 1923, and later renamed it the Moorish Science Temple of America in 1928. See Turner, \textit{Islam in the Africian Amerian Experience}, 92.
groups including the Japanese, the Indians, and the Chinese—were “the descendants of Canaan and Ham and therefore the original Asiatic nations.”

These teachings held sway with many blacks during the post-World War I era, a period which witnessed a number of historical developments including the relocation of millions of African Americans from the South to the Northern region; growing unrest in urban cities; and a global depression. These social and political forces, combined with the decline of Garvey’s UNIA during the mid-1920s, helped to create an atmosphere in which Ali’s ideas gained significant currency. In the aftermath of Garvey’s deportation, Ali aspired to “assume the mantle of Garvey’s leadership and to make the MST a successor to Garvey’s UNIA.” While Ali might not have been successful in fully assuming Garvey’s role, his MST attracted many former Garveyites, and became the precursor to the Nation of Islam (NOI).

In Gordon’s case, she embraced Ali’s teachings because it offered an alternative to mainstream Christianity, which she viewed as the religion of white oppressors. Like many other “street scholars,” Gordon was anti-establishment and thus cared very little about organizational religion. Surviving accounts reveal that the activist was far more interested in propagating the symbols and rhetoric of the MST than the MST itself. The PME’s letterhead bore the same Islamic symbols—the star and crescent—that appeared on Ali’s “Nationality and Identification Cards,”

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61 Turner, Islam in the African American Experience, 93.
62 Ibid.
64 Elijah Muhammad, who became one of the founders of the Nation of Islam, was one of Noble Drew Ali’s followers. See Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds. Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 378.
65 Taylor, “Street Strollers,” 156.
which he issued to his followers.\textsuperscript{66} Furthermore, at the weekly meetings in Chicago, Gordon and other PME leaders openly denounced Christianity and described Islam as the true faith of black people.\textsuperscript{67} Though she did not require or even advocate membership in the MST, Gordon used her weekly meetings as a forum to endorse Islam. As her husband, William, later explained, “We don’t have a connection with the Moslems but just believe in the Moslem faith.” “At our meetings…we talk about worshipping Allah,” William continued, “[and] we also believe that Mohammed is the prophet of Allah, just like Jesus Christ was the prophet of God.”\textsuperscript{68}

Much like Ali, Gordon appropriated the worship practices and “biblical tropes and characters” of the Black church while claiming full allegiance to Islam.\textsuperscript{69} While indicating that the PME was “built…from a Biblical standpoint,” for example, the organization’s constitution included a clause that suggested its members believed in one God—“Allah, the God of the universe.”\textsuperscript{70} Throughout its pages, the PME’s constitution also included a number of biblical verses including Psalm 19:14—“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O’ Lord my strength and my Redeemer.”\textsuperscript{71} Notwithstanding their support of many of Ali’s teachings and efforts to appropriate the religious leader’s rhetoric and symbols, Gordon and her followers did not adhere to the distinct rituals and practices of the MST. PME members, for example, did not adopt the surname “Bey” or “El,” a common practice for Ali’s followers, or wear the Turkish fez, the MST’s official headgear.

\textsuperscript{67} See Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 3.
\textsuperscript{68} Statement of William Gordon, 20 September 1942, FBI Investigative File no. 100-124410.
\textsuperscript{69} Gomez, \textit{Black Crescent}, 210, 213, 230. For a detailed discussion of Noble Drew Ali’s teachings and links to mainstream Islam, see Curtis, “Debating the Origins of the Moorish Science Temple.”
\textsuperscript{70} Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 12.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 13.
For Gordon, the rejection of Christianity and promotion of Islam was both a religious and political move. By rejecting Christianity and offering an alternative that appeared to be more authentic to the black experience, Gordon’s PME provided a platform from which blacks in Chicago and across the urban North could assert their political and religious agency. By telling her followers to embrace an idiosyncratic religio-political ideology that fused Christianity and Islam, Gordon was essentially constructing a “new genealogy and ethnic identity for Black Americans.”

Writing to one of her supporters in 1941, she denounced white Americans for “instilling heathenism in our people through his education and churches.” Her propagation of Ali’s Islamic teachings, then, functioned as a counter-hegemonic response to white domination. Nevertheless, when Gordon and other PME leaders later attempted to establish new chapters in the South, they strategically downplayed their Islamic ethos as they sought the assistance of local black preachers.

PME Membership, Leadership, and the Roles of Women

The majority of the men and women who joined the PME during the 1930s were the black working-poor. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, many of these men and women were unemployed, struggling to make ‘ends meet.’ As the nation sunk deeper into the Depression, Chicago faced a number of challenges. The city, which bore the full force of the Great Migration—with an estimated black population of 492,000 by midcentury—had economically collapsed. Only months after the 1929 Stock Market Crash, Jesse Binga’s State Bank, the preeminent black-owned...
bank in the city, had been forced to close. By 1934, most of the residents in Chicago’s “Black Belt,” the predominantly African American community on Chicago’s Southside, were on government relief. Worsening conditions for black residents in Chicago, and other Northern urban cities, coincided with the declining influence of mainstream race organizations. During the early years of the Depression, Chicago’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Urban League (NUL) lost a significant amount of their funding from African Americans and white philanthropists. The lack of financial resources, coupled with changes to the local NAACP’s and NUL’s leadership, underscored these organizations’ instability, and their inability to confront the growing problems of poverty in the city’s black communities.

The emergence of the PME, then, opened up a new political space in black Chicago, providing an alternative to mainstream race organizations. To be sure, there were other political alternatives for black Americans. Around the very same time that Gordon established the PME, the United States Communist Party (CPUSA) was beginning to ‘pick up steam’ in black communities across the country. The 1931 Scottsboro case in which nine young black boys were falsely sentenced to death for raping two white women in Alabama, became a significant recruiting tool for the Party. Signifying the Party’s commitment to eradicating racial injustice at home and abroad,

79 Other smaller communist-affiliated radical groups attracted a significant following during this period. Perhaps the most significant was the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), a relatively small leftist group of black intellectuals and activists “intent on guiding the black freedom movement toward a pan-Africanist proletarian revolution.” Established in Harlem in 1919, the ABB had an estimated eight thousand members during its peak. See Minkah Makalani, In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 45.
Communists initiated a national and international justice campaign for the Scottsboro boys.\textsuperscript{80} The CPUSA’s growing popularity in various parts of the country, including Chicago, offered black Americans political sites in which to merge racial and economic concerns.\textsuperscript{81} Black women found in the Party a space in which to engage in “black left feminism,” which centered on the intersection of race, gender, and class.\textsuperscript{82}

Although the CPUSA provided a space for black women to engage in the struggle for racial advancement, the organization maintained a “male-centered version of radicalism.”\textsuperscript{83} Women’s roles were still limited in the predominantly white and male organization. Black women in the CPUSA functioned as “outsiders within,” never fully participating on an equal level with their white male counterparts.\textsuperscript{84} Gender politics, however, were not the only deterrents for some black women. Individuals like Gordon openly resisted the CPUSA’s pro-Marxist platform, choosing instead to emphasize black capitalism and racial separatism. Following in the footsteps of Marcus Garvey, who

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\textsuperscript{81} Dawson, \textit{Black Visions}, 172.
\textsuperscript{83} Kelley, \textit{Hammer and Hoe}, 46.
\textsuperscript{84} McDuffie, \textit{Sojourning for Freedom}, 21.
\end{flushright}
envisioned the entire black race as the proletariat in Marxian theoretical schema, Gordon and her followers rejected Marxism in all its forms.\textsuperscript{85}

While some black radicals such as Audley “Queen Mother” Moore and Hubert Harrison forged an idiosyncratic politics that drew on Garveyism as well as the objectives and principles of Communism, Gordon and many of those who joined the PME viewed these two positions as ideologically incompatible.\textsuperscript{86} Writing in 1937, Gordon insisted that the sole purpose of the CPUSA was to “destroy any race-conscious movement” and prevent the establishment of an autonomous black nation state.\textsuperscript{87} Within the context of the Great Depression era, which ushered in a period of intense Communist repression, Gordon’s words reflect a sense of distrust that some activists had for the Communist Left—specifically, a fear that any Communist affiliation might bring unwanted attention and thereby hinder their political agenda.\textsuperscript{88} But, her apparent rejection of Marxism and decision to remain distant from the Communist Left also capture the range of black radical politics during this era. Gordon’s PME provided a new avenue for some black radical activists who were unwilling to affiliate with the Communist Left.

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\textsuperscript{85} On Garvey’s view on Marxism, see Marcus Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey, The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, or Afriat for the Africans (Dover: Majority Press, 1986), 69-70.

\textsuperscript{86} A number of scholarly works have debunked the strict black Communist/nationalist dichotomy, underscoring how radical activists often embraced both ideologies. See, for example, Winston James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America (London: Verso, 1998); Erik S. McDuffie, “[She] Devoted Twenty Minutes Condemning All Other Forms of the Government but the Soviet’: Black Women Radicals in the Garvey Movement and in the Left during the 1920s,” in Diasporic Africa: A Reader, ed. Michael A. Gomez (New York: New York University Press, 2006); McDuffie, Sojourning for Freedom; Dayo F. Gore, Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{87} Gordon to Cox, 7 March 1937, Box 4, Cox Papers.

\textsuperscript{88} Black women faced a number of reprisals for allying with Communists. It is also significant to note that well-known race leaders including A. Philip Randolph and Walter White openly criticized the CPUSA and black men and women who embraced the pro-Marxist organization. See Harris, “Running with the Reds,” 21, 38.
From the outset, the PME promoted a vision of Pan-African unity, appealing specifically to “black men and women whose hearts beat in unison with the race.” It is not surprising, then, that Gordon chose to call her organization the Peace Movement of Ethiopia. A common trend of blacks in the African diaspora, Gordon used the term, “Ethiopia” to refer to all peoples of African descent. Rooted in the ideological underpinnings of Ethiopianism—race redemption ideas derived from biblical Ethiopia—Gordon’s use of the term in 1932 was largely symbolic. Significantly, the establishment of the PME coincided with the reign of Ethiopia’s Emperor Haile Selassie, who had been crowned two years prior. But, by her own statement, the reference to Ethiopia derived from the biblical verse Psalm 68:31, which reads in part, “princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.” Like many nationalists before her, Gordon drew inspiration from the biblical verse, which served as a prophetic reminder of inevitable black redemption. This is exemplified by the PME’s installation ceremony script, which reads, in part, “I

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89 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 4.
90 Gordon’s use of the term, “Peace” in her organization’s name reflects the PME’s stance against military service. During the early 1940s, Gordon and her supporters discouraged black men from fighting in World War II. Gordon may have also drawn inspiration from the women’s peace movement of the period though she makes no mention of the movement in her writings.
92 Gordon to Cox, 22 May 1938, Box 4, Cox Papers.
shall do to the best of my ability spiritually, mentally, and physically defend the cause of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia and protect the morale of our members to the end that God’s divine purpose be accomplished in the ultimate redemption of Africa.” Gordon’s decision to include these words in the script signifies her belief in the message of Ethiopianism, her commitment to worldwide black liberation, and her steadfast belief that emigration would hasten the redemption of Africa.

Determined to popularize these ideas, Gordon began “street strolling” in Depression-era Chicago, holding public meetings all across the city and attempting to persuade black men and women to join the movement. Sam Hawthorne, a native Mississippian who had relocated to Chicago in 1927, first crossed paths with Gordon sometime during the early 1930s. He recalled hearing Gordon speak “in public, on the streets” and remembered other black Chicagoans enthusiastically talking about her. Deeply moved by the activist’s teachings, Hawthorne became a PME member and later established a chapter in his hometown. Another black resident in the city recalled hearing Gordon speak at a local park, drawing crowds of former UNIA members. Describing her as a “rebel,” the individual assumed that Gordon had been speaking on behalf of the Communist Party though s/he angrily concluded that the activist had “no damn program.”


94 PME Installation Ceremony, 20 September 1942, Exhibit No. 29, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410, RG 60, National Archives, Washington, D.C.


96 See Taylor, “Street Strollers.”

97 Statement of Sam Hawthorne, 7 November 1942, file no. 100-124410.
Criticizing Gordon for integrating “lots of biblical crap” in her speeches, the individual concluded that the activist’s appeal was only attributed to her ability to stir her listeners’ emotions.  

Evidently, this individual was no fan of Gordon’s but their comments, along with Hawthorne’s recollections, offer glimpses into how Gordon used city parks and street corners as platforms to disseminate her nationalist ideas and build momentum for the movement. Like Garvey had done in Harlem years prior, Gordon also used these public speeches as opportunities to attract new members for her organization. Her efforts were fruitful. Surviving organizational records reveal that the PME drew a significant following of black men and women in Chicago and across the country during the 1930s. In the Midwestern region, specifically the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Ohio, the PME boasted an estimated two thousand and twenty seven members combined—one thousand one hundred and three men and eight hundred and sixty eight women.  

The weekly PME meetings of the main division, generally held at the Boulevard Hall on East 47th street in Chicago, attracted an average crowd of 200 to 350 people. Usually held on Sunday evenings, the weekly PME meetings began with a short prayer—reflecting the organization’s idiosyncratic religious ethos—and the reading of minutes from the previous meeting. This routine was generally followed by the reading of reports from local officers, updates from the varied divisions and occasionally, the election of officers to fill vacant positions. The meetings were

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99 These figures are based on the author’s calculations using PME membership data obtained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1942. The author was unable to determine the sex of fifty six individuals. See Membership Roll in the Peace Movement of Ethiopia Report, 8 August 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.

100 Hill, *FBI’s Racon*, 93.
facilitated in a strict and organized fashion, reflecting the organization’s hierarchical structure of leadership. During one meeting, Gordon admonished attendees for not following the correct protocol to address the executive board, reminding them that “no speaker would be permitted to talk before… giving the president of that local [division] their subject” for review.101

These meetings provided an intellectual space for working-poor black men and women to engage black nationalist discourse(s) and address current issues of the day. Each meeting centered on key themes for discussion and Gordon, along with various other male and female leaders in the organization, presented speeches addressing these matters and provided opportunities for members of the audience to raise questions. In one meeting, held on July 23, 1942, the subjects of the meeting were as followed: “Can the black man be completely independent in the U.S. Government? What steps could be taken to bring about a permanent solution to the race problem in the U.S.? Should the matter be delayed or should the black man act now?” In another instance, PME leaders and members discussed the key question, “Why should the black man choose Africa as his destination?” Reflecting on the history of race relations in the United States, PME leaders offered poignant examples to help reinforce their positions. For example, they reminded those in attendance that President Abraham Lincoln had proposed deporting former slaves to Haiti and Liberia upon the abolition of slavery. Moreover, they read excerpts from Chief Justice Taney’s racist ruling in Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857) that had declared African Americans to be non-citizens of the United States. By evoking these earlier historical developments in their weekly meetings, PME leaders made it quite clear that in their view, race relations had not improved much since the nineteenth century and

101 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Minutes, 15 June 1942, Exhibit No. 46, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410, RG 60, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
blacks were “not citizens of America, but citizens of Africa.” Hundreds of black men and women in Chicago embraced this message.

But, many others rejected it. According to one 1936 Chicago Defender article, race leaders in Chicago were greatly “disturbed by this bombshell which threatens to wreck havoc on all the progress the race has made in this country since emancipation.” One anonymous race leader insisted that the PME’s agenda was motivated by cowardice: “Action by this group of mis-led Negroes shows a cowardly attitude of running away from a problem instead of standing and fighting it out.” He went on to criticize the organization’s makeup, noting that no scientists, engineers or doctors were members of the PME, alluding to the fact that Gordon’s organization lacked the backing of the “better class of Negroes.” Expressing similar sentiments, Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press, described Gordon and PME members as “a crude, ignorant lot.” These comments offer a glimpse into the class divisions within black communities over the emigration question. While the black masses often embraced emigration plans in their quest for economic and social autonomy, members of the black middle class and elite generally resisted these efforts.

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102 Report of PME Meetings (Excerpts of minutes), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410.
103 “Nation Stirred Over Move To Colonize Race In Africa,” Chicago Defender, 7 March 1936.
104 Ibid.; “Better class” phrase comes from W.E. B. Du Bois, who used the phrase in describing the class divisions in his classic work, The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (Philadelphia: Published for the University, 1899).
105 Quoted in Ibrahim Sundiata, Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1940 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 312. Such critiques were also reminiscent of the ones Garvey received from Du Bois and other race leaders during the 1920s. See Martin, Race First, 274-280; Colin Grant, Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 298-317.
106 Mitchell, Righteous Propagation, 20; Nell Irvin Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 141-145. Steven Hahn makes a similar argument that emigrationism held greater currency for Southern Black laborers. See Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet:
Despite the resistance that Gordon and her supporters faced during this period, the organization continued to gain momentum during the Depression era. In addition to the weekly meetings in Chicago, the PME began to hold meetings in various parts of the city and before long, its influence began to spread across the nation. This expansion can be credited to Gordon’s commitment to “street strolling” along with her followers’ active recruiting efforts. With the help of PME organizer Harry Collins, for example, the organization opened a new branch in East Chicago during the early 1930s with an estimated 400 members. Another organizer, Tommie Thomas managed to maintain a PME branch in Grady, Arkansas for a short period of time until the group dissolved in 1940. Likewise, Leonard Robert Jordan oversaw a PME branch in Jersey City, NJ while fellow PME member William Ashley Fergerson formed a local chapter in Platka, Florida after reading about the PME in the *Pittsburg Courier*. The median age of the organization’s membership was between forty and fifty, representing the age group that would have been most impacted by the Garvey movement. The only surviving membership roll, obtained by FBI officials in 1942, indicates that the organization had an estimated 4,100 official members in chapters all over the country including the states of Illinois, Washington, Indiana, Maryland, Arizona, Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas, Pennsylvania and Florida. It appears that the majority of the PME’s membership was male.

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Despite the overwhelming representation of men in the PME, women held a variety of visible, formal leadership positions in the organization. In addition to Gordon as president, women maintained leadership roles as national organizers while others were members of the organization’s Board of Directors and supervisors of PME chapters. Alberta Spain, who migrated to Chicago during the early 1920s, served as secretary and a member on the organization’s executive council.\footnote{Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 12.} Likewise, Mrs. W.L. Stubbs served as one of the executive officers. As executive officers, both women were granted a number of leadership duties that distinguished them from the lay members of the organization. Members of the Executive Council were responsible for “decid[ing] all questions arising between [l]ocals, subordinated Society appeals, International questions and all matters affecting the good and welfare of the organization and the members at large.”\footnote{Ibid., 8.} Members of the PME’s Executive Council also had the power to approve and reject the appointments of officers in the organization.\footnote{Ibid., 7.}

stepparents and eight siblings during the Great Migration. Her spouse, Hampton Jernigan, a native Mississippian, worked in a local metal factory in 1920 and later, as a watchman for a railroad company before losing his position sometime during the late 1930s.115 While Lydia Jernigan oversaw the local PME chapter in Galesburg, other women in the PME served as secretaries and others as “lady presidents.” In Garvey’s UNIA, the “lady president” was a title bestowed upon women leaders who were responsible for overseeing a woman’s division. Importantly, these women were answerable to the chapter’s male president.116 In the PME, however, women leaders had more flexibility. The title was primarily used as a way to distinguish between male and female leaders; but, there is no evidence to suggest that “lady presidents” in the PME were solely confined to a woman’s division.

Moreover, these women leaders were not answerable to male leaders in the organization. All members and leaders of the PME were answerable to Gordon, who set the parameters for each division and position. While she certainly worked in conjunction with members of her executive committee, often seeking their advice and making decisions based on a majority vote, Gordon exerted control by chairing weekly meetings, limiting who could serve in leadership positions, and carefully overseeing the activities of each division.117 As a “lady president” of a local division, then, women leaders worked under Gordon’s leadership regardless of who actually presided over the

116 Bair, “Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands Unto God,” 41, 45.
117 See, for example, 106th session of the Supreme Council of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, 5 December 1941, Exhibit No. 35, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410.
specific chapter. Second, while many men in the PME served as presidents of local divisions, the position was not gender-specific. Female presidents (and vice presidents) could be found in a number of local PME divisions. Mary Bailey, for example, was appointed president of the PME chapter in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania during the early 1940s.\footnote{Organizational Records of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, 23 January 1941, Exhibit No. 32, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410. The author has yet to locate conclusive genealogy records on Bailey.}

Even though Gordon’s PME provided a platform for nationalist women to serve in multiple leadership capacities, the organization still upheld certain traditional gender roles. Oddly enough, the organization’s constitution explicitly stated that while lay members—regardless of sex—could hold leadership positions, women could only hold the office of president when “there is not sufficiency among the male.”\footnote{Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 5.} Given the predominance of male members in the organization, this clause is peculiar, but may reveal Gordon’s attempt to uphold the expected patriarchal and masculinist ideals of nationalist organizations.\footnote{On the masculinist representations of black nationalism, see E. Frances White. “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism.” \textit{Journal of Women's History}, Vol. 2, no. 1 (1990): 73-97.} The PME’s Protective Corps division further illustrates this fact. Modeled after the UNIA’s African Legion, the “most visible representation of Garveyite manhood,” the Protective Corps represented the paramilitary division of the PME.\footnote{Martin Summers, \textit{Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Black Masculinity, 1900-1930} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 93; Organizational Records of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, 1942, Exhibit No. 38, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410.} Like the UNIA’s African Legion, the PME’s Protective Corps, which only consisted of men, was created primarily for the purpose of providing the protective arm of the future black nation-state. Foreshadowing the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed self-defense civil rights organization that later emerged...
in 1964, the members of the Protective Corps were trained in military discipline—learning drills and even donning militaristic titles.\textsuperscript{122}

\textbf{A Petition to President Franklin D. Roosevelt}

While some of the men in the PME participated in the Protective Corps, others were engaged in a number of grassroots organizing activities, advocating black emigration as the only viable option for black Americans during the Depression era. Interestingly, the rising tide of pro-emigrationist sentiments coincided with the early implementation of FDR’s New Deal programs. The New Deal, which failed to live up to its promise of providing economic security as a political right for every American citizen, certainly helped to increase dissatisfaction among black men and women.\textsuperscript{123} But, the promise of the New Deal strengthened some black Americans’ resolve to advocate emigrationism. This was certainly the case for Gordon and her supporters in the PME. Inspired by FDR’s promise to improve economic conditions for all citizens, Gordon and other nationalists in Chicago initiated a pro-emigration campaign in 1932, framing their commitment to emigrationism along these lines.

\textsuperscript{122} 106th session of the Supreme Council of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, 5 December 1941, Exhibit No. 35, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410; One PME member adopted the name “Lieutenant Ulysses Grant.” See Organizational Records of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, 1942, Exhibit No. 38, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Investigative Files, “Peace Movement of Ethiopia” (SAC, Chicago, 100-8932), File no. 100-124410. It is also significant to note that the PME maintained a youth division, “the African Pioneers Club,” modeled after the UNIA’s Juvenile Division. Although the UNIA established the African Universal Motor Corps, a female auxiliary whose units were affiliated with the African Legion, there appears to be no equivalent in Gordon’s PME. See Bound Ledger of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, 1 July 1934, Exhibit No. 40, FBI File no. 100-8932. On the Deacons for Defense and Justice, see Timothy Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Lance Hill, The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

\textsuperscript{123} A number of scholarly works have examined how the shortcomings of New Deal policies invigorated black activists. These include Kelley, Hammer and Hoe, Patrícia Sullivan, Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
Shortly after establishing the organization in December 1932, Gordon and founding members of the PME drafted an emigration petition addressed to FDR. From its opening lines, the petition called on the President to provide federal aid for West African emigration, citing the promises of the New Deal. “Whereas the Congress has empowered the President to exercise his judgment in the present crisis in a manner suited to the exalted office and *provided means to execute his plans for the amelioration of distress and the restoring of normalcy…*” they argued, “we, the subjoined signatories, American citizens of African extraction, individually and collectively join in respectfully petitioning the President to consider our proposal, confident that his conclusions will be for the best interests of our families and of the community at large.” The petition went on to emphasize the stringent economic conditions that black Americans faced, arguing that emigration would hasten the end of the Great Depression: “[T]he distress of the unemployed is most severely felt by such of the uneducated American Negroes who abhor alms, both public and private, in any guise; [thus] the removal of a half million of the poorest from a competitive labor market, at the time, would tend to relieve to that extent the condition and opportunities of the remainder.”\(^{124}\)

The PME’s petition to FDR underscores the complexities of black nationalism during the Great Depression and illuminates how activists drew inspiration from Garvey and earlier black nationalists, while also framing their demands within the context of the historical developments of the era. During the late nineteenth century, itinerant African Methodist Episcopal (AME) preacher Bishop Henry McNeal Turner had called on the federal government to provide financial aid for emigration. Convinced that the United States had accumulated an estimated $40 billion for centuries of exploitation, Turner demanded that federal officials compensate black Americans by covering

\(^{124}\) Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 20 (emphasis added).
relocation expenses. Years later, in 1922, Garvey followed suit, supporting Mississippi Senator T.C. McCallum’s proposal to seek federal assistance to purchase or negotiate “a piece of land where the Afro-American could move towards independence under the tutelage of the United States government.” Thus, Gordon’s petition for federal aid to advance black emigration during the early 1930s was hardly unique.

Within the context of the Great Depression, however, Gordon and her supporters skillfully framed their demands for federal aid as part of the promises of the New Deal. Rather than citing their concerns about race-mixing, or their desire to establish an autonomous black nation state in Liberia, for example, these nationalists advocated emigration as a logical response to the nation’s economic crisis and as a viable solution to African Americans’ harsh conditions within the context of the Depression era. “Hungry, cold and miserable,” they argued, “the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness in America appears futile.” “Given an opportunity in our ancestral Africa,” they continued, “the knowledge of farming and of simple farm machinery and implements, which we have acquired here, would enable us to carve a frugal but decent livelihood out of the virgin soil and favorable climate of Liberia.”

What is even more striking is the way in which Gordon and her supporters creatively evoked the language of American citizenship while making a rather unconventional request to abdicate citizenship. While many Americans were turning to the burgeoning welfare state for aid to maintain a livelihood in the United States, Gordon and her supporters were seeking aid to establish a home elsewhere. This underscores the shifting identities of Gordon and her supporters, who intentionally

126 Martin, Race First, 347.
127 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 23.
presented themselves as “Americans of African extraction” in their emigration petition to FDR, while referring to themselves as “Ethiopians” and later, as “Liberians” in other documents.\(^\text{128}\) This emphasis on an African identity in the PME’s documents underscores the lasting impact of Garveyism, which had significantly transformed black Americans’ view of Africa during the early twentieth century.\(^\text{129}\) As one scholar notes, “In Garvey’s hands, the return to Africa was not merely an escape from adverse, and sometimes terrifying, circumstances in the United States and other places of the black diaspora, but was also a reunification of an unnaturally severed family.” Moreover, Garvey’s emphasis on Africa as the “motherland” forced black Americans to contend with their African roots even as they demanded citizenship rights in the United States.\(^\text{130}\) Gordon’s pro-emigration petition coincided with this significant shift in twentieth century black political thought.

With a drafted petition in hand, Gordon and fellow PME leaders began the arduous task of soliciting signatures from black residents who supported West African emigration. Convinced that an impressive number of signatures would improve their chances of obtaining federal support, these activists initiated a grassroots nationalist movement, which would eventually evolve into a nationwide, and international, pro-emigration campaign. Using the networks she had already developed as a Garveyite in the city and through the process of “street strolling,” Gordon widely popularized her ideas and circulated the emigration petition, calling for relocation to “Liberia or

\(^\text{129}\) I discuss black nationalists’ views and engagement with Africa (both real and imagined) in Chapters 4 and 5.
some other place or places in Africa where [blacks] could work out [their] own destiny independently of white people."\textsuperscript{131}

The interest generated by Gordon’s ideas were so great that she arranged a follow-up meeting days later to begin collecting signatures from African Americans willing to leave the country. According to PME pamphlets, seventy volunteer secretaries—mostly women—were stationed at thirty five tables at the “old Jack Johnson Boxing Ring” to record the names and addresses of interested black Chicagoans. In the months that followed, Gordon and PME members continued to collect the names of emigration supporters in the city, and throughout various parts of the country. By February 1933, PME volunteers were collecting the names and addresses of black men and women interested in emigration at various stations throughout Chicago and in the state of Indiana. To expedite the process, PME volunteers asked each signatory to provide the names of family members and friends who might be interested and urged loved ones to sign the petition.\textsuperscript{132}

The method of obtaining signatures proved especially successful; in only a matter of eight months, Gordon managed to collect four hundred thousand signatures from black men and women expressing a desire to emigrate from the United States to West Africa. On November 15, 1933, Gordon mailed a copy to FDR.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{131} Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 15; By 1933, the organization’s leaders decided on Liberia as the ideal location.

\textsuperscript{132} Brief History of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia to President Roosevelt Pamphlet, March 1939, reel 243, American Colonization Society Records, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Conclusion

Not long after sending the petition, Gordon received a brief response from the State Department. As she carefully read the contents of the letter, one can imagine Gordon actively contemplating her next move. In sum, the letter indicated that the United States government was unable to assist. Gordon was not surprised but she was certainly disappointed. Later reflecting on the letter, she pointed out what she saw as its inherent fallacies. In her view, the U.S. government did have the means to help blacks relocate to West Africa. She argued, “Harry Hopkins, Federal Relief Director, [unveiled] a federal plan to spend an initial $25,000,000 in buying land to segregate the poor (presumably Negroes) in the arid West and in the sandy wastes of the cut-over lands of the North.” As such, she reasoned that the “the government disproves its own claim that it has no money for the purchase of land.” From her vantage point, New Deal funds provided a viable financial source for aiding black men and women willing to leave the country.

Though she viewed FDR’s response as a stumbling block, Gordon remained undeterred in her efforts to advance universal black liberation through West African emigration. Within weeks of receiving the response, the activist launched yet another pro-emigration petition, building on the growing momentum of her followers. Moreover, she began to make steps towards expanding her base of support. While most of Gordon’s activities during the early 1930s had been confined to Chicago and other areas of the U.S. North, the black nationalist “street scholar” decided to target the Jim Crow South—where she and most of her followers had resided before the Great Migration. In 1936, she appointed a national organizer to lead the charge. Her name was Celia Jane Allen.


134 Gordon to Cox, 7 March 1934, Box 4, Cox Papers.

135 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE


In 1937, when Celia Jane Allen arrived at the home of George Green, a black preacher in Long, Mississippi, she had one primary goal in mind. Allen, a native Mississippian who had been residing in Chicago, returned to Mississippi on behalf of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) to promote West African emigration. While Green was initially skeptical of the activist, he eventually conceded, allowing Allen to reside in his home as she engaged in the difficult task of organizing local black residents. In the ensuing months, Allen went on the mission to help establish local branches of the PME in the community and in nearby Matherville. Later recounting her activities, Allen noted that she was “successful in getting many thousands to heed the call and sign their names.” “Many places I was in danger, and was advised not to mention to the people about going to Africa,” she continued, “but I never ceased to plead with them and was successful to leave the South without any trouble.” By her own account, she managed to secure more than four thousand signatures from black residents in Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri during the 1930s. In

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1 Rev. George Green to Theodore Bilbo, 8 March 1938, Box 340, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.
2 Statement of Thomas H. Bonner, November 18, 1942, Mobile, Alabama, Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Investigative Files on the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, File no. 100-124410, RG 60, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
3 Peace Movement of Ethiopia, Constitution of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia: One God, One Country, One People; also, a Brief History, Memorial to President, Fimalal Oration and Burial Ceremonies, Battle Hymn of the Peace Movement (United States: s.n., 1941?), 29. [Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution].
4 Celia Jane Allen to Theodore Bilbo, 1939 (no month or date listed), Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
1942, she claimed to have collected over a million signatures of black residents who were willing and ready to abandon life in the United States for the prospect of a better one in West Africa.\(^5\)

Allen’s organizing activities in the Deep South offer a glimpse into the type of political activities in which nationalist women were engaged after the decline of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In the previous chapter, I examine how Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, a black nationalist “street scholar,” drew on her widespread networks in Black Chicago to launch a vibrant pro-emigration campaign during the early 1930s.\(^6\) Under the auspices of the PME, Gordon, along with thousands of her supporters in the urban North, called upon President Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide New Deal funds to facilitate a voluntary mass exodus of black Americans to West Africa. While the 1933 petition did not result in any serious consideration on the part of the FDR administration, it did help to fan the flames of emigrationist sentiments, which had already occupied a meaningful place in African American political thought since the eighteenth century.\(^7\) In the years after the FDR petition, Gordon and her supporters began to extend their political activities to the Southern region, specifically targeting rural blacks working as sharecroppers.

This chapter examines the political theory and praxis of nationalist women in the Jim Crow South during the Great Depression-era. Highlighting the activities of Celia Jane Allen, the chapter

\(^{5}\) Allen to Bilbo, 4 August 1942, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
offers a portrait of how a woman activist facilitated a grassroots nationalist movement during the late-1930s that galvanized Southern blacks in the rural areas. Deploying Garveyist theory and rhetoric, including the tenets of black political self-determination, racial pride, and economic self-sufficiency, Allen worked within the organizing tradition as she attempted to garner support for West African emigration. Centered on transforming the political consciousness of individuals in order to build greater participation in civic and political life, the organizing tradition, as opposed to the mobilizing tradition, represented the bottom-up, community-based political activism that was vital to the development of local leaders. With the focus on building relationships and developing local leaders, Allen led a pro-emigration campaign in the U.S. South, which she envisioned as a viable solution to the social, economic, and political challenges facing black men and women in the United States and across the African diaspora. Her political activities illuminate how nationalist women activists strategically adapted their actions and ideological messages to fit the local settings in which they worked. Significantly, they also shed light on how women activists articulated what some

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9 Historian Charles Payne distinguishes between organizing and mobilizing. He uses the term mobilizing to describe the large-scale, short-term public events that Martin Luther King, Jr. and other charismatic leaders used to rally communities during the modern civil rights era. While his study centers on organizing, the long-term development of leadership in ordinary men and women, Payne argues that the mobilizing tradition was also significant to the success of grassroots social movements. See Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (London: University of California Press, 2007).
scholars have referred to as “inspirational Garveyism”—a more fluid discourse that black activists continued to invoke without Garvey’s direct influence.10

Uncovering the Life of Celia Jane Allen

Celia Jane Allen’s early life is shrouded in mystery. Like many working-class black women living during this period, Allen left no personal archives and few writings.11 Much of the available information on Allen’s early life comes directly from Allen herself and largely from government records and third-party accounts. These records raise a number of questions about the mysterious personal life of a woman who became one of the key black nationalist women organizers in the U.S. South during the Great Depression-era. According to Allen, she was born in the state of Mississippi and resided at 442 Bowen Avenue in the city of Chicago.12 Gordon and other PME leaders who worked alongside Allen, referred to her as “Mrs. Allen,” a likely indication that she was married.13 The only surviving photo of Allen suggests that she might have been around forty or fifty years of age during the late 1930s.14 Apart from these facts, we know very little about Allen’s personal life.

Though Allen disclosed very little about her personal life in her correspondence and interactions with others, census records do offer a few clues. Curiously, no one by the surname Allen appears in census records for Chicago during this period—who also fits all of the details that

12 Celia Jane Allen to Thomas Bernard, 28 September 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410-65. Also see Celia Jane Allen to Theodore Bilbo, no date listed, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers; Allen to Bilbo, 18 October 1941, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers; Allen to Bilbo, 4 August 1942, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
13 It is also likely that others referred to Allen this way as a sign of respect.
14 Photograph of PME’s Executive Council, Box 39, Earnest Sevier Cox Papers, 1821-1973, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. The photo is undated but the author has determined that it was most likely taken around 1937 based on the individuals included in the photo (that correspond with organizational records).
Allen provided in her writings. Though multiple individuals with the same name resided in Chicago, they neither resided on Bowen Avenue nor had a birthplace listed as Mississippi. In 1940, when census-takers arrived at 442 Bowen Avenue in Cook County, Chicago, they encountered a thirty-five year old African American woman by the name of Ruth Dorsey. Born in Mississippi in 1905, Dorsey had relocated to Chicago sometime during the mid to late 1920s. She arrived in the city during the Great Migration when thousands of other African Americans abandoned life in the Jim Crow South.\(^{15}\) While residing in Chicago with her mother and her husband, Frank, Dorsey, like countless other black women in urban areas during this period, worked in domestic service.\(^{16}\)

During the early 1930s, Dorsey lost her job as a domestic worker and remained unemployed until 1940.\(^{17}\) Her experience mirrored those of other black women residing in Chicago and other cities; by January 1931, more than a quarter of all employed black women residing in urban areas lost their jobs.\(^{18}\) Though Dorsey admitted receiving some type of income—most likely federal relief—in 1940, her financial situation was probably still dire. Federal funds provided minimal relief for African Americans who received less than their fair share. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which spent $4 billion primarily in direct financial aid for the needy, extended more funds to white Americans than black Americans. New Deal policies, which promised


to improve socioeconomic conditions for all Americans, ultimately offered to African Americans a “raw deal.” For black women, the extremely limited job opportunities during the economic crisis and rampant racial inequalities in federal relief programs, created a dismal atmosphere. During this period, some black women in the urban North participated in “slave markets,” accepting extremely low pay for domestic work. In Dorsey’s case, it appears that she began to open up her apartment to others—perhaps as a means of supplementing her income in the aftermath of losing her job.

Though Celia Jane Allen’s living arrangements are unclear, her ability to use Dorsey’s address for the purpose of receiving mail during the 1930s and 1940s suggests that the two women may have been related or well acquainted. At the very least, it may be an indication that Allen was a boarder (or lodger) in Dorsey’s apartment even though Allen was not present when census-takers arrived at the home in 1940. While we may never know the full circumstances surrounding Allen’s early life in Chicago, we do know that she became actively involved in the PME sometime in 1933. During the economic and political upheavals of the Depression-era, the organization provided a significant

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21 Impoverished families often took in boarders (individuals who received food and room) or lodgers (individuals who received room but took meals separate from the families) during this period. Early census records recognized these two distinct classifications; however other terms were also used such as renter, roofer, and subletter. See Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out of Work: A History of Wage Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 124-5; Beverly Ann Statum, *Poor Women and their Families: Hard Working Charity Cases, 1900-1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 54, 187.

22 In a 1942 letter, Allen revealed that she had been active in the movement for nine years. See Allen to Bilbo, 4 August 1942, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
platform for working-class blacks in the city, and other parts of the country, to engage in nationalist politics—rejecting mainstream white society and advocating black pride and black political and economic self-determination. With local UNIA chapters in a state of decline, the PME emerged as the largest, and arguably most influential, black nationalist organization established in Chicago during this period. Like many of the black men and women who joined the PME, Allen might have been especially drawn to the organization on account of its pro-emigration platform.

In the context of the Great Depression, there is no doubt that Allen also embraced West African emigration in response to some of the historical developments of the era. Writing in a 1938 letter, Allen insisted, “I want to do all that I can do in the fight in the helping to provide ways and means for the [N]egroes to be immigrated to Africa from whence we came.” “[W]e can only plead to the gods of this country to send us to Africa,” she continued, “where we can work and make a living and be a pure black race.”

Her comments capture the activist’s Pan-African vision and sustained belief that emigration was a vehicle for realizing black unity and bolstering black political and economic self-determination during the Depression. For Allen and the thousands of men and women who joined the PME during the 1930s and 1940s, West African emigration appeared to be a logical solution to the racial hatred that permeated much of the nation, and a step towards building better livelihoods during the economic crisis.

When Gordon began advocating West African emigration on the street corners of Chicago during the early 1930s, her words must have resonated

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23 Allen to Bilbo, 9 June 1938, Box 354, Bilbo Papers (emphasis added).
24 A copy of the PME’s membership roll, obtained by FBI agents in 1942, includes the names and addresses of 4,012 official members. See Membership Roll in the Peace Movement of Ethiopia Report, 8 August 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410-65. However, other sources suggest that the organization had an estimated 300,000 supporters. See, for example, Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Cox Papers; “Nation Stirred Over Move To Colonize Race In Africa,” Chicago Defender, 7 March 1936; “400,000 Ask F.D. to Ship Them From Country,” Baltimore Afro-American, 10 March 1934.
with Allen in some meaningful way. By 1937, Allen had not only embraced Gordon’s teachings; she was one of the PME’s key recruiters.

As the PME began to gain momentum in the urban North and message about its growth began to spread through newspapers across the country, Gordon seized the opportunity to expand her organization’s base in the Southern region. Though the specific circumstances are unclear, Gordon and her executive council identified Allen as the ideal candidate to facilitate this process—perhaps because Allen was familiar with the area or volunteered to go. To a large extent, the transient nature of Allen’s life suggests that the activist enjoyed a mobility that made it possible for her to be an effective organizer. As a national organizer, Allen was expected to be away from home for extended periods of time, and she was also expected to travel frequently throughout the Jim Crow South. Since Allen may have been married, perhaps with familial ties to Chicago, the decision might have been a difficult one for her to make.25

Moreover, as an organizer, the activist received little financial support from the PME. Though the organization provided five dollars for traveling expenses, Allen bore the brunt of the financial costs.26 The personal sacrifices and financial commitment associated with Allen’s political organizing activities might have been deterrents. But even more, the decision to return to the South—considering that she had decided to leave years earlier—might have caused Allen some anxiety. Allen’s few surviving letters capture her sense of fear as she traveled throughout the Southern region to recruit new members and promote the message of West African emigration. Naturally, she worried that her life would be in danger, and with limited financial resources, she had

25 There is no evidence to suggest that Allen had children.
26 Allen to Bilbo, 8 October 1941?, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers. It is unclear if the five dollar payment was a one-time occurrence or recurring payment.
no clear sense of how her basic necessities would be met. Allen’s unexpected arrival at Reverend Green’s home in Long, Mississippi underscores the uncertainty associated with her political activities during this period.

**Building a Movement in Mississippi**

The state of Mississippi was, in the words of one historian, the “most race-haunted of all American states.” Like other states in the former Confederacy, the lives of black men and women in the state of Mississippi were dominated by Jim Crow segregation, exclusion, racial violence and terror. Between 1889 and 1945, there were 467 recorded lynchings in the state of Mississippi alone—representing thirteen percent of the nation’s recorded lynchings. An estimated 12.7 percent of those who were lynched in the state—from the period of 1889 to 1935—were accused of rape. However, records of the period only confirmed what journalist Ida B. Wells had long acknowledged in her seminal works, *Southern Horrors* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895); whites used the threat of rape as a means of terrorizing black Americans in order to keep them “in their place.” Though white vigilantes generally targeted black men, women were also victims of white mob violence. Between 1880 and 1930, at least one hundred and thirty black women were lynched in the Southern region. In the state of Mississippi, roughly eighteen black women were victims of mob violence during this period.

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27 Allen to Bilbo, 9 June 1938, Box 354, Bilbo Papers.
29 Ibid., 229, 335.
32 Ibid., 159.
period. These incidents, combined with a string of highly publicized black lynchings during the postwar period, including the 1955 Emmett Till murder, helped the state gain its reputation as “the land of the tree and the home of the grave.”

During the late 1930s, when Celia Jane Allen ventured out into the state to begin organizing rural blacks, white mob violence had become so commonplace in Mississippi that local newspapers hardly covered their occurrence. Though there appears to be fewer lynchings in Wayne County—where Reverend Green resided—than other parts of the state such as Hinds County, white vigilantes were active in every region of the state and black residents simply could not escape this sobering fact. Significantly, one of the most infamous lynchings of the period took place in Duck Hill (Montgomery County) in 1937. In April of that year, a mob of white men seized Roosevelt Townes and Robert McDaniels, two African Americans who had been accused of murdering a local white merchant. After mob leaders hung Townes and McDaniels to a tree, hundreds of local whites watched on as they used gasoline blowtorches to burn the men alive. The Duck Hill lynching might have gone unnoticed, as many other acts of racial violence in Mississippi during this period, were it not for the fact that someone in the crowd chose to take photographs. Images of the gruesome scene later circulated across the nation as Congress debated the passage of a federal anti-lynching bill. Despite the public outcry, no one was ever arrested for the murders.

34 McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 252.
35 Ibid., 229-230. McNeil points out that the majority of lynchings (about 70 percent) occurred in MS counties with the greatest density of black population.
In this tense racial climate, Celia Jane Allen began organizing in the state of Mississippi. When Allen showed up at Reverend Green’s home in 1937, one can imagine that the activist arrived quietly, trying not to attract unwanted attention. While Green offered few details on his initial encounter with Allen, surviving accounts suggest that Allen arrived alone and ‘out of the blue,’ asking for a place to stay. Born in Mississippi in 1875, Green lived with his wife, Beatrice, and twenty-four-year-old son, Eddie. A sharecropper by day, Green was also a preacher at a local church and may have had ties to various other churches in the region. While it is plausible that someone—perhaps a black churchgoer who read about the PME’s popular emigration campaign in Chicago—suggested that Allen stay with Green, the preacher had never heard of Allen or the PME prior to the activist’s arrival.  

The sixty-two-year-old preacher might have been caught off-guard by this new visitor, but Allen’s arrival was certainly intentional. She wanted a place to stay, but even more, she wanted to secure Green’s support for her nationalist activities. As a preacher, Green would likely have many local connections, and his endorsement of the organization and its platform would certainly make Allen’s work a bit easier. Pointing out the limited opportunities available for Southern blacks and insisting that emigration to West Africa offered the most viable solution for black Americans, Allen convinced Green to not only become a PME member, but to also help her establish a series of local chapters. Although Green later shrewdly told FBI officials that Allen never made him aware of the

38 Rev. George Green to Bilbo, 8 March 1938, Box 340, Bilbo Papers.
organization’s stance on West African emigration, his writings confirm his full knowledge of the
PME’s aims, and his conscious decision to join the movement.39

Green’s endorsement of the PME marked a turning point in Allen’s political activities in the
area. Green’s support certainly strengthened Allen’s ability to garner support for her cause. As a
minister who had been residing in the area for quite some time, Green occupied a place of privilege
in the black community. Unlike Allen, who was fairly new to the community, Green was most likely
already well connected, and one can easily imagine that as a spiritual leader, Green wielded some
amount of influence and respect.40 Green’s support certainly provided Allen with access to a public
meeting space where she could address local residents, which was critical. Largely shut out of the
formal political process during this period, black churches—like other black-owned businesses and
institutions—provided a significant space for black Southerners to meet, plan, and disseminate
ideas.41 These churches, according to historian Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, “afforded African
Americans an interstitial space in which to critique and contest white America’s racial domination”
during the Jim Crow era.42

39 Statement of George G. Green, Matherville, Mississippi, November 5, 1942, FBI File no. 100-
124410-65. Federal authorities were monitoring the activities of a number of black nationalists since
1919, when the Garvey movement began to attract a significant following in the country. For an
overview of federal surveillance of black radicals, see Theodore Kornweibel, Seeing Red: Federal
Although the PME, as an organization, did come under heavy federal surveillance until the early
1940s, federal officials began to monitor the activities of Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, the PME’s
founder and president, during the early 1940s.
40 On the role of the black preacher, see Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, eds., The Black
Press, 1996), 51. The recent work of historian Tiffany M. Gill underscores the significance of black
owned-businesses as platforms for political activism. See Gill, Beauty Shop Politics: African American
Women’s Activism in the Beauty Industry (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
42 Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church,
While Green provided Allen with access to a physical meeting space, the preacher’s support provided a buffer of protection from those who might have questioned a woman’s ability to autonomously lead. Concerns over the proper roles and responsibilities for women often dominated discussions among black churchmen and nationalists who, more often than not, advocated a strict gendered hierarchy of leadership. While these men recognized women as the ‘backbone,’ they were less willing to accept women in positions of visible leadership with authority over both men and women.  

Much like men in the Black Church, nationalist men, envisioned a woman’s place as supportive to men’s leadership roles. Garvey’s own poetry, articles, and speeches reinforced women’s responsibility as nurturers, often behind the scenes, while men were expected to occupy visible leadership positions as “sworn protectors” of the “honor and virtue” of black womanhood. As one male Garveyite opined in a 1923 article, “Let us go back to the days of true manhood when women truly reverenced us…for all true women will admire and respect a real man.” These comments captured the patriarchal nature of the Garvey movement, which, as previously mentioned, was characteristic of other twentieth century black nationalist movements.


45 Negro World, 9 June 1923.

Significantly, though, the PME did not maintain a strict gendered hierarchy. From the outset, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, a former UNIA member, established the organization, initially claiming that she could not “locate a strong man” to do the job. Given the demographics of the organization—most of the members were male—and the very fact that at least nine men including Gordon’s husband, William, were present at the first meeting in December 1932, it appears that Gordon was simply unwilling to seek out the “strong man” she envisioned. Gordon would ultimately maintain the position of president general in the organization during the remainder of her lifetime; even during the two years she was imprisoned for her radical internationalist activities (1942 to 1944), she placed a number of women in charge of running the affairs of the organization in her absence.

Perhaps what is even more striking is that unlike women in the UNIA during the 1920s, women in the PME could be found serving in a variety of visible leadership roles from national organizers to members of the executive board. This is not to suggest that the organization maintained gender egalitarianism or that Gordon herself promoted gender equality. To the contrary,

47 Gordon to Cox, 27 October 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers.
48 It was only after Gordon’s death in 1961 that a male assumed leadership of the organization.
49 By and large, women in the Garvey movement of the 1920s were relegated to behind-the-scenes and supportive roles. With the exception of a handful of high-profile women leaders, UNIA women generally served as Black Cross Nurses or members of the African Motor Corps. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter One. See Tera W. Hunter, “Feminist Consciousness and Black Nationalism: Amy Jacques Garvey and Women in the Universal Negro Improvement Association” (Unpublished Paper Presented at Women’s History Research Seminar, Yale University, 1983); Bair, “Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands Unto God”; Bair, “True Women, Real Men: Gender, Ideology and Social Roles in the Garvey Movement,” in Gender Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women’s History, eds. Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Beryl Satter, “Marcus Garvey, Father Divine, and the Gender Politics of Race Difference and Race Neutrality,” American Quarterly, Vol. 48, no. 1 (March 1996): 43-76. Historian Claudrena Harold describes the New Orleans division of the UNIA as one notable exception in terms of gendered leadership, arguing that the division was “quite progressive with regards to the promotion of women to leadership positions.” See Harold, The Rise and Fall of the Garvey Movement, 142, n. 102.
Gordon maintained a masculinist vision of black liberation, and while she remained at the forefront of black nationalist politics, she still desired to establish a black nation-state led by strong black men.  

Similar to Amy Jacques Garvey, Gordon and other women in the PME articulated what historian Ula Taylor has termed “community feminism.” Community feminists are women whose activism is centered on expanding opportunities for women’s leadership, on one hand, while reinforcing traditional roles and expectations on the other. “At times,” Taylor asserts, “community feminism resembled a tug-of-war between feminist and nationalist paradigms but it also provided a means of critiquing chauvinist ideas of women as intellectually inferior.” In this way, community feminism provided a unique space for black nationalist women to simultaneously function as both helpmates and visible political leaders within their communities.

This certainly was the case for women in the PME. However, these women articulated community feminism in ways that were noticeably different from the first generation of Garveyite women activists in the UNIA. While women in the UNIA during the 1920s used the pages of the *Negro World*, the official Garveyite newspaper, to publicly challenge male chauvinism and patriarchy in black nationalist circles, women in the PME were largely silent on these issues. Surviving primary sources suggest that PME women were less interested in advocating a black feminist agenda in writing compared to nationalist women like Jacques Garvey, who introduced the women’s page of the *Negro World*—“Our Women and What They Think”—in 1924. Their actions, however, spoke louder than their words, or lack thereof. Despite the absence of overt feminist writings, the women in the PME often maintained positions of leadership and authority, over both men and women, and engaged in activities that challenged the gender and sexual conventions of their time. Allen’s

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50 I offer a more in-depth discussion of Gordon’s political ideas and activism in Chapter Two.  
51 Taylor, *Veiled Garvey*, 2.  
52 Ibid., 64-90.
decision to travel alone and live away from home for extended periods of time, particularly as a woman who might have been married, offers a case in point. Similar to black women in the Communist Party during this period, Allen “forged a transgressive gender and sexual politics” that defied traditional expectations about respectable black womanhood. 53

At the same time, Allen had to carefully ‘walk a fine line’ between leading as a woman activist and adhering to the black nationalist (masculinist) belief in the primacy of black male leadership. When Allen began to organize in Wayne County, Mississippi, the activist had to skillfully assert her leadership in a way that would not appear threatening to (male) members of the community. Her decision to collaborate with Reverend Green was strategic in this regard. With Green’s endorsement, and through his connections, Allen quickly tapped into a widespread network of churchgoers, friends, and relatives.

During her stay in Mississippi, she contacted thirty-nine-year-old local resident Thomas H. Bernard. Born in Matherville, Mississippi in 1898, Bernard worked as a sharecropper during his teens until 1918, when he was drafted for the U.S. army at the age of twenty. 55 By the time Allen arrived in Mississippi in 1937, Bernard was still residing in Matherville with his wife, Alee, and his mother, Delia. By his own statement, Bernard’s interest in the PME was

54 Statement of George Green, Matherville, Mississippi, November 5, 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
directly linked to his encounter with Allen during her visits.\(^{56}\) A few years later, he recalled his motivations for joining the PME, indicating that he found the organization appealing because of its commitment to “get[ting] its members back to Africa, their fatherland” [and] its emphasis on “peace at all times.” As a WWI veteran, Bernard appeared to be intrigued by the organization’s instructions that members should “file conscientious objector forms…in order that [they] would not have to fight for the United States” in the event of another war.\(^{57}\)

Bernard’s interest in relocating to “the fatherland” suggest that he imagined himself as part of a diasporic community of black men and women who would ultimately be (re)united in Africa.\(^{58}\) He was not alone. One of Allen’s surviving poems, “Freedom’s Wind is Blowing,” captures these same sentiments: “We are a nation/ Must go free and stay free forevermore/We are thirty million strong/We bid you all adieu.” After recounting “four hundred years” of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, black enslavement, and racial oppression in the U.S. South, Allen called on blacks in the diaspora to take a definitive stance towards racial progress. Exemplifying the masculinist undertones associated with black nationalist movements, Allen’s poem appealed directly to black men to lead the way:

> The black man now must stand alone  
> And let the nations see  
> That he now has a worthy cause  
> And surely must go free

\(^{56}\) Statement of Thomas H. Bonner (Bernard), November 18, 1942, Mobile, Alabama, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.  
His Fatherland is calling him
And homeward he must go
He has no envy in his heart
But bid you all adieu.\textsuperscript{59}

Like many other black nationalists during this period, Allen desired to be (re)united with other blacks in the diaspora and thus envisioned the PME as a vehicle for advancing West African emigration and thereby establishing an autonomous black nation-state.

These ideas about racial unity, black self-determination, and self-sufficiency were popularized by Garvey, the “pivotal figure” in the growth of twentieth century black nationalism.\textsuperscript{60} But, they were not entirely new. Long before the Garvey movement gained currency in the U.S. South during the post-World War I era, black Southerners had already embraced the movement’s ideological underpinnings through the teachings of earlier leaders including Booker T. Washington and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner.\textsuperscript{61} It was, in fact, Washington, the Tuskegee Institute founder, who became one of Garvey’s role models before the charismatic black nationalist leader arrived in the United States in 1916. Washington’s \textit{Up From Slavery}, which emphasized the significance of black education, had a profound effect on Garvey, who upon reading it experienced an epiphany of his calling to become a “race leader.”\textsuperscript{62}

Moreover, many of Garvey’s teachings closely mirrored those of Bishop Turner’s. An itinerant African Methodist Episcopal (AME) preacher, Turner began advocating black emigration after his political prospects ended after Reconstruction. Convinced that extinction was the only

\textsuperscript{59} Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 29-31.
\textsuperscript{61} Rolinson, \textit{Grassroots Garveyism}, 24-47. Garvey was deeply influenced by other black leaders including influential early black nationalist Edward Wilmot Blyden. Rolinson offers an excellent overview of how Garvey drew on the teachings of earlier black thinkers to formulate his ideology.
likely outcome for African Americans barring emigration, Turner appealed to African Americans to leave the country during the late nineteenth century. While Garvey’s platform was far more extensive, his call for West African emigration during the 1920s echoed the rhetoric of the AME preacher. Like Turner, Garvey maintained a civilizationist perspective, believing that West African emigration would blaze a path towards modernity in Africa. Based on the widely popularized principle, “Africa for the Africans,” Garvey advocated West African emigration as a necessary step towards ‘redeeming’ Africa from the grip of European colonization. Like Turner, Garvey embraced the philosophy of Ethiopianism, evoking biblical verses as a prophetic reminder of inevitable black redemption.

Given the widespread influence of Turner, Washington and other early black leaders in the South—whose religio-political philosophies formed the very core of Garveyism—it is not surprising that Garvey found a significant following in the Southern region. By the mid-1920s, his organization, the UNIA, claimed five hundred divisions and branches across the U.S. South. The UNIA, which eventually began to decline in the aftermath of Garvey’s arrest and imprisonment on charges of mail fraud, played an integral role in the politicization of countless Southern black activists including Pan-

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Africanist leader Audley “Queen Mother” Moore.\textsuperscript{67} In the state of Mississippi, Garvey’s teachings held sway among black tenant farmers and sharecroppers—many of whom read the widely-circulated Garveyite newspaper, the \textit{Negro World}, which encouraged local residents to set up their own divisions. By 1921, thirty-four UNIA chapters were established in the state largely as a result of the efforts of individuals like local black farmer and preacher Adam D. Newson.\textsuperscript{68} As in other locales, UNIA women in Mississippi were largely involved in the movement as Black Cross Nurses, providing a range of social services for members of the black community.\textsuperscript{69} By 1928, however, the UNIA branches in the Southern region began to wane.

In the aftermath of Garvey’s 1927 deportation, local organizers struggled to keep divisions afloat.\textsuperscript{70} As the UNIA began to lose its stronghold in the Southern region, the PME emerged as a viable alternative.\textsuperscript{71} Organizing on their own terms—without Garvey’s direct influence or authority—PME activists attempted to build a wide coalition of black supporters in the region, advocating emigration as a vehicle for black social, political and economic progress. While there is no doubt that these activists tapped into many of the nationalist ideas that were firmly rooted in black politics and culture during this period, they also employed a range of tactics that helped to propel the movement. For example, PME organizers were able to convince local black residents to join the movement by insisting that they had already secured land in West Africa. This was not exactly the case. But, PME leaders had made some strides in their efforts to advance black

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 3, 27. On Moore, see Erik S. McDuffie, “‘I wanted a Communist philosophy, but I wanted us to have a chance to organize our people’: the Diasporic Radicalism of Queen Mother Audley Moore and the Origins of Black Power,” \textit{African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal} 3 (2010): 181-95; McDuffie, \textit{Sojourning for Freedom}.

\textsuperscript{68} Rolinson, \textit{Grassroots Garveyism}, 98-100. For division figures, see appendix D in \textit{Grassroots Garveyism}.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 122.

\textsuperscript{70} With the exception of the state of Virginia, the UNIA divisions ceased to exist by 1928. See Harold, \textit{Rise and Fall of the Garvey Movement}.

\textsuperscript{71} Rolinson, \textit{Grassroots Garveyism}, 182.
emigration, and they emphasized this information in order to pique the interests of prospective followers. In April 1936, T. Elwood Davis, then aide to Liberian President Edwin Barclay, extended what appeared to be a favorable response to black emigration to the country. Citing President Barclay’s commitment to making Liberia a “respectable and attractive place in which Negroes the world over may find it the true asylum from those handicaps and oppressions peculiar to other places where they are domiciled,” Davis assured Gordon and her supporters that they would receive a warm welcome.

Circumstances were far more complicated than this quote suggests, and President Barclay had a number of stipulations for prospective emigrants including a desire for individuals with capital.72 By not disclosing the full details of Davis’ letter, Gordon managed to convince her supporters that with the promise of land in Liberia, black residents would soon be able to begin the process of leaving the United States. In addition, when Allen arrived in Mississippi in 1937, the PME was in the process of sending a small delegation to Liberia to assess conditions in the country and begin negotiations with Liberian officials.73 Therefore, when Allen began organizing in Mississippi, she emphasized these developments to convince Bernard and other black Mississippians that the PME and its leaders were making tangible steps towards following through with their plans.

Maintaining a deep sense of urgency, Allen pled with local residents to join the PME, which she described as the “only safe way to Africa.” “I tried very hard,” she later noted, “to make my people see that our time is winding up in this western world.”74 Her efforts were fruitful. Bernard

72 T. Elwood Davis to Gordon, 24 April 1936, Box 4, Cox Papers.
73 In Chapter Four, I offer a more in-depth discussion of the complex realities of Americo-Liberian relations with the United States prior to and during the Great Depression. For an excellent overview of this subject, see Ibrahim K. Sundiata, Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914-1940 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
74 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 28.
was convinced and like Reverend Green, he agreed to become a member of the organization. Shortly thereafter, he and Allen established new PME chapters in the area, which attracted an estimated three hundred members. Much like her experiences with Green, Allen played an instrumental role in Bernard’s quick transition from member to leader. By 1942, Bernard was not only a member of the organization, but a local organizer who in turn, went on to help establish more chapters of the PME in the neighboring state of Alabama.75

Local residents’ descriptions of Bernard during this period reveal much about how Bernard organized black men and women in the Southern region. One anonymous local resident complained to federal authorities that Bernard’s involvement in the PME incited some tensions in Matherville. According to the informant, “T.H. Bernard was constantly agitating the colored folks in that vicinity against white people.” “He possessed a typewriter in his home, carried a little black satchel, and carried on considerable correspondence with some peace organization in Chicago, Illinois,” the individual added. Interestingly, the only surviving photo of Allen shows the activist also holding a black satchel, symbolically forging a connection between the two organizers who worked in tandem during the Depression-era. Described as a “whiteman hater” by one of his neighbors, Bernard engaged in door-to-door canvassing, attempting to solicit help “in obtaining freedom of the negroes from the slavery of the whites.”76 Another anonymous black resident later recounted that during the process of canvassing, Bernard called for a militant response to racial oppression, attempting to

75 Statement of Thomas H. Bonner, Mobile, Alabama, November 18, 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
enlist help to “actively revolt against white people” in the area. The individual also claimed that Bernard was known to carry a gun.\textsuperscript{77}

These descriptions about Bernard’s activities provide a glimpse into the diverse protest strategies that PME activists employed during their political work. Whereas Allen centered her political activism on convincing local black residents to join the PME; advocating black political-self determination; and insisting that black emigration was imminent, Bernard may have desired a more immediate overthrow of the white power structure. If, in fact, the FBI informant looked askance at Bernard’s alleged militant approach, others seemed to embrace it. During the late 1930s, Bernard’s door-to-door canvassing garnered considerable support in the local community and within months of joining the movement, he had established two PME branches, consisting of “about 300 members,” in Wayne County, Mississippi.\textsuperscript{78} One local white resident later observed, “[Bernard] wielded considerable influence with his fellow negroes.”\textsuperscript{79}

Together, Bernard’s chapters in Matherville and Green’s PME chapter in nearby Long, Mississippi provided a space for local black men and women to become involved in nationalist politics, drawing widely on the networks of churchgoers and using the church as the central meeting place. The extent of the utilization of the church and the overtly Christian ethos mark striking differences between PME chapters in the South and the organization’s main chapter in Chicago. While Gordon and PME leaders in Chicago promoted a syncretic version of Islam based on the teachings of Noble Drew Ali, PME activists in the South toned down their Islamic rhetoric.\textsuperscript{80} In

\textsuperscript{77} Report of Special Agent John L. Sullivan, 4 February 1943, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
\textsuperscript{78} Statement of Thomas H. Bonner, Mobile, Alabama, November 18, 1942, File no. 100-124410-65.
\textsuperscript{79} Report of Special Agent John L. Sullivan, 4 February 1943, Jackson, Mississippi, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
\textsuperscript{80} Ali was the founder of the Moorish Science Temple, the precursor to the National of Islam.
fact, PME meetings in the South closely mirrored a typical service in the Black Church.\(^81\) These weekly meetings, generally held immediately after church services, began with a prayer and the reading of biblical scriptures. For example, in the state of Florida, William Butler, a deacon of the Mount Carmel Freewill Baptist Church in Toddsville, later recalled that PME organizer William Ferguson shared information about the organization shortly after the pastor had delivered his sermon.\(^82\) Another local resident, Rosa Boyd, recalled the same organizer showing up at Allen Chapel, a Methodist Church in Hicksville, Florida, asking the pastor for permission to address the congregation at the conclusion of the service.\(^83\) These examples offer glimpses into how PME activists in the South skillfully used black churches as platforms from which to spread their nationalist ideas and recruit new members. Notwithstanding the tensions that often existed between black churches and black activists, these examples also illustrate the inextricable relationship between black religion and politics and reveals that black churches had a profound impact on the development of the PME’s nationalist movement in the South during this period.\(^84\)

\(^81\) I discuss Gordon’s connections to Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple (MST) in more detail in the previous chapter of this dissertation.
\(^83\) Statement of Rosa Boyd, 23 November 1942, Palatka, Florida, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
\(^84\) The literature on black politics and religion is extensive. For an excellent overview of the topic in relation to women’s activism, see Bettye Collier-Thomas, Jesus, Jobs and Justice: African American Women and Religion (New York: Knopf, 2010). Barbara Savage’s recent study addresses the contested relationship between black activists and black churches. See Savage, Your Spirit Walks Besides Us: The Politics of Black Religion (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). A number of historians have examined how African American churches have provided the foundation of the black public sphere. See Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” Public Culture Fall 1994 7(1): 107-146; Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent.
With access to this meeting space, Allen and other organizers were able to openly spread their nationalist ideas—hidden from white interference and control. Local leaders used the meetings to not only bring members of the community together—through prayer, bible study, and quiet reflection—but to discuss key issues and keep local residents abreast of current developments. Reflecting the legacy of oral traditions in African and African American cultures, PME leaders used these meetings to read aloud from newspaper articles and letters from Gordon. Significantly, many of Gordon’s letters contained references to international developments—an indication that Gordon wanted to make sure that her followers did not lose sight of global freedom struggles of the era. In a 1942 letter to Bernard, Gordon reflected on the challenges that Indians endured under European colonialism and staunchly declared, “When India is free all colonial people and subjects throughout the world will be free.” “It will cost much bloodshed,” she predicted, “but it WILL COME.” In a subsequent letter to Tommie Thomas, a PME organizer in Arkansas, Gordon emphasized the link between the challenges facing African descended people and the plight of Indians. “The India situation is somewhat connected,” she argued, “and the complete freedom of India will bring complete freedom to the American black people, because the same men are holding them in slavery.” Believing that the plight of African Americans was inextricably linked to people of color around the globe, Gordon used her letters as a way to disseminate her internationalist ideas. In this

85 In her seminal study, historian Tera Hunter has documented how African Americans used the segregated spaces under Jim Crow to “bolster their autonomy and collective power.” See Hunter, To ’Joy My Freedom, 100.
86 Lincoln and Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience, 277. Also see Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness.
87 Gordon to T. H. Bernard, 20 August 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410 (capitalizations in original text).
way, the PME’s weekly meetings provided an intellectual space for local blacks, many sharecroppers and tenant farmers, to engage black internationalist discourse(s) at the grassroots level.  

Employing a range of strategies and tactics, Allen and other PME organizers attracted a significant following in the region. Much of their activities appeared to go undetected by federal authorities who were preoccupied with suppressing communism. While the FBI closely monitored the activities of other black radicals organizing in the Southern region during this period, they seemed to miss the activities of Allen, Bernard and others. It was not until the early 1940s, when the FBI attempted to build a case against Gordon—on account of her pro-Japanese sentiments and efforts to discourage her followers from fighting in World War II—that they uncovered a world of grassroots black nationalist activists who had been organizing in the Southern region. These men and women had been quite effective in attracting a large following. While size is not the only measure of effectiveness, it is certainly an important one, and in the state of Mississippi alone, the PME boasted seven hundred and thirty three official members—individuals who had purchased a PME membership card for ten cents and those who attended meetings on a frequent basis. An estimated three hundred and fifty one of these individuals were female and approximately three hundred and forty six were male. The members of the organization could be found scattered across the state. The majority of PME members—an estimated one hundred and seventy nine individuals—resided in Bolivar County, one hundred and five members resided in Attala County, and one hundred and thirty five in Madison County. These figures capture the widespread reach

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89 I offer a discussion of how nationalist women engaged in black internationalism during the 1930s and 1940s in Chapter Six.


91 These figures are based on the author’s calculations using PME membership data obtained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1942. The author was unable to determine the sex of thirty six
and effectiveness of PME organizers who used a range of tactics and strategies to recruit new members and sell their nationalist vision(s) during the 1930s.

PME women organizers’ emphasis on building relationships and developing local leaders played a crucial role in propelling the movement to state and regional prominence. Celia Jane Allen’s relationship with Joella Johnson provides a striking example of this correlation. Sometime in 1938, Johnson, a forty-eight-year-old wife and mother of two, made the decision to join the PME. Born in Mississippi in 1890, Johnson was residing in Long, Mississippi during the Depression-era when she crossed paths with Allen. While the full circumstances surrounding their initial meeting are unclear, it appears that Johnson and Allen first met each other during one of Allen’s public talks on emigration. In the state of Mississippi and across the Southern region, Allen had been taking her message to “churches, schools, on the streets and in hundreds of homes” in an effort to convince local black residents that West African emigration was a logical response to the challenges facing black Americans during the Depression, and a necessary step towards universal black liberation. Later recounting her activities, Allen expressed despair over the conditions of black Southerners: “Hundreds of the poor people were being driven from their farms...Conditions are such that many children are not able to go to school for the lack of shoes, clothing and food.” “I have met so many of them,” she continued, “and have had the opportunity to get them to sign the [emigration] petition

individuals. It is unclear exactly why much of the organization’s membership was concentrated in these three specific counties.


93 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 28-9. Allen was a featured guest speaker at a local church in 1939. See Program at the AME Zion Church, 3 February 1939 in Box 5, Cox Papers.
or [recite] our one prayer.”

Moreover, she added, “I tried very hard to make my people see that…the PEACE MOVEMENT OF ETHIOPIA, which was founded and led by Mme. M.M.L. Gordon, is the only safe way to Africa, which means freedom and justice.”

Perhaps Joella Johnson was one of the individuals that Allen described—one of the many black Southerners “being driven from their farms.” For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mississippi was, like other states in the Southern region, a largely agricultural state. During the antebellum period, land tenancy and sharecropping emerged in the state, primarily in areas with few slaves and plantations. In the aftermath of slavery, sharecropping became the primary means by which Southern farmers earned a living. But, for freedmen and women, tenant farming only created a cycle of unending dependency and debt with little prospect for land ownership. During the 1930s, conditions became even more dismal despite—and ironically, because of—the federal government’s attempts to boost the economy with the implementation of the New Deal. Policies such as the 1933 Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which was intended to increase failing crop prices, resulted in the displacement of thousands of land tenants, sharecroppers and small landowners—most of them being African Americans. As landowners began to eliminate their small

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94 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 28-9. Allen might have been referring to one of the PME’s standard prayers that members recited during weekly meetings.
95 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 28-9 (capitalizations included in the original text).
99 A number of scholars have examined how New Deal policies worsened conditions for black Americans and other minority groups. These include Harvard Sitkoff, A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Robin D. G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Zaragosa Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers
plots and farms became more mechanized, the systems of land tenancy and sharecropping began to die out in the region. Allen’s encounter with Johnson in 1938, then, coincided with the beginning of a major shift in the Southern economy, and Johnson may have been affected by these developments.  

Whatever the actual circumstances, Johnson’s interview with FBI officials in 1942 offer some important clues regarding why she joined the movement. Importantly, Johnson admitted to FBI officials that she was already familiar with the PME before she met Allen. She credited a woman activist by the name of “Mrs. Brooms” from Chicago who first told her about the organization and its goals. Though she offered few details on the matter, it is quite clear that despite prior knowledge, Johnson did not become involved in the organization until after meeting Allen. One can only wonder what distinguished Allen from the previous activist. Perhaps Allen’s words struck a personal chord with Johnson. Or perhaps Johnson was deeply moved by Allen’s passion, speaking abilities, personality, or a combination of all three. Whatever the circumstances, there is no denying that Allen left a lasting impression on Johnson.

This emerges from a careful reading of the FBI records, which despite its limitations, provide an extraordinary glimpse into Johnson’s life. Because of the underlying motives that guided the actions of FBI agents, when they showed up in Mississippi with a list of “suspects,” local black residents were often unwilling to answer their questions in earnest. Not surprisingly, Johnson’s interview with FBI officials is ripe with contradictions. From the outset, Johnson denied


*Statement from Joella Johnson, Long, Mississippi, 5 November 1942 and 6 November 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.*
membership in the PME and tried, to little avail, to maintain a level of secrecy about her 

involvement in the political movement. In one instance, she informed FBI officials that she was 

unable to read and write even though she had numerous letters in her possession. Though 

Johnson blatantly denied any knowledge of Allen’s nationalist agenda, she did admit to hearing Allen 

publicly “say something about Africa.” In addition, while she suggested to FBI agents that she 

hardly knew anything about the organization or Allen for that matter, she admitted welcoming Allen 

into her home for two nights.

Understandably, Johnson was not forthcoming with FBI officials. But, her actions are quite 

revealing. Her carefully crafted responses, which attempted to downplay her intelligence, interest in 

the organization, and knowledge of its leaders, only affirm her close affiliation with the organization. 

Certainly, Johnson wanted to protect the organization and its leaders—so much so that was she was 

willing to tell an amended version of the truth. Her refusal to admit her full involvement in the PME 

was most likely a survival strategy; she was not oblivious to the consequences of her political actions 

or the reprisals that might have followed if she disclosed too much information. At the same time, 

Johnson’s defiance during the FBI interviews also provides an example of what Robin D.G. Kelley 

refers to as racial “infrapolitics,” the covert methods of resistance that working-class black men and 

women employed in their efforts to challenge white supremacy during the Jim Crow era.

These


103 Ibid.

“seemingly innocuous, individualistic acts of survival and opposition,” Kelley argues, “shaped Southern urban politics, workplace struggles, and the social order generally.”

Johnson’s interview with FBI officials captures an infrapolitics of resistance that also characterized black life in the rural South. Cognizant of the racial hierarchy that circumscribed the lives of black men and women, and the looming presence of the state, Johnson strategically withheld crucial information from the white FBI officials. In so doing, she covertly challenged the social order, and by claiming to be oblivious of Allen’s activities, Johnson attempted to ensure the future success of the PME’s pro-emigration campaign. Not only was Johnson knowledgeable about Allen’s activities, other sources reveal that she was, in fact, drawn into the movement on account of Allen’s recruiting efforts. The two days that Allen spent in Johnson’s home could not have been coincidental. Similar to her earlier experiences with Reverend Green, Allen most likely had identified Johnson as a potential leader of the movement. Therefore, Allen’s request for a place to stay was both an attempt to build a relationship with Johnson and her family, and an opportunity for Allen to help groom Johnson for future leadership roles in the organization.

In the immediate aftermath of Allen’s short stay in her home, Johnson played a significant role in establishing a new local PME chapter and served as the chapter’s “lady president.” This provides yet another example of how the organization provided a space for women to serve in

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105 Kelley, “We are Not What We Seem,” 78.
106 The FBI acknowledges that very few African Americans worked as agents during the early twentieth century. They can only confirm that four black agents worked with the agency prior to 1962 when Aubrey Lewis and James Barrow became the first African Americans admitted to the FBI academy. See “‘A Byte Out of History’: Early African-American Agents,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2011/february/history_021511 (accessed 9 June 2013).
107 Statement of George G. Green, Matherville, Mississippi, November 5, 1942, FBI File no. 100-124410-65; Organizational Records of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, 23 January 1941, Exhibit No. 32, FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
108 Ibid.
formal, visible leadership roles. A survey of the list of officers in PME chapters across the state of Mississippi reveals that all divisions had both male and female officers. One of the local PME divisions in Matherville ("local # 10"), for example, boasted nine officers—three of whom were women serving in varied leadership capacities as a president, vice president, and secretary.\(^{109}\)

Johnson’s title also underscores how women activists in the PME had to carefully navigate black nationalist spaces. While it appears that Johnson was responsible for overseeing both men and women in the local chapter, the very use of the title—"lady president"—captures the gender politics at play.\(^{110}\) In the PME, the title was primarily used as a way to distinguish between male and female leaders; there is no evidence to suggest that "lady presidents" in the PME were solely confined to a woman’s division. In Johnson’s case, she worked alongside Reverend Green, who served as the chapter’s main president in Long, Mississippi.\(^{111}\) In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that Johnson was ultimately answerable to the Reverend. Surviving letters reveal that Johnson remained in close contact with Gordon who administered organizational instructions to both Johnson and Reverend Green—an indication that their leadership roles were complementary or equal.

Maintaining frequent communication with these local organizers, Gordon offered advice when needed, made suggestions for how the organizers should conduct their affairs, and provided words of encouragement in moments of despair. Writing to Johnson in 1942, Gordon urged her not to become “discouraged because of those who differ with you.” Echoing Garvey, who popularized the slogan during the 1920s, Gordon advised Johnson to “preach ‘AFRICA FOR THE AFRICANS’”

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109 List of Officers of Locals Number 10 and 11 in Report of Special Agent John Sullivan, 4 February 1943, Jackson, Mississippi in FBI File no. 100-124410-65.

110 In Garvey’s UNIA, the “lady president” was a title bestowed upon women leaders who were responsible for overseeing a woman’s division. Importantly, these women were answerable to the chapter’s male president. See Chapter One of this study. Bair, “Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands Unto God,” 41, 45.

111 Gordon to Johnson, 15 January 1942 in FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
everywhere you can.” In another letter, after Reverend Green reported acts of violence directed against PME members, Gordon followed up with a detailed letter, offering words of encouragement. “We hope you will soon find out the truth about the brutality to some of our members,” she noted. “Tell your people to be of good cheer for those that are suffering now will not have to suffer much longer.” Vaguely referencing recent developments in East Africa and India, Gordon advised the Reverend Green that in only a matter of time, black people would “win our fight without opposition.” She expressed similar sentiments in a letter to Sam Hawthorne, a Mississippian who joined the PME in Chicago and later returned to the Southern region to help establish a new chapter. Gordon urged Hawthorne “not to be discouraged because the people are slow to see the light.” “It takes time to wake sleeping people,” she added. Reinforcing these views in a letter to Bernard, Gordon optimistically declared, “Everything is working in our favor all over the world. In the very near future…the black man will be free.”

Gordon’s words may have provided much-needed hope and encouragement when circumstances appeared rather bleak for black Southerners. The Scottsboro case, perhaps more than any other case during this period, symbolized the racial hatred that permeated the Jim Crow South. Because of anxieties concerning interracial sex, many black nationalists were not enthusiastic about supporting the Scottsboro Boys. Some UNIA divisions—in New York and

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113 Gordon to Green, 22 July 1941; enclosure in letter from A.H. Johnson to Director the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 29 October 1942 in FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
114 Gordon to Hawthorne, 15 April 1942, in FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
115 Gordon to T.H. Bernard, 29 July 1942, enclosure in letter from A.H. Johnson to Director the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 29 October 1942 in FBI File no. 100-124410-65.
Detroit, for example—supported the cause by hosting fundraising rallies to help cover legal expenses. But, for the most part, Garveyites looked the other way. While many Garveyites and members of the National Association for Colored People (NAACP) and National Urban League (NUL) initially took a back seat, the Communist Party (CP) launched an international justice campaign, bringing widespread attention to the bitter legacy of institutional racism, discrimination, and class oppression in the U.S. South and beyond. A significant recruiting tool, the Scottsboro case response signified the Party’s commitment to eradicating racial injustice at home and abroad. In the Southern region, the Party drew a following of black farmers, industrial workers, and the unemployed during the 1930s. In 1934, the Party boasted more than four hundred members—mostly black sharecroppers and tenant farmers—in the state of Alabama.

In the state of Mississippi, the Party appeared to have much less of a following. By one historian’s account, the Party was unable to organize interested black residents in Mississippi during

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118 See Kelley, Hammer and Hoe.
the early 1930s as a result of limited resources. In 1936, the combined Party membership for Mississippi and two other states—Alabama and Georgia—was 425, representing a significant decrease from two years prior when the Party boasted 1,000 members in the city of Birmingham alone. The exact figures are murky but the CP yielded far less success in organizing blacks in Mississippi during the 1930s than it did on other Southern states. Additionally, the Party’s influence began to wane considerably in the South during the late-1930s—at the very same moment that PME organizers began to target the region. Other organizations like the National Negro Congress (NNC), a militant civil rights group established at Howard University in 1935, did not fare any better in the state of Mississippi. As a result, these radical organizations seemed to pose little threat to the PME, which despite vastly different ideological commitments, methods, and goals, also targeted members of the black working-class.

The Struggles within the Struggle

While the Communist Party, and other black radical groups, did not appear to be a major political rivalry to the PME, activists still had other concerns. During her time as a political organizer in the South, Allen encountered a host of challenges that she later disclosed in a 1941 letter.

119 Solomon, The Cry Was Unity, 125.
120 Kelley, Hammer and Hoe, 132.
121 Most of the NNC’s political activities prior to World War II were concentrated in the states of Florida, Alabama, and Georgia. See Kelley, Hammer and Hoe, 124; Also see Erik Gellman, Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Black Civil Rights (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
122 Notwithstanding the ideological contradictions, I use the term “black radical” to describe black nationalists (including Pan-Africanists, emigrationists, and Garveyites), Communists, Socialists, and other anti-Capitalists. This also includes individuals who forged an idiosyncratic political ideology that blended two or more of these ideological currents. My thinking is deeply informed by the scholarship of Winston James, Robin D. G. Kelley, Erik S. McDuffie and others. See James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America (London: Verso, 1998); Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); McDuffie, Sojourning for Freedom.
According to Allen, the extensive walking associated with local home visits resulted in the development of blisters and swelling on her feet.\(^{123}\) These personal health problems were further compounded by growing tensions within the organization. Reflecting on her tenure in the PME, Allen described a strained relationship with Gordon during the late 1930s. According to Allen, Gordon “became [jealous] and envious” of her success in organizing blacks in the Southern region, and in response, started to “press and ignore” her.\(^{124}\) The activist also complained that she had a “very hard fight with so many preachers and [professors]” while organizing in Mississippi, Alabama, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee. Convinced that many of these black “preachers and professors” only opposed emigration because of their desire to “exploit [their] own race,” Allen openly criticized their attempts to block her efforts. “If the poor masses could see why they are trying to block this [emigration] measure,” she argued, “they would ignore that kind and would be too glad to go to Africa.”\(^ {125}\) Her comments offer a glimpse into the intraracial conflicts and class divisions within black communities regarding the question of emigration.

Political opposition, internal conflicts, and health problems seemed to wane in comparison to the reprisals that Allen and other PME activists endured during this period. In one instance in 1938, while moving from plantation to plantation in an attempt to convince black sharecroppers to sign the PME’s ‘back-to-Africa’ petition, Allen encountered a group of hostile white landowners in what she referred to as “Bamboo, Mississippi.”\(^ {126}\) Later recounting the course of events, Allen indicated that black sharecroppers in the area had expressed a genuine interest in the organization but when she showed up with plans to organize these men and women, a group of white

\(^{123}\) Allen to Bilbo, 8 September 1941?, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
\(^{124}\) Allen to Bilbo, 4 August 1942, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
\(^{125}\) Allen to Bilbo, 1939 (No Month or Date listed), Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
\(^{126}\) The author has yet to determine the exact location of this incident. However, Allen’s account suggests that it was in the Mississippi Delta.
landowners drove the activist out of town with threats of violence and intimidation. Allen recounted that many black residents who openly supported the organization and its goals also faced a number of reprisals, in some cases “being beat almost to death.” These incidents closely mirrored the violent attacks UNIA followers in the Southern region encountered during the 1920s. Indeed, political organizing in the Jim Crow South was no easy task, and PME activists during the Depression-era had to devise a range of creative strategies and tactics to deal with some of the challenges that they encountered.

Their alliance with a well-known white supremacist was the most problematic and paradoxical strategy these women employed. In the immediate aftermath of Allen’s Bamboo incident, the activist wrote a letter to Senator Theodore G. Bilbo, asking the racist senator for a letter “authorizing us to organize in your state, a letter to be shown to any authority questioning our right to organize for this purpose.” Her odd request arrived on Bilbo’s desk in June 1938—only months after Gordon had begun corresponding with the senator to secure his support for the passage of an emigration bill. An ardent segregationist, Bilbo had committed much of his political career to upholding white supremacy. By 1936, Bilbo had already developed a reputation as one of the most virulent racist politicians in the country. While other white segregationists certainly maintained the same views as Bilbo, Bilbo stood apart as one of the few politicians to unabashedly express overt racist remarks in public, often using derogatory language to describe African

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127 Gordon to Bilbo, 10 August 1938, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
128 Allen to Bilbo, 9 June 1938, Box 354, Bilbo Papers.
130 I discuss black nationalist women’s collaborations with white supremacists in more depth in Chapter Four.
132 I offer an in-depth discussion of the 1939 Greater Liberia bill (“Back to Africa bill”) in Chapter Four.
Americans and other non-whites. Not surprisingly, his politics reflected his racist views. While he supported New Deal policies, he eschewed what he saw as FDR’s attempt to advance “racial egalitarianism.” In the late 1930s, he became a major opponent of the federal anti-lynching bill, vowing to fight it until “hell freezes over.” Though the Senator apparently condemned lynching, he resisted federal intervention, viewing it as the ultimate threat to white superiority.

On the surface, collaboration between white supremacists and black nationalists seem unlikely. Whereas white supremacists promoted racial terror and violence, black nationalists openly condemned racial oppression. Moreover, nationalists unequivocally rejected the white supremacist belief that members of the white race were biologically superior to blacks. Black nationalists, in fact, embraced the idea that people of African descent were morally superior to whites—on the basis of their history of suffering. However, this did not prevent some black nationalists from collaborating with white supremacists for a myriad of political reasons. During the nineteenth century, a number of black nationalist figures including Martin Delany and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner procured assistance from the American Colonization Society (ACS), a religious organization founded in 1816 by a coalition of white slave owners and Quakers who opposed slavery but

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136 Morgan, Redneck Liberal, 227.

accommodated American racism. Years later, in 1922, Marcus Garvey made the ill-fated decision to hold a meeting with Edward Young Clarke, acting imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), in Atlanta. Accepting biological notions of race, which have now been repudiated, many black nationalists found common cause with white separatists on the matter of “racial purity.” These men and women could not, as historian Michele Mitchell has argued, realize their goals “without the actual biological perpetuation of the race.” Therefore, Garveyites and other black nationalists of this period, attempted to closely monitor and control black sexuality. One of Allen’s surviving letters to Bilbo underscores this fact. “I am tired of looking [at] white ladies and [N]egro men locked arms walking up and down the street [and] white women pushing half negro babies,” the activist bitterly complained.

Because black nationalists and white supremacists both desired racial separatism, they often stood on the same side of the West African emigration issue. To be sure, black nationalists generally advocated *voluntary* emigration as opposed to *compulsory* emigration. But, some nationalist leaders still attempted to use collaborations with influential white segregationists as a means of bolstering their political leverage and thus securing their ultimate goal of racial separatism. This was the case for

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138 Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*. It is significant to note that while Delany and Turner received financial support from the ACS, they were also critical of the organization. On the ACS, see Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005).


140 These ideas were certainly influenced by Social Darwinism. I offer a more in-depth discussion of this point in the subsequent chapter of this study by examining the larger global system of white supremacy.


142 Allen to Bilbo, 9 June 1938, Box 354, Bilbo Papers.
Marcus Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, and later, Malcolm X. Not surprisingly, the questionable collaborations with white supremacists incited much tension and disagreement in black nationalist circles, and drew sharp criticism from many others.

In the case of Celia Jane Allen, the unlikely collaboration with Senator Bilbo was certainly intentional considering the site of her political organizing. Allen’s decision to evoke the Senator’s name underscores the depth of white supremacy in the South and the sheer magnitude of Bilbo’s reach and influence in the state of Mississippi. Bilbo was, as his biographer has argued, “the state’s dominant political personality of the era of segregation.” His popularity in the state of Mississippi was second to none, and black nationalist organizers were not oblivious to this fact. During the late 1930s, as she began to organize black men and women in the Jim Crow South, Allen attempted to use her odd connection to Bilbo as a recruiting tool. The activist also appeared to be deeply moved by her correspondence with the Senator. “It is very encouraging to have the privilege to write a United States Senator,” she later admitted to Bilbo, “and I am filled with enthusiasm when I read a letter from the U.S.A.”

By telling local residents in the state of Mississippi that the PME had not only secured land in Liberia, but also had the support of the most influential white politician from the state, Allen hoped to win the support of those who might have been skeptical or too fearful to join the movement. Somehow, the very notion that Bilbo supported the PME organizers’ efforts seemed to

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145 Morgan, Redneck Liberal, 1.
146 Allen to Bilbo, 4 August 1942, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
place some black Mississippians at ease. This certainly was true for Reverend Green. In March 1938, months after joining the PME and helping Allen establish a local chapter, Green wrote to Senator Bilbo to express his enthusiasm for the pro-emigration campaign. “I thank you for the good you are doing for this Black race [of] mine,” Green wrote. After noting that Allen was residing in his home in Long, Mississippi at the time of his writing, Green went on to ask Bilbo to corroborate the story that Allen had been circulating. “I understand from Mrs. Celia J. Allen [of] Chicago that you give her authority to organize the Black people in the State [of] Mississippi” Green wrote, “[s]o I would love to read a letter [of] permit from you to be read to my people.”

Green’s comments to Bilbo in 1938 are quite revealing. While he offered no clear indication as to why he seemed to maintain some skepticism about Allen’s claims, it is evident that he, or others in the community, maintained some misgivings at the time the letter was written. It is also evident that Allen shrewdly used the PME’s affiliation with Senator Bilbo as a way to somehow authenticate her political activities in the face of local resistance. On the one hand, Allen reasoned that some skeptical black residents might be more willing to get on board if they believed that the organization had the backing of a well-known U.S. Senator. On the other hand, Allen hoped that the Senator’s sponsorship could secure black nationalists some protection from white violence. She was probably disappointed, then, when Bilbo failed to provide the letter of support that she and Reverend Green requested.

147 Green to Bilbo, 8 March 1938, Box 340, Bilbo Papers.
148 Bilbo to Green, 17 March 1938, Box 341, Bilbo Papers. Although Bilbo responded to both Allen and Green, he failed to mention the letter of permit they requested. The author has yet to locate any correspondence from Bilbo that directly addresses reasons for why he apparently ignored the request but one can easily imagine that the Senator was unwilling to give advice to his constituents on how they should respond to black activists organizing in the state.
**Conclusion**

In 1941, Celia Jane Allen wrote a short report of her organizing activities in the Southern region to be included in a PME pamphlet. In what appears to be the only surviving first-hand account of her activities during this period, Allen constructed a narrative that circulated across the nation, and ultimately ended up in the hands of federal officials.\(^{149}\) After recounting her countless speeches to black residents in Mississippi and other states in the Southern region, the activist expressed a deep sense of satisfaction that she never gave up, and in the end, was “successful in getting many thousands to heed the call and sign their names.”\(^{150}\) In all, Allen worked tirelessly to organize rural blacks in the South for a period of nine years.\(^{151}\) While it is impossible to verify the actual numbers, it appears that Allen did, in fact, have a meaningful impact in the South. Of the estimated three hundred thousand signatures from black residents in support of the PME’s emigration plans, a significant number came from black residents residing in Mississippi and neighboring states.\(^{152}\) But beyond the petitions, Allen played a key role in spreading black nationalist ideas across the region—without Marcus Garvey’s direct influence and leadership. Similar to Alaida Robertson, a “masterful recruiter” who helped to establish UNIA divisions in Louisiana, Georgia, and Mississippi during the late 1920s, Allen helped to expand the PME’s reach and influence during the late-1930s.\(^{153}\)

\(^{149}\) Allen offers brief descriptions of her activities in a few extant letters. However, this appears to be the only surviving full-length first-hand account of her activities.

\(^{150}\) Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 28.

\(^{151}\) Allen to Bilbo, 4 August 1942, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

\(^{152}\) The Bilbo Papers include hundreds of pages of signed petitions from the Peace Movement of Ethiopia emigration campaign, which began in 1933. The petitions are not dated and thus, it is impossible to determine exactly when signatures were obtained. See PME Petitions, Boxes 1186 and 1187, Bilbo Papers.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her invisibility, Allen managed to sell her Pan-Africanist vision to countless black men and women, and in the process, recruited new PME members and helped establish new chapters in the region.\(^\text{154}\) Drawing on the social networks of black churchgoers and using the church as the primary physical space to disseminate her ideas, Allen advocated racial pride, black political self-determination, and economic self-sufficiency across the U.S. South during the Depression-era, built lasting relationships with countless men and women, and played a key role in developing local leaders. Even after she ceased political organizing in the region, she remained in frequent contact with local activists—in one instance, writing Bernard during World War II to inquire about the well-being of his family.\(^\text{155}\)

Allen’s commitment to relationship building and the development of local leaders helped to propel the PME’s pro-emigrationist movement to national and regional prominence. While Allen’s activities did not dismantle white supremacy—and in some ways, contradicted her own black nationalist agenda—they did leave an indelible mark on the lives of many black men and women in the U.S. South. Through Allen’s efforts, ordinary individuals like Reverend George Green, Joella Johnson and Thomas Bernard came to embrace black nationalism. These individuals, in turn, helped to spread these nationalist ideas throughout the Southern region during the 1930s and beyond.\(^\text{156}\) This is, perhaps, Allen’s greatest legacy.


\(^{155}\) Celia Jane Allen to Bernard, 28 September 1942, File no. 100-124410-65.

\(^{156}\) For example, Bernard, who helped establish two local PME chapters in Mississippi, went on to help establish a local chapter in Mobile, Alabama where he eventually relocated for work. Statement of Thomas H. Bonner, November 18, 1942, Mobile, Alabama, File no. 100-124410-65.
CHAPTER FOUR

“WE HAVE TO DEPEND ON THE CROCODILE TO CROSS THE STREAM”: BLACK NATIONALISTS, WHITE SUPREMACISTS, AND THE 1939 GREATER LIBERIA BILL

In a 1938 letter to Mississippi Senator Theodore G. Bilbo, an outspoken white supremacist, Florence Kenna, a member of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) residing in Chicago, praised the Senator for his efforts to advance black emigration to West Africa. “I have read an article in the newspaper,” she wrote, “pertaining to your request to this government to raise money, to send all people of African [descent] back to their home in Africa; to inhabit our motherland.” “[I] congratulate you,” she continued, “and I do hope that your determination for this program will never cease [until] the millions [of] sons and daughters of Africa be sent back home to serve our God and our maker under our own vine and fig tree.” Kenna’s letter was one of many letters of support that arrived on Senator Bilbo’s desk from black nationalists across the country during the late 1930s. These men and women lauded the Senator’s efforts to pass the Greater Liberia Bill—dubbed the “Back to Africa bill”—which called for millions of dollars in federal aid to relocate African Americans to West Africa.

While many race leaders across the country openly denounced the bill and its controversial author, black nationalist men and women throughout the country found it to be a glimmer of hope.

1 Florence Kenna to Theodore G. Bilbo, 15 March 1938, Box 341, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi (Hereafter cited as Bilbo Papers).
2 Examples of these congratulatory letters include Ellen Johnson to Theodore Bilbo, 15 March 1938, Box 341, Bilbo Papers; George Calbert to Bilbo, 15 March 1938, Box 341; Emma Beal to Bilbo, 13 March 1938, Box 340, Bilbo Papers.
Amidst the social and political upheavals of the period, the 1939 Greater Liberia Bill stirred long held nationalist aspirations of establishing an autonomous black nation state. Moreover, many black Americans of all political persuasions rallied behind the controversial Senator and his bill, hoping to escape the racial injustice and economic hardship they faced during the Great Depression. During this period, a cadre of nationalist women leaders including Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and Celia Jane Allen emerged as key proponents of the Greater Liberia Bill, publicly lobbying for its passage at the local and national levels. Like Garvey, women activists were willing to work in tandem with white supremacists on the basis of their mutual interest in racial separatism. But, unlike Garvey, nationalist women leaders during the Great Depression relied heavily on the support of white supremacists and played a far more proactive role in fostering these relationships in order to attain their political goals.

This chapter examines black nationalist women’s political activism surrounding the 1939 Greater Liberia Bill and highlights the underlying motivations for why these women pursued alliances with white supremacists. Black nationalist women’s decisions to collaborate with white supremacists, I argue, were not simply irrational or haphazard. To the contrary, women’s alliances with white supremacists represent social relations that involved political strategy and performative interactions. Women’s collaborations with these seemingly unlikely political allies can be seen as both a series of actions and negotiations that sought to “affect the course or behavior of government [and] the community” and as acts of performance that were “conditioned and

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4 Tony Martin, Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (Dover: Majority Press, 1976), 344-57. It is significant to note that Garvey’s relationship with white supremacists extended beyond this one meeting.

circumscribed by historical convention.” During a period of Jim Crow segregation and black disenfranchisement, nationalist women activists were cognizant of their positions as outsiders in a white-dominated and patriarchal society. As such, they envisioned alliances with influential white (male) supremacists as a means to bolster their cause and secure federal legislation to improve conditions for blacks in United States and across the African diaspora. An exploration of black nationalist women’s political collaborations with white supremacists reveals the pragmatic and strategic steps, negotiations, and compromises that women activists were willing to make in order advance nationalist politics during a global economic crisis. Moreover, they exemplify how nationalist women leaders built on, yet also extended well beyond, Garvey’s political ideas and practices.

**Liberia in the Black Nationalist Imagination**

During the 1930s, black nationalist activists were deeply concerned about developments taking place in Liberia. By the onset of the Great Depression, Liberia occupied a privileged position as one of only two independent African nations. However, Liberia could not claim full independence. From the outset, Liberia’s fortunes were inextricably linked to those of the United States and the descendants of enslaved and free black people. In 1822, the nation was established as a colony for free blacks by members of the American Colonization Society (ACS). A religious organization, the ACS was founded in 1816 by Reverend Robert Finley and a coalition of white slave owners and Quakers who opposed slavery but accommodated white racism. I discuss the significance and origins of the ACS in Chapter Two. See P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Allan Yarema, *American Colonization Society: An Avenue to Freedom?* (Lanham: University Press of

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1866, the ACS played a significant role in relocating an estimated thirteen thousand African Americans to Liberia. Neither a colony nor protectorate of the United States, Liberia remained largely under the control of the ACS. In 1847, after years of occupying an ambiguous position with the United States government, Liberia gained its political independence.

When Liberia declared itself independent in 1847, black nationalists envisioned the country as a possible site for the future black nation state. To be sure, Liberia was not the only possibility—some looked to Haiti, the first independent black republic—but political developments in Liberia certainly figured prominently in the minds of many black Americans during this period. Individuals like black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet were especially enthused by developments in Liberia, maintaining the belief that with its new found independence, Liberia “now held the same hope and


possibility that Haiti had possessed during the nineteenth century.”

Many black Americans’ hopes in Liberia were quickly dashed, however, as the nation sank into financial debt and its leaders replicated patterns of American hegemony and exclusion of indigenous peoples. In 1871, Liberian leaders borrowed $500,000 from British bankers, falling into default shortly thereafter. Thirty-five years later, the Liberian government resumed payments only to take another loan from London.

Within a matter of years, Liberia sank deeper and deeper into debt largely as a result of a $5 million loan from the U.S.-based Firestone Company. The fiscal crisis in Liberia coincided with tensions between indigenous Liberian ethnic groups and Americo-Liberians—the ruling elite and descendents of the people who founded Liberia. Viewing indigenous Liberians as uncivilized, Americo-Liberians instituted a number of policies that sought to exploit the labor of indigenous Africans, alienate these ethnic groups socially and economically, and thus relegate them to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

Despite growing ethnic tensions and financial problems, Liberia figured prominently in the black nationalist political imagination during the twentieth century. Marcus Garvey was among the most influential figures who maintained a belief that Liberia had the potential of becoming a strong independent nation. In an effort to ignite the process of nation-building, Garvey attempted to convince Liberian officials to release a portion of unoccupied land to his organization, the UNIA. In

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1919, the same year Garvey launched the Black Star Line (BSL), a group of Garveyites first approached Liberian president Charles D.B. King in Paris. With his eyes set on Liberia, Garvey organized a series of UNIA delegations to work out plans for selective emigration of skilled blacks including scientists, mechanics, and artisans. His plans were met with strong resistance from President King and other Americo-Liberian leaders who did not embrace Garvey’s vision. Writing to W.E.B. Du Bois’s newspaper, The Crisis, in June 1921, King insisted that he would not allow Liberia to become “a center of aggression or conspiracy against other sovereign states.” Moreover, the members of the Americo-Liberian ruling-class were hesitant to cooperate with Garveyites because their Pan-Africanist sensibilities threatened Americo-Liberians’ exploitative relationship with the indigenous ethnic groups of Liberia. Unwilling to sacrifice their privileged status in Liberian society, President King, and other Americo-Liberian leaders, banned the UNIA from entering the country. After a series of attempts to secure Liberian support for black emigration and numerous failed UNIA missions to the country, Garvey’s Liberia plan came to a halting end in 1925.

17 Quoted in Sundiata, “The Garvey Aftermath,” 82.
18 Sundiata, Brothers and Strangers, 35. For an excellent and succinct account of Garvey’s efforts to advance the Liberian plan, see Sundiata, Brothers and Strangers, 30-35. Also see Elliot P. Skinner, African Americans and U.S. Policy Toward Africa, 1850-1924: In Defense of Black Nationality (Washington: Howard University, 1992), 381-469.
Garvey’s unsuccessful efforts to create a UNIA colony in Liberia in the 1920s seemed to matter little to black nationalist activists during the Great Depression-era. Even after Garvey’s deportation, thousands of black nationalist men and women across the United States were still convinced that Liberia was the ideal location for relocation. These black nationalists maintained a utopian vision of the nation as a haven for members of the African diaspora, and actively championed black emigration to Liberia through their writings and speeches. For instance, on the pages of Madame Maymie De Mena’s newspaper, the *Ethiopian World*, nationalist men and women engaged in a lively discourse on Liberia, grappling with its significance for the future of the black race and encouraging readers to rally in support of the nation.¹⁹ A gifted journalist and experienced political activist, De Mena established the *Ethiopian World* in 1934 after a short stint in Father Divine’s Peace Mission.²⁰ Appealing to black nationalists in the United States and other parts of the globe, De Mena pledged to provide “clean, constructive, fearless and progressive journalism that will help the race to find its true and noble place among the other great races of our common human family.”²¹ In order to help advance the race, De Mena envisioned West African emigration as a viable solution. She believed that relocation to Liberia would simultaneously help black Americans and improve conditions in Liberia. In a 1934 speech to UNIA supporters in Harlem, De Mena encouraged the resettlement of black Americans to Liberia in light of the nation’s political turmoil.²²

Her concerns were not unfounded. In 1930, Liberian president Charles D.B. King and members of his administration became embroiled in an international scandal surrounding charges of

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slavery and political corruption. The conflict, which had reached a boiling point during the late 1920s, had begun many years earlier in 1914 when Liberian officials made an agreement to provide contract labor for Fernando Po, a Spanish colony. By the start of World War I, the Spanish colony had a shrinking labor force with an increasing demand for labor on the island's cocoa plantations. Based on the terms of the agreement, laborers from Liberia were expected to work in Fernando Po for one to two years and receive compensation at the end of their term. From the beginning of the agreement in 1914 to 1927, thousands of Liberian laborers were sent to the colony. However, after a series of developments, including questionable recruitment practices and financial constraints, Liberian officials proposed to end the flow of workers to the Spanish colony in late 1927.  

In the subsequent months, Liberian officials faced increasing international scrutiny over their labor practices, resulting in an investigation from the League of Nations. Critics accused the Liberian government of condoning modern-day slavery as others questioned the ability of the nation's leadership to rule effectively.  

Though members of the international community focused primarily on Liberia's involvement in the scandals, deplorable conditions on the Spanish colony also played a key role. The charges of slavery and political corruption that were leveled against Liberia negatively impacted many black Americans' view of the nation. In the aftermath of the scandals, one historian argues that many black Americans “could hardly hold up Liberia as a source of pride and evidence of black national capability.”

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24 Ibid., 81.  
However, for Maymie De Mena and many other nationalist activists, the problems in Liberia only bolstered their interest in the nation, confirming the need for black emigration. In a poem entitled, “Liberia,” PME member Albert McCall emphasized the need to establish an independent black nation in Liberia to alleviate some of the nation’s social problems: “Liberia, Liberia, here we come/ Sound the bugles and sound the drums/We are coming to build up a government…/ We will build up a government like they have here;/ Because [there is] nothing but trouble makers on every hand.”

Appealing to black men and women in the United States, McCall added, “You are the men and women that Liberia needs/And we’ll make an army of men like you/I am sure all of you have agreed,/ To go back to Liberia to live/Where you won’t have to be lynched and killed.”

McCall’s comments simultaneously capture his Pan-Africanist vision and his assumption that Americanization would fundamentally improve conditions for Liberians. Writing in the *Ethiopian World*, De Mena expressed similar sentiments: “In spite of whatever assurance the League [of Nations] may give in their final decision on Liberia, the inspiration of National service and self sacrifice must continue to be numbered by our people everywhere. The call is to ask the youth all over the world to make it a duty…to utilize the opportunity which now presents itself for greater and more useful service to your race.”

Other black nationalists appealed specifically to black youth across the African diaspora to take up the cause of aiding Liberia in its time of need. Charles Mitchell, who served as U.S. ambassador to Liberia, specifically challenged younger UNIA members at a meeting in Harlem to take advantage of emigration opportunities: “Liberia…is the land of opportunity [especially] for

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27 Albert McCall, “Liberia” in *Peace Movement of Ethiopia, One God, One Country, One People; also, a Brief History, Memorial to President, Funeral Oration and Burial Ceremonies, Battle Hymn of the Peace Movement* (United States: s.n., 1941), 35. (Hereafter cited as Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution).
28 Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 35.
young people with adequate financial backing.” Similarly, members of the Harlem-based African Reconstruction Association (ARA), a relatively small nationalist organization established during the early 1930s to “promote and encourage immigration and colonization into undeveloped areas…of Negro nations,” called on young black Americans to support nation-building efforts in Liberia. The organization’s leaders, Harlemites Bernard Mason and W.A. Ramsey, emphasized the economic opportunities for black men and women in Liberia and requested help to “colonize 50,000 or more Negroes there.” Laced with paternalist undertones, Mason’s and Ramsey’s views further demonstrate nationalists’ view of Liberia as a country in complete disarray and desperately in need of black men and women to come to its aid.

Significantly, Mason, Ramsey and other ARA leaders envisioned emigration to Liberia as the primary means of uplifting the black race generally. While black middle-class reformers were engaged in a series of activities to uplift black communities domestically, many working-class black men and women emphasized West African emigration as the most viable means of racial progress on a global scale. Members of the ARA, for example, laid out their case for West African emigration in the pages of the *Ethiopian World*, pointing out the need for a physical home for peoples of African descent: “The program of finding a home by immigrating and assisting in developing the Republic of Liberia is [our] only aspiration.” “Losing possession of the land and control of natural resources,” they continued, “we have become a poverty-stricken, unprotected people, merely

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32 *Ethiopian World*, 26 May 1934, Volume 1, No. 1.
engaged in a struggle with empty hands against tremendous odds for recognition…” 34 Establishing a black nation state in Liberia, they argued, was the ultimate solution.

In a weekly meeting of the ARA, nationalists in Harlem gathered to listen to Dr. S.S. Sesvir, a Liberian doctor, who argued that African Americans could earn a substantial living by engaging in agricultural work in Liberia. 35 Writing in a 1934 newspaper article, Lloyd Graves, a member of the ARA, insisted, “Liberia is the land of opportunity… [S]ome day we will be glad to go there, knowing there will be no more jim-crowism, no more segregation, no more lynching and brutality cast upon our people, knowing that we will be respected by men as men.” 36 Garveyites Peter M. Easley, Leroy Edwards, and S. Campbell expressed similar sentiments in a pro-emigration petition, which emphasized the prospect of relocating to a country that seemed to offer financial stability for black Americans during the Depression. 37 With limited job opportunities and minimal federal relief, Cora Lee Frazier, a member of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME), lamented, “I have 5 children [and] I don’t see any future for them here…I have always wanted to be free. If we stay here we will all go to [nothing].” 38 Another black resident from Washington, D.C. added, “We are tired [of] begging for jobs and home relief…we want to go to Africa.” 39

What is especially striking is that black nationalists across the country imagined Liberia as a place of wealth—not the country steeped in millions of dollars in debt as it were. Perhaps this point of view resulted from a lack of knowledge regarding Liberia’s economic conditions, wishful thinking, or a little of both. Still, the vision of Liberia as a place of wealth offered some hope for black

34 “Home Through Self-Help is Negro’s Need,” Ethiopian World, 26 May 1934.
37 “A Petition,” 9 March 1938, Box 340, Bilbo Papers.
38 Cora Lee Frazier to Theodore Bilbo, 14 March 1938, Box 340, Bilbo Papers.
39 Anonymous letter to Bilbo, 16 May 1939, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.

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nationalists during an economic crisis in the United States. Expressing this highly romanticized view of Liberia, black nationalist Albert McCall declared in one poem, “There is fruit in Africa worth while eating/We don’t have to stay here and take a white man’s beating.” He went on to emphasize Liberia’s thriving job market, insisting that “Liberia has many towns, where work can easily be found.”

W.E. Johnson, a graduate of Howard University’s Dental School, lent his support to West African emigration, arguing that “Africa offers great opportunities for us…We could bring about trade relations with America etc…If we remain here we must apply for relief, charity [but] if we go to Africa we can solve our problem.”

Certainly, McCall’s and Johnson’s descriptions were exaggerated, and conditions in Liberia were very different from what they imagined. However, by envisioning Liberia in this way, black nationalists found an escape—if only imagined—from both the reality of life for black men and women in the United States and the socioeconomic challenges in Liberia. This utopian vision, along with a lasting commitment to realizing Marcus Garvey’s Liberia plan and a desire to improve the lives of African descended people, strengthened nationalists’ resolve to advance West African emigration during the social upheavals of the 1930s.

**Mittie Gordon, Earnest Cox, and the Politics of Race in an Age of Empire**

The rise of Jim Crow in the United States coincided with the rise of a global racial caste system that swept across the globe. Significantly, the United States was very much a part of

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40 Albert McCall, “My Home” in Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 34.
41 W.E. Johnson, D.D.S. to Theodore Bilbo, 2 February 1939, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers.
43 See Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), chapter one. For an overview of global white supremacy and the Social Darwinist thinking that dominated the racial discourse of the period, see Millery Polyné, *From Douglass to*
constructing this racial caste system as much it was a product of it. The U.S. occupation of Haiti during the early twentieth century exemplified the process by which the United States sought to exercise territorial, economic, and political control over people of color. Only a few months after the U.S. began a military occupation of Haiti in 1915, U.S. officials began the process of establishing a number of educational and religious programs that mirrored the Americanization efforts directed at Native Americans at home. In particular, President Woodrow Wilson implemented a new economic and labor system in Haiti—one that replaced subsistence agriculture with a capitalist system—and created the Haitian Gendarmerie, an army made up of U.S. marines who claimed to be acting on behalf of Haitian citizens. Both efforts exemplify the process by which the United States engaged in empire-building during this period. Importantly, the motivations behind the army’s formation and U.S. soldiers’ own interactions with Haitians, were largely based on a number of cultural assumptions—assumptions that were, at the core, based on race.

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46 Renda, Taking Haiti; Plummer, Haiti and the United States; Schmidt, The United States Occupation of Haiti.

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The American policies in Haiti were certainly not unique. To the contrary, these policies exemplified a larger pattern of U.S. foreign relations during the twentieth century, and indeed, much earlier. They also reflected a larger system of global white supremacy that was not particular to the United States. The global color line that W.E.B. Du Bois had described in his seminal work, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), appeared to be fixed in place—despite the persistent struggles and protest movements that emerged in the United States and abroad. At its core, the global color line—which described both the European colonialism in Africa and Asia and U.S. expansionism in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and other countries—was deeply rooted in the social Darwinist thinking of the day. These beliefs influenced many Europeans and Americans of the twentieth century to conceptualize race as both biological and overly deterministic, and provided these individuals with a justification for discrimination, racism, and global imperialism. As one historian posits, “Social Darwinism offered a vision of weaker peoples of all shades inevitably disappearing before the relentless march of stronger peoples.”

Many people of African descent also embraced this form of racial thinking, albeit in different ways. This was especially true for individuals who embraced the black nationalist intellectual tradition during the early twentieth century. On the one hand, black elites such as W.E.B. Du Bois eschewed racial determinism, while black nationalist leaders like Marcus Garvey maintained racial essentialist views, glorified blackness, and emphasized the importance of racial separatism. In the

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same vein, black nationalist women leaders during the Depression-era “held fast to a biological conception of race and campaigned for racial equality as well as racial autonomy.” 52 Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, founder of the PME, was certainly one of these individuals. Gordon envisioned West African emigration—and with it, black separatism—as a viable means of securing the future of the black race. Although her 1933 petition to FDR requesting financial aid to relocate African Americans to Liberia had been quickly dismissed by members of his administration, the activist was no less determined to attain her goals.53

During the mid-1930s, Gordon initiated a massive letter-writing campaign aimed at attracting support from powerful whites who also embraced biological conceptions of race and championed racial separatism. In 1934, one of her letters arrived on the desk of Earnest Sevier Cox, a white supremacist from Richmond, Virginia.54 An author and explorer who had traveled extensively throughout the African continent, Cox was an avid proponent of black emigration, maintaining the belief that it was necessary to maintain “racial purity.”55 His first book, White America, published in 1923, championed white supremacy, calling on white Americans to “preserve ethnic purity, for upon his shoulders was the burden of civilization and progress.” In 1924, Cox’s popularity began to expand as his book drew the attention of white supremacists, and—unbeknownst to him at the time—black nationalists in Richmond and across the country.56

53 I discuss Mittie Maude Lena Gordon’s establishment of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) and the activist’s pro-emigration petition to FDR in Chapter Two of this study.
54 For the only comprehensive work on Cox, see Ethel Wolfskill Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization: A White Racist’s Response to Black Emigration, 1923-1966” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1974).
56 Ibid., 48, 86.
September of that year, after hearing Garvey speak at a local event, Cox became an avid UNIA supporter, embracing Garvey’s pro-emigration message. In the ensuing months leading up to Garvey’s 1927 deportation, Cox maintained consistent correspondence with Garvey, and worked closely with numerous Garveyite leaders across the country.57

When she launched her letter-writing campaign in 1934, Gordon strategically targeted Cox. In four detailed pages, Gordon’s letter to Cox laid out her case for West African emigration in no uncertain terms. First, she described her efforts to obtain 400,000 signatures for an emigration petition, which she mailed to FDR in 1933. She went on to assure Cox that although the U.S. federal government had denied her request for financial support, she had obtained “assurance that the governments of [Liberia and Ethiopia] would welcome mass immigration of American Negroes.” After recounting the response from FDR’s administration, Gordon carefully deconstructed each part of the administration’s letter, pointing out its flaws and offering counterarguments. For example, though members of FDR’s administration indicated that “the government does not have the money to purchase any land [in Africa],” Gordon pointed out what she saw as the fallacies of such a statement. She reasoned that the government certainly had funds available through the New Deal. Convinced that she might be able to persuade the U.S. government to release New Deal funds for West African emigration, Gordon appealed to Cox to lend his support to her organization and her cause: “We ask you, therefore, to take up our appeal. An exodus of the poorest Negroes would benefit both races, improve labor conditions for those remaining, and promote the long deferred

57 Ibid., 107; Martin, Race First, 351.
economic recovery.”

Apparently impressed by Gordon’s “dignified and moving petition to the President of the United States,” Cox eagerly accepted the invitation.

Interestingly, once Cox expressed a willingness to support Gordon’s plans, the tone of Gordon’s letters shifted drastically. Moving from a rather neutral tone in her initial letter, Gordon’s subsequent letters took on a more submissive tone—which underscores her attempts to coax her new white ally. Now addressing her new ally as “my dear Mr. Cox,” Gordon skillfully asserted, “Let me give expression to my heartfelt gratitude for your continued interest in the welfare of our people. Please be assured that your benevolent attitude will spur us on to greater effort and greater hope in its ultimate success.”

In a subsequent letter, Gordon continued to heap praises on Cox, noting “[W]ords are inadequate to express our appreciation…accept my personal thanks together with the great appreciation from all our good and humble members, for the kind interest you are showing on our behalf.”

Gordon’s statements to Cox, and the tone in which they were expressed, capture the activist’s concerted efforts to secure a new political ally through a series of performances. “Every performance,” cultural theorist Elin Diamond reminds us, “embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged.”

Gordon’s change in tone and description of her supporters as “good” and “humble” reveal, among other things, a conscious attempt to perform an act of submission and deference to white (male) control.

Gordon’s strategy worked. In return, Cox appeared especially eager to offer advice and direction, clearly moved by Gordon’s apparent admiration. “No one could receive a higher

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58 Gordon to Cox, 7 March 1934, Box 4, Cox Papers.
59 Cox to Gordon and the PME, 10 March 1934, Box 4, Cox Papers.
60 Gordon to Cox, 15 March 1934, Box 4, Cox Papers.
61 Gordon to Cox, 19 September 1934, Box 4, Cox Papers (emphasis added).
compliment than you have paid me,” Cox noted. Responding to Gordon’s initial letter, Cox went on to outline a list of steps for Gordon to take to secure federal support for emigration plans. In addition to contacting the American Colonization Society (ACS), which had played a central role in funding emigration from the United States to Liberia during the nineteenth century, Cox advised Gordon to make arrangements to see FDR, seek endorsement from the Liberian government and work towards an emigration petition through the Virginia Assembly.\textsuperscript{63} However, Gordon was two steps ahead of Cox—she had already attempted to obtain support from FDR and had initiated a letter-writing campaign directed towards Liberian officials months prior.\textsuperscript{64} In her response to Cox in September 1934, Gordon offered thanks to Cox for his suggestions but carefully explained her own attempts to secure Liberian support through a series of letters sent to politicians in Cape Palmas. After acknowledging her failed efforts to obtain President Edwin Barclay’s support, Gordon made one request to Cox: “It would be a great move if you succeed in getting President Barclay of Liberia to send his approval of our petition to the President of the United States.”\textsuperscript{65}

Ultimately, Cox was unable to secure President Barclay’s direct support for emigration plans, however he was able to use his connections to advance Gordon’s plans. By Cox’s own admission, he turned to “capable white people who are in sympathy with our cause” to obtain support for Gordon and her supporters. By 1936, Cox was able to persuade members of the Virginia General Assembly to pass a resolution recommending that the U.S. Congress provide federal assistance for black emigration.\textsuperscript{66} This signified an important development in Gordon’s pro-emigration campaign. While the Virginia Resolution was a far cry from the federal legislation Gordon and her supporters desired,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{63} Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 117.
\item \textsuperscript{64} I discuss Gordon’s petition to FDR in Chapter Two of this study. On Gordon’s letter-writing campaign to Liberian officials, see Gordon to Cox, 19 September 1934, Box 4, Cox Papers.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Gordon to Cox, 19 September 1934, Box 4, Cox Papers.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 120.
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it represented a step closer to their goal. Writing to Cox days later, Gordon expressed her gratitude on behalf of the PME but skillfully downplayed her own involvement in the matter: “We were profoundly awed, utterly surprised and received with great enthusiasm your special message of good news to-day…Words are far from inadequate to even attempt to tell you of the esteem and respect this organization holds for you and your mastery in winning this colossal victory.”

In the aftermath of this “colossal victory,” Gordon found herself in a rather precarious position. Although Cox’s support helped to propel her political career—specifically by increasing media coverage of her activities and thus extending the reach of her message—it also drew some unwelcome attention and public criticism. On March 7, 1936, the Chicago Defender, the city’s largest and most influential black newspaper, ran a two-page story on the PME, crediting the organization for “bring[ing] pressure on the assembly in Virginia to pass resolutions in accordance with their plan for racial salvation in Africa.” However, the article also revealed that anonymous race leaders in the city were “disturbed by this bombshell which threatens to wreak havoc on all the progress the race has made in this country since emancipation.” One race leader insisted that Gordon and her supporters were only motivated by cowardice: “Action by this group of mis-led Negroes shows a cowardly attitude of running away from a problem instead of standing and fighting it out.” “Our forefathers sacrificed, and died, that we might establish our rights in America” he continued, “Why should we now follow a twisted conception of the race’s salvation and play our cards right into the white man’s hands?”

These race leaders were not alone in their critique of Gordon and her followers. Mainstream white news outlets also mocked Gordon and the PME as others simply ignored their existence.

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67 Gordon to Cox, 27 February 1936, Box 4, Cox Papers (emphasis added).
68 “Nation Stirred Over Move To Colonize Race In Africa,” Chicago Defender, 7 March 1936.
69 Ibid.
Writers of one *Times* magazine article chose to emphasize Gordon’s outward appearance, describing her as a “portly mulatto.” Others portrayed her as a fanatic who maintained an obsession for Garvey and described her organization as simply a “repatriationist cult.” Though Gordon seemed to weather the storm of criticism with ease, her greatest challenge came from some of the people she trusted most. In February 1937, Gordon was taken to court by Ethel Waddell, her secretary, along with a group of other PME members. Born Ethel Hunter in Arkansas sometime around 1906, Waddell relocated to Chicago during the early years of the Great Migration. Though her early life is shrouded in mystery, census records reveal that Waddell maintained a hair salon in Chicago during the early 1930s. Sometime in 1936, the thirty-year-old beauty shop owner approached Gordon, expressing an interest in joining the organization and serving as one of her private secretaries.

Waddell’s decision to join the PME marked a significant shift in her engagement in black nationalist politics. Waddell’s absence in UNIA records prior to the mid-1930s suggests that she was not a prominent or visible leader in the movement during the UNIA’s heyday. Perhaps Waddell, like other Garveyite women like Ethel Collins, worked quietly behind-the-scenes, using personal

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70 “Races: Mr. Bilbo’s Afflatus,” *Time*, 8 May 1939.
71 Gordon to Cox, 3 February 1937, Box 4, Cox Papers.
74 Waddell does not appear in Hill’s *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers* until the late 1930s. The author has yet to locate any concrete evidence that suggests she was a member of the UNIA/active Garveyite before this period.
funds from her salon business to support the movement. But, it was not until the mid-1930s that Waddell became a highly visible black nationalist activist, working alongside Gordon and her supporters in Chicago. In June 1936, Waddell accompanied Gordon to a meeting with Gabriel Dennis, then Liberian Secretary of the Treasury, to discuss plans for relocating to West Africa. A few months prior, T. Elwood Davis, then aide to Liberian President Edwin Barclay, extended what appeared to be a favorable response to black emigration. “It is the policy of the present administration,” Davis insisted, to do everything humanly possible to make Liberia a respectable and attractive place in which Negroes the world over any find it the true asylum from those handicaps and oppressions peculiar to other places where they are domiciled.”

On the surface, Davis’ letter opened up a unique opportunity for Gordon to garner more support and international attention for her cause. In fact, the news of Barclay’s offer quickly spread and the Chicago Tribune reprinted an article from a Liberian newspaper that reinforced Barclay’s commitment to emigration. But, the newspaper article, along with Davis’ letter, revealed a number of limitations that Gordon overlooked. Most significantly, Davis’ letter explicitly welcomed a certain class of black emigrant: skilled laborers. The newspaper article further elaborated on this issue, indicating that Barclay preferred “skilled artisans, trained agriculturalists, business men with capital, and young physicians willing to go into the interior and develop the aborigines.”

Writing in the Liberian newspaper, The Weekly Mirror, in 1938 Reverend J. F. B. Coleman, president of Monrovia

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76 Gordon to Bilbo, 15 March 1938, Box 341, Bilbo Papers.
77 T. Elwood Davis to Gordon, 24 April 1936, Box 4, Cox Papers.
78 T. Elwood Davis to Gordon, 24 April 1936, Box 4, Cox Papers.
80 Ibid.
College and the paper’s editor, maintained similar views. Like Barclay, Coleman believed that an influx of African American emigrants could improve Liberia’s economic and social conditions, and ultimately bring progress and ‘civilization’ to the nation’s aborigines. Without mincing words, Coleman argued, “[African Americans] should prove an invaluable asset to Liberia in converting its jungles into fertile farm lands, and filling the country-side with happy homes of contentment, of peace and plenty.”

Echoing the views of Turner and other nineteenth century black nationalists, Coleman added, “Liberia needs immigration to quicken and expand internal improvements…she needs it to help shake off the [habiliments] of heathenism and clothe herself in the more pleasing [raiment] of Christianity.”

Coleman’s descriptions, along with Barclay’s stipulations, hardly described Gordon and her supporters who neither explicitly had an interest in spreading Christianity nor investing capital in the country.

But, Gordon remained convinced that the apparent invitation to Liberia, regardless of competing visions with Liberian officials, was an invitation nonetheless. Using Barclay’s letter as leverage, Gordon began to move forward with emigration plans, forming a delegation of PME members who would travel to Liberia to view first-hand the available land for prospective emigrants.

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In order to secure funds for the trip, Gordon began organizing local fundraising drives, which yielded an estimated eighty-five dollars.\(^{85}\)

In the immediate aftermath of this fundraiser, tensions between Gordon and her secretary Ethel Waddell reached a boiling point. In a rather sensationalist account, Gordon claimed that Waddell “went to the homes of [PME] members, telling them I had sent her to get their signatures for a closed door meeting.” On December 9, 1936, Gordon noted that Waddell, along with fellow PME member Charles Watkins, “enter[ed] our meeting like gangsters, demanded the delegate money from us under threats.” “Had we resented one word,” Gordon continued, “we would have been killed like dogs that night.”\(^{86}\) In the months that followed her alleged “gangster” encounter with Gordon, Waddell initiated a number of lawsuits, accusing Gordon of “operating a racket” and misappropriating funds that should have been reserved for emigration plans.\(^{87}\) In March 1937, Waddell, along with Watkins and three other nationalists—Cora Berry, Arthur King, and Antonio L. Paez—established a rival organization, the Peace Movement of Ethiopia, Inc. (PME, Inc.), maintaining the same objective as Gordon’s PME: “repatriation of the American Negro who desire to go to Africa to work out his own destiny and become self-sufficient.”\(^{88}\)

With the incorporation in place, Waddell and supporters then sued Gordon in an effort to prevent her from using the name, Peace Movement of Ethiopia. When their efforts failed, they

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\(^{85}\) Gordon to Bilbo, 15 March 1938, Box 341, Bilbo Papers.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.

\(^{87}\) It appears that Waddell sued Gordon three times. After the initial lawsuit in January 1937, another injunction was brought against Gordon in February 1937. With both being dismissed for lack of evidence, Waddell filed a third lawsuit in 1938. It also appears that Gordon filed a counter complaint in March 1938. On the legal troubles between Gordon and Waddell, see Gordon to Cox, 3 February 1937, Box 4, Cox Papers; Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 125. On the counter complaint, see The Peace Movement of Ethiopia, Inc. v. Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, William Gordon, William Merriweather, and Joseph Rockmore, No. 37 S 1961, State of Illinois, Cook County in Box 1089, Bilbo Papers.

attempted to secure support under the disguise of the original PME. In one instance, Waddell and Watkins contacted FDR’s secretary asking for federal aid for emigration, claiming to be affiliated with Gordon’s organization. In the end, Waddell’s lawsuits were all dismissed, and Gordon retained the right to use the name of the organization she had established in 1932. She also managed to send a delegation of two PME representatives—J. Rockmore and David J. Logan—to Liberia in October 1938 to meet with officials and sort out the logistics for relocating to the country. Meanwhile, Waddell went on to use the rival organization as a platform for recruiting new Garveyites in Depression-era Chicago. In the ensuing years, the PME, Inc. and UNIA co-sponsored a number of community events.

Significantly, Waddell and other leaders in the PME, Inc. also pursued alliances with white supremacists. Like Gordon, Waddell envisioned alliances with influential white supremacists as a viable strategy for securing federal legislation for West African emigration. Waddell believed that individuals like Earnest Cox had greater political capital—access to state resources, legal support, and financial resources—and the material means to spread these ideas to an even larger audience. Months after establishing the new organization, Waddell reached out to Cox, offering an explanation for why she parted ways with Gordon. “Due to the mishandling of funds, inefficiency of the former officers to carry out intelligently the scheme of the organization, and their attempt to disrupt the [UNIA] and disregard for the Honorable Marcus Garvey,” she carefully explained, “we found it necessary...to incorporate [the Peace Movement of Ethiopia].”

89 Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 126.
90 Ibid., 135; Gordon to Cox, 9 October 1938, Box 5, Cox Papers.
91 Waddell to Thomas Harvey, 26 May 1938, Box 2, Universal Negro Improvement Association Records, 1916, 1921-1989, Manuscript Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL), Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.
92 Waddell and Watkins to Cox, 4 March 1938, Box 4, Cox Papers.
is still an independent organization but an affiliate of the Universal Negro Improvement Association,” Waddell added, “[and] some of its officers have been trained and graduated in the School of African Philosophy, which was taught by Marcus Garvey…in order to have capable leaders to carry out intelligently the work for the ultimate success of the ‘Back to Africa’ project.”

Clearly implying that Gordon was neither “capable” nor “intelligent,” Waddell attempted to discount Gordon’s activities yet at the same time capitalize on some of the networks she had established much earlier. While Waddell’s letters threatened to sever Gordon’s alliance with Cox, and ultimately derail her plans, Gordon managed to maintain her relationship by preemptively warning Cox.

_Theodore Bilbo and the 1939 Greater Liberia Bill_

Determined to make strides with the emigration campaign despite mounting tensions with Waddell and others, Gordon reached out to Cox in June 1937 to insist that he amplify his efforts to secure federal aid for black emigration. Although Cox’s support had resulted in the 1936 Congressional resolution, Gordon and her supporters were becoming increasingly frustrated as emigration plans appeared stalled. The Great Depression was in full swing, and despite the implementation of New Deal programs, black Americans remained at the bottom rung of the economic sector, largely excluded from the benefits of many of these programs. For Gordon, the prospect of remaining in the United States in a constant state of poverty, and what appeared to be a never-ending struggle for civil and economic rights, was no prospect at all. Writing to Cox in June

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93 Ibid.
94 Gordon to Cox, 3 February 1937, Box 4, Cox Papers.
1936, Gordon noted, “Many times I have gone without food yet traveled on to carry out the work. And I have never received one penny of salary…It will be hard for you to understand the groans coming up from a suffering people, the groans which I face daily.” Her strategic alliance with Cox, though a source of contention among many of her counterparts, had certainly yielded some positive result, particularly by drawing national attention to her efforts. But, in reality, Gordon and her supporters were no closer to leaving the country than when they launched the pro-campaign years earlier.

Though Gordon had turned to Cox in 1934 in a strategic effort to realize her goals, she understood that she could not rely on this one ally. After receiving no favorable response from her letters to FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt, and every member of the Illinois legislature, Gordon reasoned that she needed the backing of an influential white politician who would have the ears of other white politicians and constituents. After carefully expressing thanks to Cox for his unwavering support of her efforts, Gordon made her intentions clear in a 1937 letter, requesting the name of a white politician willing to take a financial bribe to push for legislation. “Can you cite a purchaseable member of either House who is on the market, and try to learn his price?” she asked Cox in no uncertain terms. As she awaited a response, the answer came in the person of Senator Theodore G. Bilbo from Mississippi, apparently without the need for any financial incentive.

Because of his deep commitment to white supremacy, Senator Bilbo had already secured his position as one of the most polarizing U.S. politicians of the era. He was not initially an advocate of

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96 Gordon to Cox, 26 June 1936, Box 4, Cox Papers.
98 Ibid., 123, 138. See Gordon to Eleanor Roosevelt, 17 December 1938, Box 5, Cox Papers.
99 Gordon wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1938 after learning of the first lady’s work with the NAACP.
100 Gordon to Cox, 23 June 1937, Box 4, Cox Papers.
101 See Chapter Three of this study.
West African emigration—he believed it was desirable but impractical. Gordon’s efforts to advance emigration through her Chicago-based organization played a significant role in shifting his position. Convinced that there was, in fact, enough support from members of the black community, Bilbo began to advocate emigration in 1938. During a filibuster against the NAACP’s proposed federal anti-lynching bill on January 21, the senator recommended racial separation as the only solution: “It is essential to the perpetuation of our Anglo-Saxon civilization that white supremacy in America be maintained,” he argued, “and to maintain our civilization there is only one solution, and that is either segregation within the United States, or by deportation or repatriation of the entire Negro race to its native heath, Africa.” While he offered no further explanation for how such a plan might be accomplished, Bilbo immediately identified Liberia as the ideal location and referenced Gordon’s 1933 petition to FDR as evidence that African Americans were ready and willing to leave the country. Arguing that the United States government could relocate African Americans just as they did Native Americans, Bilbo rationalized that West African emigration was not only logical but feasible.

While Bilbo’s comments before Congress drew ridicule from many, they certainly drew the attention of other white supremacists like Cox. On the very same day of Bilbo’s speech, Cox wrote to the senator, offering a gesture of support and providing Bilbo with information on his speeches and writings on the emigration issue. Clearly enthused by the gesture, Bilbo immediately responded and requested a copy of Cox’s pro-emigration article, “The Effort to Colonize Them Will

101 Morgan, Redneck Liberal, 227.
102 Record of the 75th Congress, January 21, 1938, CR-1938-0121, 881.
103 Ibid., 883.
104 Ibid.
105 Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 129.
Be Continued.” ¹⁰⁶ In the weeks to follow, Bilbo requested additional information from Cox, asking for advice on how to advance the emigration of black Americans. ¹⁰⁷ “I am anxious to get your plan,” Bilbo wrote to Cox, “[in order to] eliminate the NAACP from future efforts related to the anti-lynching bill.” ¹⁰⁸ Cox was equally anxious to give advice, and immediately began laying out plans to advance black emigration through the widespread support of Gordon, Waddell, and other like-minded black nationalist activists. ¹⁰⁹

On May 24, 1938, Bilbo presented an amendment to the work relief bill, calling for the federal government to cover the “transportation and colonization expenses for the almost two million Negroes who have joined in a request to be repatriated to Liberia, Africa.” Like Gordon and her supporters, Bilbo reasoned that West African emigration was a viable response to the socioeconomic challenges facing black Americans during the Depression era. According to Bilbo, “It would be better for [African Americans] and for their own country to use the money that will be spent in their maintenance here…in paying their transportation and colonization…in Africa.” ¹¹⁰ Thus, he proposed that the federal government provide monetary aid for all black Americans—under age forty—willing to leave the country. When it became quite apparent that Liberia could not possibly accommodate the proposed two million blacks willing to relocate, Bilbo then amended his proposal, suggesting that England and France should relinquish control of their West African colonies to provide more physical space for potential black emigrants. ¹¹¹ In true Bilbo fashion, the presentation included a number of overtly racist comments, including Bilbo’s crass suggestion that

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 130.
¹⁰⁷ Theodore Bilbo to Earnest Sevier Cox, 17 February 1938, Box 4, Cox Papers.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
¹⁰⁹ Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 130.
¹¹⁰ Bilbo to Cox, 17 February 1938, Box 4, Cox Papers.
¹¹¹ Fitzgerald, “We Have Found a Moses,” 301. Bilbo suggested that the United States should forgive France and England’s World War I debts in return.
“God created the whites [but] I know not who created the blacks. Surely a devil created the mongrels.”\(^{112}\)

Convinced that Senator Bilbo offered simply a means to an end, black nationalist activists publicaly appeared unfazed by the Senator’s remarks. In a letter to Cox shortly thereafter, Gordon expressed her gratitude for Bilbo’s support. “[W]e are inclined to believe we have found a Moses to lead us [through] the Senate,” she argued, “and [believe] that our work will become an accomplished fact.”\(^{113}\) “For my part,” she wrote to Cox in a subsequent letter, “nothing Senator Bilbo says, or can say, offends me, it does not matter what he says so long as he puts this bill through successfully.”\(^{114}\)

Notwithstanding the irony of a black nationalist leader referring to a white supremacist as “Moses,” Gordon’s comments underscore the activist’s dogged determination to realize her political goals irrespective of the questionable nature of her alliances. Certainly, the activist maintained full knowledge of Bilbo’s beliefs about black people—ideas which clearly reinforced the very same ideals she vigorously rejected. But, her comments also offer a glimpse into the performative nature of Gordon’s politics. Given the intended recipient of the letter—another white supremacist—it is not surprising that Gordon spoke positively of Bilbo, clearly overemphasizing her gratitude for the Senator’s help.

In addition, the activist consciously and strategically described Bilbo as a “Moses” of black people to signify the representative role Bilbo would ultimately play in facilitating the Greater Liberia Bill. It is especially striking that Gordon selected Moses—the biblical hero who would lead his people to freedom. In African American folklore, Moses represented “ideal black leadership” and

\(^{112}\) Quoted in Fitzgerald, “We Have Found a Moses,” 302.

\(^{113}\) Gordon to Cox, 29 June 1938, Box 5, Cox Papers.

\(^{114}\) Gordon to Cox, 19 June 1938, Box 5, Cox Papers (emphasis added).
the Hebrews symbolized the experiences of black men and women under slavery.\textsuperscript{115} Certainly, Bilbo was no black hero and his intentions for supporting black emigration had much more to do with his desire to maintain white supremacy than a genuine interest in improving conditions for blacks in the diaspora. But, by evoking the biblical character, Gordon was emphasizing the magnitude of the Senator’s bill, and its ability to significantly alter the lives of African descended people—using a familiar analogy that her followers, and Cox, immediately understood. In this way, Gordon’s words and acts of performance embodied the “cultural stories, traditions, and political contestations that comprise[d] [her] sense of history.”\textsuperscript{116} Moreover, by referring to Bilbo as a “Moses,” Gordon attempted to situate him within a larger historical trajectory of white political leaders who, in her view, took initiatives that aided black nationalists’ political goals. As she explained to Cox, “[W]e see and recognize the spirit of Jefferson, Madison, Clay, Lincoln, and Mercer [in Bilbo.]”\textsuperscript{117}

Gordon was certainly not alone in her support of the controversial Senator and his bill. That same year, Ethel Waddell, Ethel Collins and other nationalist leaders convened at a convention in Toronto, Canada, where Marcus Garvey insisted that the bill for black emigration should be


\textsuperscript{116} Diamond, \textit{Performance and Cultural Politics}, 1.

\textsuperscript{117} Gordon to Cox, 29 June 1938, Box 5, Cox Papers. Here Gordon is referring to U.S. Presidents Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Senator Henry Clay, and U.S. Congressman Charles Fenton Mercer. It is significant to note that these individuals all supported the idea of relocating black Americans to Africa (or the West Indies). Many of these individuals were closely affiliated with the American Colonization Society (ACS). See Nicholas Guyatt, “The Outskirts of Our Happiness: Race and the Lure of Colonization in the Early Republic,” \textit{Journal of American History}, Vol. 95, no. 4 (2009): 986 -1011; Staudenraus, \textit{The African Colonization Movement}; Burin, \textit{Slavery and the Peculiar Solution}; Yarema, \textit{American Colonization Society}; Clegg, \textit{The Price of Liberty}. 

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considered separately from Bilbo the person.\textsuperscript{118} “Regardless of how good or how bad a man may be himself,” Garvey argued, “whenever he brings something that appeals to a race or group it is up to that particular group to grasp that particular thing and carry it for their own good.”\textsuperscript{119} Thus, nationalists resolved that the Greater Liberia Bill was far too important to abandon on account of Senator and his offensive comments. Instead, they were convinced that with careful and strategic political organizing, Bilbo’s bill would, in fact, improve the socioeconomic conditions of blacks in the United States and across the globe. Writing to Bilbo and others shortly after the Senator’s controversial speech, Gordon and her supporters carefully outlined the importance of the Greater Liberia Bill for the future of the black race: “[T]hese amendments will determine whether emancipation is to remain half completed or if the freedmen are to be returned to their homeland…It will determine whether the Negro is permitted to work out his own culture.”\textsuperscript{120}

As Bilbo prepared to introduce the Greater Liberia Bill before Congress, working alongside a number of individuals including Detroit attorney Ramon A. Martinez, nationalist women did most of the legwork, engaging in a nationwide grassroots campaign to promote the bill.\textsuperscript{121} In Chicago, Gordon revived another pro-emigration petition in order to secure more signatures of support.\textsuperscript{122} Garveyites Peter M. Easley, S. Campbell and Leroy Edwards followed suit, circulating a pro-emigration petition in favor of the bill.\textsuperscript{123} Waddell and others in the PME, Inc. offered their full

\textsuperscript{118} Hill, Marcus Garvey and UNLA Papers, Volume 7: 851, 854-55.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 854-855.
\textsuperscript{120} Peace Movement of Ethiopia to Bilbo, 22 May 1938, Box 353, Bilbo Papers.
\textsuperscript{121} Sundiata, Brothers and Strangers, 311.
\textsuperscript{122} Gordon to Cox, 13 July 1936, Box 4, Cox Papers.
\textsuperscript{123} “A Petition,” 9 March 1938, Box 340, Bilbo Papers.
support to Bilbo, promising to do “what ever we can do to push the amendment to the Relief bill or whatever steps you think advisable.”

In Clarksville, Tennessee, PME organizer Celia Jane Allen used her networks to promote Bilbo’s emigration bill. Speaking before a crowd of churchgoers and local community leaders at a local African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, Allen championed the “colonization of American [N]egroes in Liberia.” Writing to Bilbo in June 1938, Allen insisted, “I want to do all that I can do in the fight” for West African emigration. Allen’s correspondence with the Senator during this period further exemplify how women activists often engaged in performative acts aimed at coaxing their white political allies as a strategic effort to attain their goals. Allen, who spent her formative years growing up in the Jim Crow South, understood the culture of segregation and white supremacy aimed at whipping black Americans into full submission. Though Allen was in the process of facilitating a nationalist movement in the Southern region during the late 1930s, the PME organizer skillfully downplayed her political agency and influence in letters to Senator Bilbo. Feigning uncritical admiration, Allen described the Senator as the “greatest and strongest friend that the [N]egro has ever had.” Seemingly embracing a patriarchal vision of the masculine protector and a paternalistic racial view, Allen added, “I am depending on you to save me.” Gordon followed suit, describing Bilbo (and Cox) as “the greatest friends the Race has, at this time” in a letter addressed to

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124 Waddell and Watkins to Bilbo, 1 March 1938, Box 339, Bilbo Papers.
125 I discuss the political activism of Celia Jane Allen in Chapter Three of this study.
126 Program at the AME Zion Church, 3 February 1939, Box 5, Cox Papers.
127 Allen to Bilbo, 9 Jun 1938, Box 354, Bilbo Papers.
129 Allen to Bilbo, 8 September 1941?, Box 1091, Bilbo Papers (emphasis added).
Bilbo. “The membership [of the PME] holds you in the highest place of any white man in this country,” Gordon added.\textsuperscript{130}

Yet, in a letter to William Ferguson, a PME leader residing in Florida, Gordon made her intentions quite clear. Writing to Gordon in 1939, Ferguson expressed deep frustration over Bilbo’s overtly racist comments and questioned the rationale behind an alliance with the Senator. After first reminding Ferguson “to be careful” with what he expresses in writing since “letters often go astray,” Gordon reminded Ferguson that Bilbo and other white supremacist collaborators were solely a means to an end and nothing more. “\textit{When we have to depend on the crocodile to cross the stream},” she carefully explained, “\textit{we must put him on the back until we get to the other side}.”\textsuperscript{131} Her comments to Ferguson illuminate the strategic means by which Gordon maintained her alliances with influential white supremacists like Bilbo. She recognized the need to perform the characteristics of the “Old Negro”—the accommodating and submissive mythical trope—if she hoped to attain her goals.\textsuperscript{132} “We have served our purpose as slaves here” she later argued, “[and] the longing for our ancestral country and people have always been prevalent in our minds.”\textsuperscript{133}

Despite black nationalist women’s acts of performance and strategic efforts to use collaborations with Bilbo and other white supremacists as a means by which to advance black emigration, the Greater Liberia Bill was a far cry from what these women expected. In March 1939, only weeks before he presented the bill before Congress, Bilbo sent a draft to Gordon and her supporters. The bill, which would provide land grants of fifty acres and financial assistance for black Americans—between the ages of twenty one and fifty—who were willing to relocate to West Africa,

\textsuperscript{130} PME to Bilbo, 1939 (no month or day listed), Box 1089, Bilbo Papers.
\textsuperscript{131} Quoted in Statement of William A. Ferguson, 21 November 1942, FBI File, 100-6668 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{132} See Alain Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” \textit{The Survey Graphic}, March 1925, Volume 6, no. 6.
\textsuperscript{133} Gordon to Bilbo, 5 August 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.
it also included a number of stipulations to which Gordon and her supporters rejected. Among them was a clause that would grant the United States government military control over the West African territories for a period of two years after prospective emigrants had relocated. Clearly compromising what Gordon and others hope would result in full economic and political autonomy for black people, the proposed U.S. military rule immediately became a source of contention.

Gordon and her supporters also rejected Bilbo’s proposition to displace indigenous Liberians, arguing that it would fuel tensions between Liberians and new emigrants. Despite these objections, however, Gordon acquiesced, recognizing that little could be done to change the specifics of the bill and conceded that after two years of military rule, nationalists would eventually have full autonomy in West Africa. There is no doubt that Gordon’s acceptance of these terms signaled the activist’s decision to compromise for the sake of progress, but they also capture the contradictory nature of her politics. While Gordon was deeply committed to anticolonial politics, she, like many other black activists during this period, was often complicit in promoting imperialist and civilizationist discourses.

“She’s the 1939 Moses”

On the afternoon of April 24, 1939, Gordon arrived on the front steps of the Capitol building, ready to witness Senator Bilbo’s presentation of the Greater Liberia Bill. She had traveled more than six hundred miles from Chicago in a tattered vehicle that broke down at least once on the

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134 Fitzgerald, “We Have Found a Moses,” 308.
135 Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 140.
136 Ibid., 141.
137 I examine black nationalist women’s complex engagement with Pan-Africanist and anticolonial discourse(s) in Chapter Five. A number of scholarly works examine the complexities, and contradictions, within African Americans’ diasporic politics during the twentieth century. These works include Stephanie Leigh Batiste, Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Mullen, Afra-Orientalism, Polyné, From Douglass to Duvalier.
way.\textsuperscript{138} She was tired, famished, and probably a little cranky. With limited financial resources and in the face of mounting public pressure, the activist had also managed to arrange travel for an estimated five hundred PME supporters to come along.\textsuperscript{139} Gordon’s initial plans of arranging transportation by bus or train had fallen through due to lack of funds. As an alternative, she coordinated rides for as many supporters as she could accommodate in twenty-one tightly-packed trucks and cars—some of which also broke down during the ten to twelve-hour commute.\textsuperscript{140}

Despite these challenges, PME members arrived in Washington, D.C. just in time for Bilbo’s presentation. “Mr. President, with the patience and kind indulgence of my colleagues,” Bilbo began, “I trust I may be permitted at this time to discuss for a little while what is, in my judgment, the greatest, most important, and far-reaching problem that has ever or will ever confront the American people for solution.” “It is important in the highest degree,” he insisted, “because it involves the welfare and perpetuity of two races, the white race and the black race, which are now trying to live side by side in the same domain and under the same government.”\textsuperscript{141} Occupying half of the Senate seats, Gordon and her supporters quietly listened to Bilbo for more than three hours as he outlined the terms of his bill, often quoting Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. “It is to us of special significance that Thomas Jefferson was the first man of great prominence to be identified with a repatriation movement in this country.” he stated. “This man Jefferson, the father of the party to the principles of which a majority of the Senate subscribes,” he continued, “wrote more learnedly and

\textsuperscript{139}“President of Liberia Encourages Migration of Select Race Groups, Chicago Defender, 6 May 1939, Chicago Defender.
\textsuperscript{140}Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,”142. These vehicles were most likely driven by PME members, friends, and relatives.
\textsuperscript{141}U.S. Congressional Record, 76th Congress, First Session, 1939, 4650.
truthfully about the Negro than any other man of his time.”\footnote{Ibid., 4654.} With characteristic racist overtones, Bilbo insisted that “without a proper solution both races will be destroyed and will be succeeded by a mongrel race, and…the white race will suffer the loss of all that is dear and precious, high and noble in our civilization.”\footnote{Ibid., 1939, 4650.} It must have seemed like an eternity and one can easily imagine that Gordon and her supporters were a bit uneasy with the tone of the Senator’s lengthy speech even though they accepted the basic premise of his message—the need for racial separatism.

In spite of a very passionate presentation, Senator Bilbo’s “Back to Africa bill” received a chilly reception. Though it does not appear that most of the U.S. senators walked out, as some newspapers reported, the critical questions that were raised by some of senators at the conclusion of Bilbo’s speech suggests that they were not fully persuaded.\footnote{“Senate Snubs Bilbo: ‘African Plan’ Flops,” \textit{Chicago Defender}, 29 April 1939; “Senator Bilbo’s Repatriation Bill,” \textit{African Nationalist}, 5 July 1939, Albert Porte Papers, Roll 2. Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,”144-5. There is no indication that any Senators left during the Bilbo’s presentation. See U.S. Congressional Record, 76th Congress, First Session, 1939.} Senator James Davis, a Republican from the state of Pennsylvania, questioned Bilbo on the specifics of the bill—asking how much land the Liberian government had committed and inquiring about the amount of financial support that black Americans would receive once in Liberia.\footnote{U.S. Congressional Record, 76th Congress, First Session, 1939, 4659. On Senator James Davis, see Paul B. Beers, \textit{Pennsylvania Politics Today and Yesterday: the Tolerable Accommodation} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 104-6.} Though Bilbo had a prompt response—assuring Davis that black Americans would obtain financial support and the basic necessities in Liberia including land and property—the Greater Liberia Bill failed to receive the support Bilbo and others had anticipated. Moreover, the newspaper coverage or lack thereof, spoke volumes. In the immediate aftermath, few black newspapers mentioned the controversial Senator and his bill. A
number of black newspapers and magazines, including the NAACP’s *Crisis* and National Urban League’s *Opportunity*, made no mention of the developments—probably intentionally.\(^{146}\)

The few newspapers that did cover the story emphasized the role of Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, who had launched the pro-emigration campaign years earlier.\(^{147}\) Writers seemed especially fascinated by this very outspoken black nationalist leader who appeared to be an unlikely ally of the racist Senator. Though some newspaper articles were quite critical of Gordon—in one instance, describing her as “buxom, well-heeled and loquacious” fanatic of Marcus Garvey—she seemed to welcome the public attention, using it as an opportunity to openly denounce white supremacy and vigorously defend her nationalist views.\(^{148}\) In the immediate aftermath of Bilbo’s failed presentation, Gordon held an impromptu interview with members of the white press. “You people don’t want us,” she boldly declared to a group of white reporters, “and we don’t want you.” Referencing the sexual abuse that black women endured at the hands of white slaveholders, Gordon unapologetically blamed white people for the ‘problem’ of race mixing. “Some day the man you elect [as president of the United States] is going to be a black man because you can’t tell the difference,” the activist mockingly remarked. “And it’s simply going to be the price you’re paying for the *sins of your forefathers*” she continued. Without mincing words, she added, “All of you know— I do, if you


\(^{147}\) See “500 Want to Go Back to Africa,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 29 April 1939; Florence Murray, “Anything except Mr. or Mrs. Bilbo’s Policy,” *The Chicago Defender*, 20 May 1939; “Races: Mr. Bilbo’s Afflatus,” *Time*, 8 May 1939.

\(^{148}\) Ralph Matthews, “*Back to Africa* Pilgrimage Proves Barnum Was Right!,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 29 April 1939.
don’t—that in days gone by your male ancestors used to raise their white children in the front yard
and their black children in the back yard.”

Gordon’s public critique of white people marked the end of her alliance with Senator Bilbo. By one newspaper account, the Senator was deeply embarrassed by Gordon’s display, perhaps because she stole the spotlight. Perhaps, in a moment of anger, she chose not to perform—as she often did in her earlier writings. Or perhaps, she had already come to the conclusion that her attempt to secure federal legislation through Bilbo’s support was now unlikely. Whatever the actual circumstances, her comments clearly ‘rubbed the Senator the wrong way.’ Apparently offended by Gordon’s expressive display and harsh criticism of white America, Bilbo tried to form his own delegation of black nationalist (male) leaders in the ensuing months, hoping to limit Gordon’s influence and also hoping that he might garner more control of the pro-emigration campaign.

For Gordon, the break from Bilbo marked a pivotal turning point in her political career. Shifting focus from “The Man Bilbo,” one Baltimore Afro-American newspaper lauded Gordon as the “1939 Moses” of black people—ironically evoking the very same analogy the activist once used to describe the Senator. Displaying a full-length photo of a smiling Gordon—under the capitalized words, “She’s 1939 Moses”—the Baltimore Afro-American included a short description of the activist responsible for leading a group of “500 disciples” to D.C. to lobby in support of the Greater Liberia Bill. Symbolically, the newspaper’s declaration underscored a significant shift that was beginning to take place at the national level. Though Gordon hoped to secure federal legislation through the help of a powerful white (male) ally, members of the African American community had selected the

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149 “500 Want to Go Back to Africa,” Baltimore Afro-American, 29 April 1939 (emphasis added).
150 Ibid.
151 Fitzgerald, “We Have Found a Moses,” 312.
152 “She’s 1939 Moses,” Baltimore Afro-American, 29 April 1939.

[159]
leader of their choice. Much like Harriet Tubman, who led hundreds of enslaved people to freedom through the Underground Railroad, Gordon became a female embodiment of the “Moses” figure.\(^{153}\)

Along these lines, many black nationalist activists envisioned Gordon as a messianic figure who, like the Biblical Moses, would lead the way to the Promised Land.\(^{154}\) Mrs. Jowers, a member of the PME in Chicago, expressed this point of view in an original song entitled “You Better Run.” “God called Madam Gordon from the start,” Jowers declared, “He stamped His will upon her heart/ He placed his commandments in her mind/ And He told her not to leave his children behind.”\(^{155}\) Juanita Carter, a young PME member, concurred, indicating that Gordon would lead people of African descent to their homeland: “Like the Sphinx o’erlooking Egypt tho never a word it speaks/We’ll follow Mother Gordon’s footsteps and always be meek/Mother Gordon will lead us home.”\(^{156}\) Carter’s comments, along with those of Mrs. Jowers, closely mirrored the “mother” trope often used in urban black churches to describe the “primary matriarchal figure.”\(^{157}\) By emphasizing Gordon’s role as “mother” and the female embodiment of “Moses,” members of African American community sought to authenticate and validate the activist’s leadership on the local and national levels.

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Conclusion

During the 1930s, black nationalist women leaders relied heavily on the support of influential white supremacists in order to advance their political goals. These women activists embraced the ideas of biological determinism that dominated the racial discourse of the period. Working within these conceptualizations of race, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Celia Jane Allen, and others actively pursued alliances with Earnest Sevier Cox and Theodore G. Bilbo. During a period that was particularly marred by racial violence, black disenfranchisement, and Jim Crow segregation, black nationalist women engaged in a series of performative interactions with white supremacists that sought to bolster their political cause. These women maintained the belief that influential white supremacists had greater political autonomy, visibility, and capital—including access to state resources and financial support. To a large extent, this was certainly the case. However, women’s controversial alliances with white supremacists ultimately failed to yield all of the results they expected.

In the case of the Greater Liberia Bill, Gordon did not obtain the congressional support she desired. However, her collaborations with Cox and Bilbo significantly increased her visibility on a national scale. In the aftermath of Senator's Bilbo’s presentation, Gordon received a record number of letters from blacks across the country, inquiring about the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) and their plans to facilitate West African emigration.\(^{158}\) Even the American Colonization Society (ACS) experienced an increase in letters during this period from black men and women inquiring about the “Back to Africa bill.”\(^{159}\) During the summer of 1939, members of the PME in Chicago held a series of public meetings, promoting the Greater Liberia Bill and securing additional

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\(^{158}\) Fitzgerald, We Have Found a Moses,” 313; Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 147.

\(^{159}\) Henry L. West to Bilbo, 23 September 1939, Reel 246, American Colonization Society Records, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
signatures from black residents in support of black emigration. In October of that year, Gordon sent additional PME organizers to the South to help Celia Jane Allen recruit new members, “arouse the sentiment of the people,” and to promote the “Back to Africa bill.”

The excitement surrounding the Greater Liberia Bill began to wane, however, as the nation became increasingly embroiled in World War II. In the aftermath of Germany’s attack of Poland in September 1939—and the immediate military response from British and French allies—it became quite apparent that the passage of the Greater Liberia Bill would not become a reality. No longer could France or Britain be expected to cede land in West Africa for the purposes of black emigration. Moreover, as more nations became embroiled in the conflict, the United States began to mobilize for war, shifting focus from national concerns to global ones. Writing in October 1939, Gordon expressed deep concern for these developments: “Our hearts are broken, our eyes are filled with tears to think that our brothers and sons, weak from hunger and ragged are being recruited to go back to Europe to another war.” “We hope that this nation will stay out of this war,” she continued, “or at least keep the black man out of it. It is not our war, we have nothing to do with it.” While Gordon lamented the outbreak of World War II, other nationalist women leaders like Amy Jacques Garvey envisioned the war as a moment of opportunity for black activists across the globe. From her base in Jamaica, Jacques Garvey launched an international Pan-Africanist

160 Gordon to Bilbo, 15 October 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.
162 Fitzgerald, “We Have Found a Moses,” 316.
164 Gordon to Bilbo, 15 October 1939, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers.
165 Taylor, Veiled Garvey, 158-9; Goldthree, “Amy Jacques, Theodore Bilbo, and the Paradoxes of Black Nationalism.”
campaign during the early 1940s, calling on black men and women across the African diaspora to seize the moment as an opportunity to secure their individual and collective freedom.
CHAPTER FIVE

“FOR THE REDEMPTION OF AFRICA”: BLACK NATIONALIST WOMEN, PAN-AFRICANISM, AND GLOBAL VISIONS OF AFRICA, 1940-1945

Writing in 1944 to A. Balfour Linton, editor of the African newspaper, black nationalist leader Amy Jacques Garvey laid out a strategic plan for securing the political, social, and economic freedom of black men and women across the globe. “The Redemption of Africa,” she insisted, “is a solution for the ills of all Africans, those at home and those abroad, and all people of African descent, the world over…” “The nerve center is Africa,” she continued, “and unless, and until, this spinal column is put into working order, the limbs cannot function properly; for it is the nerve center-Africa-that we must get our motivating power.” “Strengthen that, and you automatically strengthen even the far-flung fingers and toes,” she added.1 Jacques Garvey’s comments, which came during a global economic and political crisis, reflected her unwavering commitment to the cause of African redemption in both the physical and imagined sense.2 In black nationalist discourse of the period, African redemption meant the complete liberation of Africans and peoples of African descent from racism, European colonization, and global white imperialism.3 As colonial rule spread throughout Africa, Jacques Garvey emerged as part of a vanguard of nationalist women leaders at the forefront of black liberatory movements. In the 1940s, she launched an international Pan-Africanist movement from her base in Jamaica, aimed at securing universal black liberation and “redeeming” the continent of Africa.

1 Amy Jacques Garvey to A. Balfour Linton, 8 February 1944, Box 1, Marcus Garvey Memorial Collection, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee.
In the previous chapter, I examine black nationalist women’s political activism surrounding the 1939 Greater Liberia Bill and explore the underlying motivations for their collaborations with white supremacists. This chapter shifts focus to diasporic concerns, examining women’s political engagement with Pan-Africanist movements and discourses. It centers on the political activism of women in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) during the 1940s. The chapter analyzes an array of Garveyite women’s writings and speeches in order to shed light on women’s ideas on Africa, African redemption, and black emancipation. The chapter argues that nationalist women throughout the United States and across the African diaspora used their writings to challenge global white supremacy and articulate a commitment to Pan-Africanism—the belief that African peoples, on the continent and in the diaspora, share a common past and destiny. Interestingly, however, while these women activists were deeply committed to anticolonial politics, they also embraced some imperialist and civilizationist views that paradoxically promoted some of the same ideals they rejected. Likewise, they often endorsed a repressive and gendered vision of African redemption—one in which men occupied positions of power and leadership while women were relegated to secondary, subordinate positions.

By foregrounding Garveyite women’s writings during the 1940s, this chapter captures the complexities, tensions, and contradictions within nationalist women’s political ideas and activism. It illustrates how black women shaped, and were shaped by, Pan-Africanist movements and discourses.

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but also the social and political thinking of the day. This chapter extends much of the previous scholarship that centers on black women’s lives primarily through the prism of war and labor, and examines black nationalist women’s complex engagement with discourses of race, gender, and nationality through political activism. In so doing, the chapter situates nationalist women as key political actors and thinkers in the global black freedom struggle(s) of the 1940s.

Black Nationalism and Diasporic Politics during the 1940s

The 1940s was an era of significant transformations in the lives of black men and women across the globe. World War II, more than any other development during this period, marked a

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turning point in the history of the modern African diaspora. Concerned about the war’s impact on the future of millions of people of color across the globe, black activists across the African diaspora amplified their efforts to end global racism, white imperialism, and colonialism. In the United States, many black Americans were ambivalent about supporting American military aspirations given the persistence of racial violence, disenfranchisement, and Jim Crow segregation. A. Philip Randolph’s plan for a March on Washington (1941) and the “Double V” campaign (1942), which called for an end to fascism abroad and Jim Crow at home, revealed the racial grievances concerning U.S. foreign policy during this period. These developments coincided with the formation of the Congressional of Racial Equality (CORE)—a multi-racial political organization that helped to launch the modern Civil Rights Movement—and the Second Wave of the Great Migration in which an estimated one million black Southerners relocated to the North and West.

For African American women, the 1940s was an era of hope and possibility marred by the persistence of racial and gender inequality. When the United States entered World War II on

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December 8, 1941, black women entered the labor force in record numbers to replace men who had
gone to battle. Certainly, the rapidly expanding labor force improved socioeconomic conditions for
black women, who constituted 600,000 out of one million black workers during World War II.\footnote{Anderson, “Last Hired, First Fired”; Putney, \textit{When the Nation was in Need}; Bailey and Collins, “The Wage Gains of African-American Women in the 1940s”; Honey, \textit{Bitter Fruit}; Shockley, \textit{We, Too, are Americans}; Mullenbach, \textit{Double Victory}. For a general overview of World War II’s impact on women, see Campbell, \textit{Women at War with America}; Yellin, \textit{Our Mothers’ War}.}

Moreover, a significant number of black women entered the army—an estimated four thousand
joined the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) and more than three hundred became members of the

Notwithstanding the significance of these opportunities, black women’s
experiences during the 1940s were shaped by racial and gender discrimination. On the war front,
African American WACs were relegated to segregated living quarters and endured, on a daily basis,
gender and race prejudice in an army dominated by white male officers.\footnote{Gail Lumet Buckley, \textit{American Patriots: the Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm} (New York: Random House, 2001), 295-304.} In the workplace, black
women encountered a racialized and gender-based hierarchy, which consistently placed them at the
bottom.\footnote{Anderson, “Last Hired, First Fired,” 84.}

To a large extent, the challenges that black men and women encountered were not unique to
the United States. People of African descent in other countries also could not escape the lingering
effects of the global depression and the sociopolitical impact of the Second World War. Rampant
labor strikes in the British Caribbean during this period captured the growing dissatisfaction among
many people of African descent who were struggling to make ends meet. In Trinidad, for example,
Tubal Uriah Butler, a native Grenadian, led exploited Afro-Creole oil workers in a series of labor
strikes during the 1930s. With the backing of Afro-Creole workers, Butler launched an assault on the British investors whose profits boomed while oil workers on the island endured poor compensation and terrible working conditions.\textsuperscript{16} Significantly, the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-6) further galvanized black activists across the globe. In the immediate aftermath of Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia, black men and women in the United States and other parts of the diaspora rallied in support of the African state.\textsuperscript{17}

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 also had a profound effect on the lives of black men and women in the Caribbean as in other parts of the African diaspora. Organized mass unrest in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean underscores the extent to which the War served as a catalyst for black political action. Specifically, the War inevitably became a period in which “anticolonial issues acquired a new prominence and stood side by side with domestic demands” for black political and social equality.\textsuperscript{18} Both global and national developments, then, combined to create prime conditions for the political (re)awakening of many black nationalists. Many were drawn to Garveyism for its emphasis on combating global white supremacy. Consequently, the number of neo-Garveyites throughout various parts of the Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean increased, and the UNIA experienced steady growth in the United States.\textsuperscript{19}

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\item \textsuperscript{17} See Meriwether, Proudly We Can Be Afrians. For example, black leaders such as C.L.R. James and George Padmore came together to establish the International African Service Bureau (IASB), a multinational Pan-Africanist organization, in 1937. The IASB would later become the Pan-African Federation (PAF). The IASB would later become the Pan-African Federation (PAF). See Von Eschen, Race Against Empire. The IASB would later become the Pan-African Federation (PAF).
\item \textsuperscript{18} Von Eschen, Race Against Empire, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{19} See Asia Leeds, “Representations of Race, Entanglements of Power: Whiteness, Garveyism, and Redemptive Geographies in Costa Rica, 1921-1950,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California,
October 1940, James R. Stewart succeeded Garvey as the leader of the UNIA and moved the organization’s main headquarters from Harlem to Cleveland, Ohio. Garveyism was especially appealing to black men and women in Cleveland—as in other parts of the U.S. and African diaspora—during the tumultuous period of World War II.  

The *New Negro World*, a UNIA periodical established by Stewart in 1940, created a unique opportunity to strengthen and build international ties between the increasing number of Garveyites in Cleveland and across the diaspora. It was modeled after the original Garveyite periodical (*the Negro World*) and became the primary vehicle through which Stewart and other Garveyite leaders disseminated their nationalist ideas during the 1940s. With an estimated readership of fifteen hundred, the *New Negro World’s* circulation waned in comparison to the original Garveyite newspaper, which reached millions of blacks in the diaspora. However, during the 1940s, Stewart’s *New Negro World* served as one of the few black nationalist periodicals that provided a bridge between blacks in the United States and diverse places like South Africa and Cuba. In this way, the
New Negro World newspaper underscores what historian Erik S. McDuffie has referred to as a “diasporic Midwest”—a term that captures the transnational dimensions of the region’s history.\footnote{McDuffie, “Garveyism in Cleveland, Ohio,” 164.}

Significantly, the New Negro World also captures the gender politics within the UNIA and the complexities of Garveyite women’s political ideas during the early 1940s. Through the pages of the newspaper, Garveyites articulated a masculinist and patriarchal vision of black liberation: men needed to be the ultimate leaders, protectors, and defenders of women. Reflecting the “spirit of manliness”—to which Marcus Garvey himself referenced in a 1920 speech—the writers of the New Negro World newspaper promoted “a modern ethos of masculinity…that characterized a society dominated by Victorian values.”\footnote{Martin Anthony Summers, Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8. On the discourse of “manliness and civilization” and its relationship to imperialism, see Gail Bederman, Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917, Women in Culture and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). On Garvey’s “spirit of manliness” reference, see Hill, Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers, Volume II: 616.}

This paralleled the masculine ideals and images that dominated public discourse during World War II. In this way, the New Negro World newspaper embodied the “spirit of manliness” that guided the actions of black middle-class men at the turn of the century.\footnote{Summers, Manliness and Its Discontents, chapter 2. Summers’ seminal study examines how African American and Caribbean men constructed a “gendered self” from the period of 1900 to 1930. For other studies on black masculinity in this period see, Christina S. Jarvis, The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004); Michelle Ann Stephens, Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).}

Stewart had a profound role in constructing ideals of maleness and black leadership in the pages of the New Negro World. Not only did he serve as editor in chief, his articles also dominated the pages of the New Negro World and he directly censored anything submitted for publication. As a result, the newspaper featured an array of writings—including articles, editorials, and poems—that constructed
black men’s identities “within the paradigms of providership, production, and respectability.”

These gendered ideals also extended to the ways in which the *New Negro World* endorsed a repressive and gendered vision of African redemption.

Importantly, this is not to suggest that Garveyite women were fully complicit in promoting masculinist discourses. Women in the UNIA often challenged black patriarchal authority. As “community feminists,” women in the UNIA centered their political activism on expanding opportunities for women’s leadership even while reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations. The writings that appear in the *New Negro World* newspaper capture one of the complex aspects of Garveyite women’s gender and sexual politics during the 1940s. Like Garvey, Stewart maintained an autocratic style of leadership, carefully monitoring the UNIA’s newspaper and providing few opportunities for women activists to articulate their views without direct male censorship.

Writing in the *New Negro World* in October 1941, Stewart called on all “honest [black] men and women the world over” to join the cause for universal black liberation. “We are determined,” he continued, “to carry the Association to the realization of its objective as was the great dream of Marcus Garvey.” While he repeatedly called on “honest men and women” to join the movement,

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29 Taylor, *Veiled Garvey*, 64-90; Mark D. Matthews, “Our Women and What They Think: Amy Jacques Garvey and the Negro World,” *Black Scholar* Vol. 10, nos. 8–9 (1979): 2–18. While the *Negro World* of the 1920s did, for a short period of time, include a women’s page—“Our Women and What They Think”— on which Jacques Garvey and other women openly addressed a range of issues, Stewart’s *New Negro World* provided no such forum for women.  
Stewart, like Garvey before him, maintained a patriarchal vision of black leadership. Not surprisingly, the earliest issues of the *New Negro World* were dominated by the writings and speeches of black men. Exemplifying Stewart’s egotistical and power-driven personality, the earliest issues of the *New Negro World* newspaper were, by and large, a compilation of the black nationalist leader’s thoughts and opinions on a range of contemporary issues. For example, in a 1941 editorial entitled “Democracy’s Last Line of Defense, Stewart described what he saw as the ultimate failure of democracy: racial prejudice. “If American and British prejudice will cause them to fail in arming Negroes, “he argued, “[t]hey can blame no one but themselves for a loss of their sovereignty.”

In a subsequent editorial, entitled “Let’s Face the Truth,” Stewart pointed out the ironies of a war for freedom and democracy abroad when African Americans lacked full citizenship rights at home: “[Black soldiers] dressed in the uniforms of their nation [are] shot down in Louisiana…by the very people for whom they were to chance their lives…” Using the *New Negro World* as a vehicle to galvanize black Americans, Stewart actively condemned policies that undermined American democratic principles. Like countless civil rights leaders during this period, Stewart championed for “Double V”—victory over Axis powers and victory for equal rights at home. Not surprisingly, he maintained a masculinist vision of how this victory would be obtained. Writing in an editorial entitled “Wake Up,” Stewart called on black men to take a definitive stand towards racial progress: “Just as white men will fight for Democracy, black men everywhere must put aside their differences and demand of the world their God-given rights and privileges.” “Negroes must cease their


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imbecilic and dependent existence and by their sacrifices elevate themselves to a *standard of men,*” he continued.33

The “standard of men” to which Stewart referred in his editorial evoked the ‘spirit of manliness’ that undergirded the articles that appeared in *New Negro World* newspaper during the 1940s. Writing in a 1942 editorial entitled “Man’s Inhumanity” Stewart lamented the deplorable conditions of people of color in the United States and across the globe, insisting that “countless men, women and children are sacrificed because there are yet men who believe that might makes right.”34 Garveyite Nathaniel C. Patton, who served as assistant editor and circulation manager for the *New Negro World,* expressed similar sentiments in an article entitled “Courage!—Gentlemen.”35 Appealing directly to men in the UNIA, Patton reminded readers of their sole purpose: to serve as “natural leaders of millions of Negroes in their physical [and] spiritual redemption.” “The Negro fast approaching MANHOOD,” Patton continued, “is demanding his share of the family wealth and opportunities…”36

**Garveyite Women and the *New Negro World***

While the *New Negro World* certainly became a platform for black nationalist men to promote the “spirit of manliness,” it was also one of the few platforms available for women activists to publicly articulate their visions of African redemption and to offer their insights into how people of African descent should respond to the social, political, and economic challenges of the day. In a 1942 article entitled “Liberty,” Ethel Collins, who had served as general secretary and assisted Stewart during the transitional phase of the UNIA, advocated West African emigration as the

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34 James Stewart, “Man’s Inhumanity,” *New Negro World,* November-December 1942 (emphasis added).
36 Ibid.
solution to African redemption. Collins argued. Insisting that people of African descent needed to “create their own destinies” and build the “culture and civilization of their own,” Collins emphasized the importance of reclaiming Africa: “[W]e of the Universal Negro Improvement Association have made up in our minds to work for the restoration of human liberty and the land of our fathers.”

Elaine Cooper, UNIA secretary of the Montreal division, expressed similar sentiments, arguing that “Negroes should be more determined today than they have ever been, to protect their own interests.” Emphasizing the need for black men and women to establish their own nation, Cooper implored readers of the New Negro World to “realize that the time is coming when every man and every race must return to its own ‘vine and fig tree.’”

While Cooper offered no concrete details on exactly how people of African descent would establish an independent black nation state, other women writers in the New Negro World expressed their vision for how this could be achieved. Josephine Moody, an activist residing in Ohio, called for an immediate overthrow of the global white power structure. Reflecting the ethos of the New Negro Movement, Moody called for a militant and urgent response to global white supremacy. "The

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37 I offer a biographical sketch of Ethel M. Collins in the first chapter of this study.
bleeding wound of Africa is wide open,” Moody argued, “and the nations of the world keep the
wound from healing, and we, the Negro must be our own physician to effect a healing of that
wound.” The liberation of Africa, Moody continued, would only come by force: “We want to set the
world on fire, we want freedom and justice and a chance to build for ourselves. And if we must set
the world on fire…we will, like other men, die for the realization of our dreams.” 41 Florine Wilkes
expressed similar sentiments, calling on black men across the globe to “wake from [their]
slumber…and fight for [the] motherland.” 42 “Why not demand your freedom?” she asked in a poem
entitled “Negroes, have a heart.” 43

Significantly, Moody and other women activists maintained the belief that black Americans
would not only aid Liberia; they argued that Liberia would, in turn, help black Americans socially,
economically, and politically. In a poem entitled, “My Race,” Florine Wilkes expressed deep
frustration over the mistreatment of black men and women in the United States: “In the depths of a
long dark corridor/Stands the remains of a Nobel Race/ They’ve butchered, lynched and hanged
us /Because we wanted better place.” “We’ve been kicked, shunned and segregated/ And looked
upon as an outcast,” Wilkes continued, “We’ve suffered under the foot of the white man/How long
will this terror last?” 44 In the eyes of many Garveyite women activists, there appeared to be no end
in sight as World War II waged on. In a 1942 editorial, Ethel Collins noted that “the first war
brought about a terrible wave of unemployment and the bread lines.” 45


will it bring?” she rhetorically asked.45 In another editorial, Agnes Hall reflected on the countless black veterans from World War I who had “paid the price but failed to share in [the] liberties they strove to save.” “The First War veterans,” she noted in despair, “[were] making room [f]or more within their living tombs.”46

Through the pages of the New Negro World, women in the UNIA brought national and international attention to the plight of blacks in the United States, and openly condemned the instruments of Jim Crow segregation and oppression. In her article, “The Only Solution,” Theresa E. Young, who served as associate editor of the New Negro World, decried the rampant acts of lynching and interracial rape that were taking place across the nation. “We are denied the justice America guarantees every citizen before the courts, and likewise, we do not receive equal protection under the law,” Young asserted. “Negro women are insulted by white men,” she continued, “and Negro men are cowarded down by mobs…and therefore they do not seek to defend their women.”47 Young’s comments underscore some of the motivations for why women activists championed black emigration to West Africa, and also reveal the complex gender politics of nationalist women. While Young acknowledged the violent assault against “Negro youth, men and women” alike, her editorial reinforced the masculinist view that men needed to be the ultimate protectors and defenders of women.48

Addressing the persistent challenges of racial segregation, disenfranchisement, violence and terror directed towards black men and women, Young insisted that the “only real solution” was the establishment of an autonomous black nation state in West Africa. “The conditions of life that

48 Summers, Manliness and Its Discontents, Part I; Stephens, Black Empire, 74-125.
Negroes have faced and are still facing in America,” Young argued, “are conducive in the highest degree to a nationalistic spirit.” “At every point in their social evolution,” she continued, “opposition presents persistent discrimination to show that the Negro…will be tolerated only in the capacity of menials…The Negro must learn that if he is to take his rightful place, he too must have a government of his own…” Ethel Collins agreed, arguing that black men and women needed a country of their own. “The Pilgrim and colonists did it for America,” she added, “and the New Negro can do it for Africa.”

These women believed that in Africa, black men and women would not have to face the turmoil and humiliation they endured in the United States. In a 1941 editorial, Edith Allen openly condemned lynching and offered a scathing critique of American democracy: “[I]n America the land where Democracy IS SUPPOSED to be in evidence…a human being was shackled to a tree in the public square in the state of Georgia by a law enforcement officer.” “Even the beast[s] are not mistreated,” Allen declared, “and yet such action is unchallenged and such perpetrators go unpunished.” “Is this democracy?” she rhetorically asked. Echoing journalist Ida B. Wells and other nineteenth century black clubwomen, Allen called on “every law abiding Citizen” to “express their indignation” at the lynchings. Another woman writer expressed similar views, encouraging black Americans not to become discouraged but to “look onward, forward, and upward” and “always demand your civil rights.”

Unlike black clubwomen, however, nationalist women activists maintained the view that the racial violence and terror would only end through West African emigration. Without mincing words,

51 On Wells, see Mia Bay, To Tell the Truth Freely The Life of Ida B. Wells (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).
Allen informed readers that racial acts of violence would only cease to occur if—and when—black people “had a country of [their] own.”\textsuperscript{53} Lena Obey, a Garveyite who resided in Columbus, Ohio, expressed such sentiments in her musical composition, “Dear Africa”: “There is a land across the sea/ A land where black folks can be free/ A land that we all love so dear/ We love your name, Dear Africa.”\textsuperscript{54} Suggesting that West African emigration would help to preserve black womanhood, Obey described Africa as a “land where sin doth not appear/ And woman-hood is there reared… A land where Christ will soon appear/ And wipe away every tear.”\textsuperscript{55}

Obey’s comments provide a glimpse into how nationalist women sought to address racial and sexual violence, and also capture the dual struggle that these women endured. On the one hand, these activists were deeply committed to Pan-Africanism as a “direct response to the imperialist annexation of Africa and Eurocentrism.”\textsuperscript{56} On the other hand, women activists often subscribed to a civilizationist view of racial uplift that mirrored the same practices they rejected. Obey’s hope that “Christ will soon appear [in Africa]” underscores the activist’s belief that African redemption would come in the form of Christianity.\textsuperscript{57} Reflecting the imperial aspirations of Garveyite activists, writer Florine Wilkes declared in a poem that “No man shall successfully rule my people, [b]ut a man who looks like me.”\textsuperscript{58}

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\textsuperscript{53} Edith Allen, “Ga. Prisoner Chained to Tree,” \textit{New Negro World}, October 1941.\\
\textsuperscript{54} Lena Obey, “Dear Africa,” \textit{New Negro World}, March 1942.\\
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. (emphasis added).\\
\textsuperscript{56} Barbara Bush, \textit{Imperialism, Race, and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945} (New York: Routledge, 1999), 14.\\
\textsuperscript{57} Wilson Jeremiah Moses, \textit{Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).\\
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The global visions of Africa and African redemption that appeared in women’s writings during this period were very much intertwined with the question of gender roles. While “both men and women were integral to African redemption, women were considered particularly responsible for reproducing the race.”\textsuperscript{59} Aaron Rivers, an activist residing in Cincinnati, Ohio, expressed these sentiments in a 1942 editorial: “Without womanhood, this world would be as one vast desert unpeopled…True womanhood loves her offspring far dearer than her life.”\textsuperscript{60} Much like the earlier poetry of Marcus Garvey, Rivers’ writings revealed a veneration of black womanhood particularly in relation to motherhood.\textsuperscript{61} “The [perseverance] of womanhood to give the earth prosperity,” he wrote, “shall always be a beacon light to the glory of her maker and the joy of heaven.”\textsuperscript{62} Echoing Rivers’ comments, Mrs. Canada, a black nationalist residing in Chicago, lauded black motherhood in a 1941 poem entitled “The Hand.” “[T]he hand that rocks the cradle,” she avowed, “is the hand that shapes the soul.”\textsuperscript{63}

While Canada suggested, in one instance, that both men and women should fight for black liberation “with all our manhood method and might,” her writings supported a masculinist vision of African redemption. In Canada’s poetry, black men emerged as the ultimate saviors who would victoriously lead the black race towards freedom and equality: “We have men we know are able/To command and lead a race/ And before it is all over/ You will know we have a place.” “All the

\textsuperscript{63} Mrs. Canada, “The Hand,” Peace Movement of Ethiopia Constitution, 32.
leaders,” she continued, “should be just men...[who] should always practice what they preach.” Garveyite Adelia Ireland promoted these views in her political writings during this period. “Arise Black men,” Ireland declared, “and come out in the light and let the world know their sense of duty.” Speaking before a crowd of UNIA supporters in 1942, Elinor White, state commissioner for Illinois, emphasized the necessity of male leadership in the global struggle for black liberation. “If the men of the Black race in Africa, West Indies, South and Central America and the United States of America, would work together on this great program given us by THE LATE HONORABLE MARCUS GARVEY,” she explained, “there is no reason why we cannot present to the WORLD...A RACE OF SELF-RESPECTING AND ABLE PEOPLE.”

Amy Jacques Garvey and the Fight for Black Self-Determination

While many Garveyite women in the United States used the New Negro World as a platform to articulate their political demands, Amy Jacques Garvey was at the forefront of an unprecedented diasporic movement for black self-determination. An influential and long-time proponent of West African emigration, the Pan-Africanist leader relocated to Jamaica with her husband, Marcus Garvey, in the aftermath of his 1927 deportation. When Garvey relocated to London in 1935 in an effort to reinvigorate the UNIA, Jacques Garvey remained in Jamaica to raise their two sons—Marcus Garvey, Jr., born in 1930, and Julius Garvey, born in 1933. When Garvey passed away five years later, in June 1940, Jacques Garvey played a key role in the continued dissemination of Garveyism throughout the African diaspora, writing for various newspapers in Jamaica and completing the

seminal text, *Garvey and Garveyism* in 1958 (later published in 1963). It is from this base in Jamaica where she attempted to revive Senator Theodore Bilbo’s Greater Liberia Bill in 1944.

Though she faced mounting pressure from male Garveyites who challenged her leadership in the UNIA, Jacques Garvey remained at the forefront of nationalist politics during the Great Depression and World War II. She envisioned the Greater Liberia Bill as a vehicle for advancing the cause of African redemption and securing the future of black men and women across the African diaspora. In her view, the Greater Liberia Bill was a viable solution to the social and economic challenges facing people of African descent by making it possible to establish an autonomous black nation state during a historical moment of political and economic uncertainty. Following Bilbo’s unsuccessful presentation before Congress in April 1939, and the start of a war in Europe in December of that year, however, the bill quickly became a non-issue. But, when Jacques Garvey learned of Senator Bilbo’s plans to re-introduce the bill in 1944, she launched an international pro-emigration campaign, calling on black men and women across the diaspora to support the bill.

In March 1944, she wrote a detailed letter to Bilbo, attempting to forge an alliance with the Senator on the basis of their mutual interests in “race integrity” and West African emigration. “I feel that we are both sincerely interested in the success of the Repatriation Bill,” she wrote to Bilbo. “In view of our interest,” she continued, “I am sure you will welcome suggestions.” Reminding Bilbo about her years of extensive travel, political activism, and international influence, Jacques

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69 I discuss the Greater Liberia Bill in Chapter Four of this Study.
71 Jacques Garvey to Bilbo, 26 March 1944, Box 15, Marcus Garvey Memorial Collection, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee. A copy is available in the Bilbo Papers. See Jacques Garvey to Bilbo, 26 March 1944, Box 1090, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.
Garvey proceeded to lay out a number of suggested changes to the bill—including changing its name. “The word Repatriation, to many of my people is misinterpreted to mean forcing them out of America,” she carefully pointed out. Thus, she advised Bilbo to rename the Greater Liberia bill to “A Bill to Establish an Independent Democratic Nation in Africa for people of African descent.” “The name is long,” she admitted, “but it implies the purpose of the bill.” After suggesting more than twenty changes to the bill, Jacques Garvey expressed optimism about its future, insisting that the world war strengthened—rather than hampered—the proposal. With a “publicity campaign” and a “brand new name,” Jacques Garvey optimistically predicted that all “oppositionist[s] [would] fall for it.”

As she awaited a response from Bilbo, Jacques Garvey began using her global networks to garner support for the Greater Liberia Bill. In April 1944, she wrote to Harold Moody, a Jamaican doctor and civic leader who served as president of the League of Colored Peoples, a London-based Pan-Africanist organization. Detailing her multiple efforts to improve the lives of black men and women in the diaspora through a myriad of initiatives, Jacques Garvey laid out her arguments in support of Bilbo’s bill. She described the bill as “the best plan” that would “ease the…problems” of black Americans and other people of African descent. She also requested Moody’s help to obtain data on “the emasculation of our Race.” “Thirteen million African-Americans lynched, ostracized, and frustrated” Jacques Garvey argued, “would find an outlet for their professionals, skilled, experts and industrious and intelligent members in a country, in which they can…rise to the highest posts within the government.” Thus, the prospect of relocating to West Africa, she insisted, provided a

72 Ibid.
74 Jacques Garvey to Harold Moody, 17 April 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.

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viable means for black men and women to both escape the harsh realities of life in the United States but also provide them with economic and political autonomy.

In addition, she envisioned the bill as an opportunity for the United States to “develop West Africa from Gambia to Equatorial Africa…[and] send experts in all branches of government and for security, to teach and train Africans and Colonists from America to take over their country eventually.” Jacques Garvey believed that skilled black emigrants from the United States would play a crucial role in making West Africa “a progressive, Democratic nation.” Her comments revealed her civilizationist views towards indigenous Africans—ideas which were characteristic of other black nationalists including Marcus Garvey and Henry McNeal Turner. Not surprisingly, some members of the Americo-Liberian elite—who have historically been in opposition to indigenous Liberians—shared Jacques Garvey’s views. Years earlier, in a 1938 editorial, writers of the Liberian newspaper, *The Weekly Mirror*, asserted that “the American Negro still offers Liberia its greatest opportunity to increase its population with citizens already trained in the principles of democratic government.”

Not long after writing to Moody, Jacques Garvey reached out to C.V. Jarrett, editor of the *African Standard* in Freetown, Sierra Leone, expressing a sense of optimism about the future of people of African descent. “For a solution of the conditions of our people in America,” she wrote, “I present the Greater Liberia Bill, sponsored by an American Senator.” She also used this opportunity to present her proposal for an amendment to the Atlantic Charter. Introduced in August 1941 by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, the Atlantic Charter represented one of the most significant World War II documents, laying out a set of principles that would ultimately

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75 Jacques Garvey to Moody, 17 April 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.
77 See Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers*.
79 Jacques Garvey to Jarrett, 14 April 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.
guide the Allied powers towards peace and stability. Among the Charter’s stipulations was its emphasis on political self determination. The document declared that Roosevelt and Churchill “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.” For people of color, including millions living under the heel of colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, the Charter’s introduction in 1941 was a pivotal development. It became a significant organizing tool, galvanizing activists across the African diaspora and resulting in the resurgence of Pan-Africanist sentiments.

While the Charter “appeared to be the United States’ and Britain’s pledge to correct the injustices of the past and create a much more humane order,” it excluded people of color. In the immediate aftermath of the Charter’s debut, Churchill publicly declared before the British Parliament that it was not “applicable to Colored Races in colonial empire.” Though Roosevelt later insisted that the Charter’s provision should include colonized nations, the lack of consensus on the issue underscored the persistence of the twentieth century global color line that ultimately marginalized the needs and concerns of people of color. Along with many other black activists in the diaspora, including NAACP leaders, Jacques Garvey demanded the full inclusion of colonized nations in the Atlantic Charter. In July 1944, three months after contacting C.V. Jarrett, she drafted

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82 Anderson, Eyes Off the Prize, 17.

83 Quoted in Von Eschen, Race Against Empire, 26.

A Memorandum Correlative of Africa, the West Indies and the Americas, a crucial Pan-Africanist document that identified the loopholes in the Atlantic Charter and called for the creation of an African Freedom Council—comprised of both African and European leaders—to oversee African colonies. 85

Among the many stipulations of the Memorandum, which included a clarion call for the unification of “Africans the world over,” Jacques Garvey also promoted the Greater Liberia bill. 86 She envisioned the Greater Liberia Bill as a significant part of the “rehabilitation of Africa.” In her view, Bilbo’s bill for voluntary West African emigration signified a larger commitment to securing black political and economic self-determination during the World War II era. 87 Though she fully understood the controversies—and certainly the contradictions—associated with promoting the Senator’s bill, Jacques Garvey attempted to convince other black leaders to rally around it. Writing to Hilbert Keys, a Garveyite residing in Delaware, Jacques Garvey explained her position on the issue: “Senator Bilbo’s bill is the happy solution to the problem of the conditions of our people in the United States of America” and “would bring about a practical effort…[to establish an] independent, Democratic Nation on the West Coast of Africa.” 88 Though she lauded the Greater Liberia bill, which would help to establish “an Independent Democratic Nation for Negroes,” Jacques Garvey offered a scathing critique of the bill’s sponsor in her letter to Keys. “I do not know if you quite understand,” she wrote to Keys, “[Bilbo] is very unpopular, every speech of his more rabid anti-Negro, even if he does not realize it.” Conceding that “it is [still] his bill,” Jacques Garvey laid out a

86 Jacques Garvey to James A. Blades, Jr., 14 February 1944, Box 1, Garvey Memorial Collection.
87 Jacques Garvey to Father Divine, 8 February 1944, Box 1, Garvey Memorial Collection.
88 Jacques Garvey to Hilbert Keys, 3 May 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.
strategic plan for promoting it, but cautioned, “connecting him with the bill...is hopeless...We must be diplomatic...in the way we present [it].”

In Jacques Garvey’s view, the Greater Liberia Bill was also the ultimate answer to A. Philip Randolph and members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). A radical labor activist, Randolph helped establish the BSCP—the first Black-led union—in 1925, in response to the exploitation of African American employees of the Pullman Company, the largest private employer of black Americans during the 1920s. In 1941, Randolph threatened to lead a March on Washington demanding an end to discrimination in defense industries and government agencies, and segregation in the armed forces. The threat of a march, which attracted massive black support, compelled FDR to form the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) and issue Executive Order 8802 in June 1941, barring discrimination in defense industries and government. While these signified a step towards greater economic and social equality for black Americans, they only “scratched the surface.” In 1944, when Jacques Garvey began promoting the Greater Liberia Bill, Randolph and the BSCP remained engaged in black protest politics, agitating for improved racial

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89 Amy Jacques Garvey to Hilbert Keys, 30 June 1944, Box 2, Marcus Garvey Memorial Collection, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee (emphasis added). A copy of this letter also appears in the Amy Jacques Garvey Collection at Temple University. See Amy Jacques Garvey to Hilbert Keys, 30 June 1944, Box 1, Amy Jacques Garvey Collection, Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia. Hilbert Keys was the corresponding secretary for the National Council of Freight Handlers, Express and Station Employees, a union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. See Hilbert Keys to Theodore Bilbo, 24 May 1944, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers. For more information on the National Council of Freight Handlers, Express and Station Employees, see Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 178.

90 Jacques Garvey to Hilbert Keys, 3 May 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.

and economic rights in and out of the workplace. Jacques Garvey saw an opportunity and advised Keys to create a pamphlet about Bilbo’s bill with plans to circulate it among Randolph and his supporters.

Jacques Garvey continued to galvanize support for the Greater Liberia Bill by advising Keys to organize black activists from his base in Delaware and encouraging him to revive *The African* magazine in order to promote the bill. “You must be diplomatic,” she cautioned, “and act as a real statesman for Africa.” She also wrote to members of the Garvey Club in New York, reiterating her favorable position on the Greater Liberia bill. Though members of the Club supported the basic principles of her *Memorandum*, they rejected Jacques Garvey’s decision to support the Senator’s bill.

Writing to Jacques Garvey in August 1944, James A. Blades, Jr., one of the leaders of the Club, challenged Jacques Garvey’s position in no uncertain terms. “As a good Christian would you accept a plan from the devil as to how you may get to heaven?” he asked rhetorically. “To put it another way,” he added, “would you appeal to the devil for a solution as to how to solve your problems?” “That is what you are asking the Garvey Club to do when you suggested the insertion of the Bilbo Bill in the Africa Freedom Charter,” Blades concluded. Recounting Bilbo’s controversial political career and his virulent racist comments, and reminding Jacques Garvey of her late husband’s commitment to black self-sufficiency, Blades contended that any connection to the Greater Liberia bill would ultimately undermine nationalists’ efforts. In Blades’ view, Jacques Garvey’s decision to

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93 Jacques Garvey to Keys, 3 May 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection. It is significant to note that Jacques Garvey wrote directly to Randolph during this period but did not directly address the Greater Liberia bill. See Amy Jacques Garvey to A. Philip Randolph, 11 February 1944, Box 3, Garvey Memorial Collection.
94 Jacques Garvey to Keys, 5 April 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection; Jacques Garvey to Keys, 3 May 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.
95 Jacques Garvey to Keys, 5 April 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.
link herself—and by extension, the “movement and [Garveyite] philosophy”—with an avowed white supremacist was entirely wrong-headed and counterproductive. 96 Ironically, Blades seemed to overlook Marcus Garvey’s own early efforts to court white supremacists to advance his political goals. 97

With her characteristic tact, Jacques Garvey sent a carefully crafted four-page response to her critic. “You seem to have gotten quite a load off your chest in the one letter,” she began, “too bad we could not meet personally.” “But it is for this and other important reasons,” she continued, “why my movements are so much hampered.” After briefly summarizing Blades’s points of contention, Jacques Garvey reminded Blades that she advocated the bill—not the bill’s sponsor. Moreover, she disputed Blades’s assertion that she was “looking to Bilbo for a solution to our problem.” “I regard his Bill,” she clarified, “as fashioned by him as a means to induce our people in America to build their future in Africa.” “Yes, Mr. Blades,” she responded to Blades’s curt question, “if the Devil, in trying to rid himself of those who stand in his way, send them to purgatory, it is for wise men to use the free transportation and other subsidies, and make purgatory a real Heaven.” 98

Jacques Garvey’s response to Blades captures the complexity of her radical politics and the extent of her pragmatic political strategizing during this era. Like Gordon, Waddell, and other women activists, Jacques Garvey was not oblivious to Bilbo’s underlying goals, or the inherent contradictions of such an alliance, but she reasoned that in the fight for universal black liberation, allies might come from the most unlikely places. Thus she expressed a willingness to “use the free transportation and other subsidies” from white supremacist collaborators, who, irrespective of their ulterior motives, could serve a far greater purpose.

96 James Blades to Jacques Garvey, 7 August 1944, Box 1, Garvey Memorial Collection.
97 I discuss Garvey’s collaborations with white supremacists in the previous chapter of this study.
98 Jacques Garvey to Blades, 14 August 1944, Box 1, Garvey Memorial Collection.
Though Jacques Garvey adamantly supported the Greater Liberia bill, which she viewed as a culmination of her late husband’s efforts, she began to feel disheartened following her tense exchange with Blades and other Garveyite leaders during this period.\textsuperscript{99} Mirroring her earlier critiques of male Garveyites in the women’s page of the \textit{Negro World}, Jacques Garvey expressed frustration about “our [black] men” in a letter to Keys.\textsuperscript{100} She declared, “They are breaking my body by being dead-weight to carry all the time. So selfish, self-seeking, so slow, so lazy, I chafe under restraint, that I cannot use some kind of superhuman effort to kick them into action.” “My men!” she lamented, “I weep to think, what an apology they are for real, strong, self-asserting men.” Reassuring Keys that he was an exception to the rule, Jacques Garvey enthusiastically encouraged him to “go forward” with the important task of promoting the Greater Liberia and thereby advancing “race freedom.”\textsuperscript{101}

Despite Jacques Garvey’s vigorous defense of Bilbo’s Greater Liberia Bill, she never actually received a response from the Senator. Her earlier letter, dated 26 March 1944, along with a follow-up letter requesting copies of his bill, went unanswered. While the Senator’s silence may have been a result of his increasing health-related issues during this period—Bilbo would undergo a medical operation in August of that year—it is also likely that he was turned off by the assertive tone of Jacques Garvey’s letter.\textsuperscript{102} Though he welcomed new black supporters, Bilbo undoubtedly preferred

\textsuperscript{99} Jacques Garvey to Keys, 11 March 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.  
\textsuperscript{100} Jacques Garvey to Keys, 3 May 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection. On Jacques Garvey’s writings and the women’s page of the \textit{Negro World}, see Taylor, \textit{Veiled Garvey}, 64-90; Adler, “‘Always Leading Our Men in Service and Sacrifice,’” 363. For a poignant example of Jacques Garvey’s public critique of black men, see “Acquit Yourselves Like Men,” \textit{Negro World}, 30 April 1927.  
\textsuperscript{101} Jacques Garvey to Keys, 3 May 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection; Jacques Garvey to Keys, 30 June 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.  
\textsuperscript{102} Bilbo certainly received Jacques Garvey’s letters. See two letters to Bilbo of the same date: Jacques Garvey to Bilbo, 26 March 1944, Box 1090, Bilbo Papers. On Bilbo’s failing health, see Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 158.
to ally himself with individuals who appeared to acquiesce with—rather than challenge—his proposals. Moreover, his earlier experiences with Mittie Maude Lena Gordon might have fueled some misgivings about forging an alliance with another assertive woman activist.¹⁰³

Whatever the actual reason for Bilbo’s silence, Jacques Garvey appeared undeterred in her stance on the bill. She acknowledged that Bilbo failed to respond to her letters, but continued to emphasize her political support, drawing a clear distinction between the bill and its sponsor. In a letter to Keys in June 1944, Jacques Garvey carefully advised, “all your comments and arguments…must confine itself with the text of the Bill…make no mention of Bilbo’s name.”¹⁰⁴ Jacques Garvey’s advice to Keys underscores how the activist hoped to capitalize on the bill without evoking its sponsor. Unlike Gordon, who had publicly lauded the Senator’s efforts to attain her goals, Jacques Garvey employed a “new [covert] strategy” that aimed to “swing [the bill] entirely out of the atmosphere of Southern prejudice and hate.” By the act of concealing, or at the very least, downplaying the connection between the bill and the white supremacist Senator, Jacques Garvey hoped to garner widespread support from blacks in the diaspora.¹⁰⁵ She reasoned that if the bill was implemented, it would serve as a “small amount in recompense for services rendered under slavery.”¹⁰⁶ Similar to notable Pan-Africanist leader Audley “Queen Mother” Moore—who would later launch a widespread reparations campaign during the 1950s and 1960s—Jacques Garvey viewed slavery as a crime against black humanity.¹⁰⁷ From her vantage point, the Greater Liberia Bill,

¹⁰³ Fitzgerald, “We Have Found a Moses,” 312-314.
¹⁰⁴ Jacques Garvey to Keys, 30 June 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.
¹⁰⁵ On performativity as concealing acts, see Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.
¹⁰⁶ Jacques Garvey to Keys, 30 June 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.
¹⁰⁷ Erik S. McDuffie, “‘I wanted a Communist philosophy, but I wanted us to have a chance to organize our people’: the Diasporic Radicalism of Queen Mother Audley Moore and the Origins of Black Power,” African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal 3 (2010): 188. Mary Frances Berry’s
which would allocate federal funds to establish a black nation-state in West Africa, represented a small yet significant step towards redressing hundreds of years of racial and economic exploitation.

By August 1944, the growing tensions surrounding Senator Bilbo’s bill began to weigh heavily on Jacques Garvey. Though she had vigorously defended her decision to include the bill in her *Memorandum*, she ultimately decided to remove it, recognizing that it would only fuel more conflict and division. She was not, however, willing to break ties with white supremacist collaborators. In subsequent years, Jacques Garvey reestablished contact with Earnest Cox, who was committed to the cause of black emigration from his base in Richmond, Virginia. Cox remained a steadfast supporter of Bilbo’s bill until the Senator’s death in August 1947.

When Jacques Garvey found out that Cox was “still interested in Africa as a Homeland for our people in the U.S.A.,” she reached out to him in October 1947. Though she understood that Cox, like Bilbo, maintained racist views, she found “his idea of race purity” appealing and sought to use Cox’s political leverage to advance West African emigration. To that end, she asked Cox to form a “Colonization Committee” comprised of “influential white Southerners” who would provide “tools, farm implements, medicines, industrial machinery etc. for black Colonists” to help them establish a life in West Africa. With such “practical help and sustained assistance,” Jacques Garvey reasoned that black emigrants would not only develop a more favorable view of white Southerners


Taylor, *Veiled Garvey*, 159-160. Jacques Garvey advised Keys to print copies of the UNIA aims and objectives instead of the bill. See Jacques Garvey to Keys, 2 August 1944, Box 2, Garvey Memorial Collection.

Taylor, *Veiled Garvey*, 159.
but would also have the tools necessary to establish an autonomous black nation state. On the surface, Jacques Garvey’s immediate requests seemed to promote black dependency on white support. However, she reasoned that such assistance would hasten the more permanent goals of black economic self-sufficiency and political self-determination. Cox was less interested in this approach. Responding to Jacques Garvey in December 1947, he politely rejected her suggestions by pointing out that “only the Federal government” could provide such support. Moreover, he advised her to contact the American Colonization Society (ACS), which had been “set up to aid such program you have in mind.”

Certainly, Cox was not oblivious to the limited resources available from the ACS. His earlier efforts with Gordon and the PME revealed the challenges of obtaining support from an organization long in decline and now reserving funds for the development of educational institutions in Liberia. However, Cox’s suggestion indicated his attempt to dismiss the issue. While he supported West African emigration, he rejected Jacques Garvey’s suggestion that private citizens—in this case, wealthy white southerners—should bear the brunt of the financial responsibility to ensure its ultimate success. Unwilling to give up easily, Jacques Garvey sent an immediate response to Cox in January 1948. “I fully realize that…only a government could successfully carry out such a large scale emigration…with continued support and servicing,” she argued. “I had only in mind a private White Committee,” she continued, “to carry on in the interim, until life could be given to a government project.” Since Cox and his “wealthy friends” were uneasy about forming a committee to help fund black emigration efforts, Jacques Garvey suggested they

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[112] Jacques Garvey to Cox, 31 October 1947, Box 1, Garvey Memorial Collection.
[113] Cox to Jacques Garvey, 18 December 1947, Box 1, Garvey Memorial Collection.
maintain a sense of urgency in lobbying the Greater Liberia Bill. “Both materially and spiritually (meaning racially and socially),” she wrote to Cox, “black and white will benefit.”

Conclusion

Despite Amy Jacques Garvey’s determination to secure the passage of the Greater Liberia Bill, her efforts ultimately came up short. By the mid-1940s, the momentum surrounding the bill had run its course. However, Jacques Garvey’s political activities, along with those of rank-and-file women in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), shed light on the crucial role women played in shaping Pan-Africanist movements and discourses during the 1940s. Amidst the social and political upheavals of the era, black nationalist women were at the forefront of black liberation movements in the United States and across the African diaspora. These women activists sought to (re)unite people of African descent, “redeem” Africa from European colonization, and secure the complete freedom of black men and women everywhere. Through the pages of the diasporic newspaper, the New Negro World, women in the UNIA openly challenged global white supremacy and articulated an unwavering commitment to Pan-Africanism. While many rank-and-file Garveyite women used their writings and speeches to advance a Pan-Africanist agenda, Jacques Garvey used her global networks, visibility, and political savvy to popularize the Greater Liberia Bill. She skillfully harnessed her political leverage to promote the bill, arguing that its passage would significantly improve the lives of Africans on the continent as well as those in the diaspora.

Black nationalist women's political activities and ideas, however, were often contradictory. Though deeply committed to anticolonial politics, UNIA women also embraced imperialist and

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115 Jacques Garvey to Cox, 5 January 1948, Box 1, Garvey Memorial (underlining in the original text).
116 It is significant to note that Garveyite activist Benjamin Gibbons and members of the New York-based Garvey Club turned to another white senator—North Dakota’s William Langer—for his help to pass the bill during the post-World War II era. See Hedlin, “Earnest Cox and Colonization,” 171-213.
civilizationist views, and sometimes endorsed a repressive and gendered vision of African redemption. Further revealing the complexities and richness of women’s ideas and activism during this period, many black nationalist women promoted a political vision that extended beyond the discourse of Pan-Africanism. These women constructed a commitment to black nationalism and black internationalism, agitating for universal emancipation unlimited by “national, imperial, continental, or oceanic boundaries—or even by racial ones.” In the next chapter, I turn to a discussion of women’s engagement in political and social movements for Afro-Asian solidarity, emphasizing the writings and political work of activists Maymie De Mera, Pearl Sherrod, and Mittie Maude Lena Gordon.

CHAPTER SIX


In 1937, Pearl Sherrod, a black nationalist from Detroit, stood before a crowd of women activists at the conference of the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association (PPWA) in Vancouver, Canada, and demanded the recognition of the rights of people of color across the globe. “[I] appeal to the white race all over this world to give the dark races their constitutional rights,” Sherrod passionately argued, “[s]o that all races may live and develop without pulling others down.” “The dark nation has the same claim to be called men as the Europeans themselves,” she continued. Reminding her listeners that “all men were born equal,” Sherrod insisted that it is “unreasonable that one should have any rights to predominate over the other.” Sherrod’s comments, and her presence at the PPWA conference in Vancouver, offer a glimpse into how nationalist women activists engaged in black internationalism during the Great Depression and World War II.²

An insurgent political culture that emerged in response to slavery, colonialism, and white imperialism, black internationalism centers on visions of freedom and freedom movements among Afro-descended people worldwide and captures their efforts to forge transnational collaborations

and solidarities with other people of color. While recent studies have begun to address the vital role women and gender play within black internationalist discourse(s), much work remains to be done. This chapter highlights the writings, speeches, activism, and overseas travel of a diverse group of black nationalist women, and captures the critical ways women articulated black internationalism during the twentieth century. More specifically, it demonstrates the crucial role nationalist women activists played in promoting Afro-Asian solidarity. In so doing, this chapter sheds new light on the global visions of black nationalists whose political engagement often extended beyond Pan-Africanist concerns.

Viewing Japan as a model and potential military ally, black nationalist women were among the most vocal proponents for Afro-Asian solidarity during the 1930s and 1940s. These women used their writings and speeches to sway black public opinion and actively pursued contact and collaborations with Japanese activists and diplomats to challenge the global system of white

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3 See West, et. al., From Toussaint to Tupac.
supremacy and impact global developments of the period. Departing from the predominantly male-centric and top-down focus of much of the scholarship on the Black International, this chapter highlights the crucial role “nonstate [female] actors” played in pro-Japanese protest movements at the grassroots level, and reveals the creative means by which these women articulated black internationalism during a global economic crisis and within a climate of government repression and censorship. Significantly, this chapter also highlights how some women activists engaged in what I


call grassroots internationalism; challenging global racism, imperialism, colonialism and global white supremacy within communities at the local level. I use the term to capture the myriad ways members of the working-poor attempted to engage in global politics without ever physically crossing geographic borders.  

**Maymie De Mena and Visions of Afro-Asian Solidarity during the 1930s**

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 sparked a rise in pro-Japanese sentiments among black men and women across the United States. The war, which erupted in February 1904 over tensions between Russia and Japan concerning territorial claims in Manchuria and Korea, officially came to an end with the Treaty of Portsmouth on 5 September 1905. For many black Americans including influential civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois and the black nationalist Marcus Garvey, Japan’s successful defeat of the Russian military was no small accomplishment. It served as a powerful “example of people who demonstrated the fallacy of white assertions that people of color were innately incompetent or inferior.” In the aftermath of World War I, Japan emerged as a model of

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racial progress. The 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria, though a source of contention, reinforced these pro-Japanese sentiments among many members of the African American community.\(^{11}\)

Significantly, nationalist women activists played a key role in spreading these ideas in black communities. Madame Maymie De Mena, the UNIA’s International Organizer, was one such individual. The Garveyite activist who was involved in the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) since the mid-1920s actively pursued political alliances with Japanese activists during the early 1930s.\(^{12}\) In 1931, for example, De Mena invited a number of Asian speakers to appear at UNIA public events in various parts of the urban North.\(^{13}\) One of these individuals was a man who called himself Ashima Takis. Born in the Philippines in 1900, Takis, whose real name was Policarpio Manansala, arrived in Chicago sometime during the early 1930s. Posing as Japanese, Takis had been speaking to local black residents at UNIA meetings in the city and across the U.S. Midwest.\(^{14}\) While Takis certainly adopted the Japanese persona in an effort to secure approval among Japanese sympathizers in the African American community, historian Marc S. Gallicchio maintains that Takis also “[had] a penchant for misrepresenting himself to everyone he met.”\(^{15}\)

It is unclear whether or not De Mena was knowledgeable about Takis’ actual ethnic identity. Takis later claimed that she asked him to pose as Japanese, but given his tendency to misrepresent information, this claim was probably another fabricated story.\(^{16}\) Though the details are murky, De Mena played a key role in not only bringing Takis to Chicago but also skillfully orchestrating his

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 72.
\(^{12}\) I offer a brief biographical sketch of Maymie De Mena in Chapter One of this study.
\(^{13}\) Hill, FBi’s RacoN, 517, 523-4.
\(^{16}\) Hill, FBi’s RacoN, 523.
presentations. Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), along with multiple newspaper articles of the *Negro World*, reveal that De Mena was largely responsible for Takis’ involvement in multiple UNIA divisions. Intent on convincing black audiences that the UNIA “was sponsored and encouraged by the Japanese government,” De Mena enlisted Takis’ speaking services in the cities of Chicago, Cincinnati, and Columbus.\(^\text{17}\) It was during one of these speaking services in Chicago that nationalist leader Mittie Maude Lena Gordon encountered Takis—months before she established the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME).\(^\text{18}\)

Significantly, even though De Mena was responsible for introducing Takis to Garveyites in the first place, she quickly broke ties with him when negative rumors began to surface about his behavior. Garveyites in one Detroit chapter accused Takis of stealing a few items—a fountain pen and four bottles of Indian herb medicine—after one of his talks. “When you see him,” one activist sarcastically suggested, “give him such a WARM WELCOME that he’ll depart from your midst.”\(^\text{19}\) Shortly thereafter, De Mena openly denounced Takis and advised UNIA chapters to prevent him from speaking at all local events.\(^\text{20}\) While her relationship with Takis unraveled as quickly as it began, De Mena’s collaboration with Takis underscores her interest in popularizing Afro-Asian solidarity and her brief attempt to use the UNIA as a platform from which to promote these ideas during the 1930s.

Despite her disagreement with Takis, De Mena maintained a deep interest in Japan, first using the pages of the *Negro World* to promote Afro-Asian solidarity and later, by using her own newspaper, the *Ethiopian World*, to keep readers abreast of global developments concerning Japan. In

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\(^{18}\) I discuss Gordon’s early collaboration with Takis in Chapter Two.


the aftermath of Marcus Garvey’s deportation, De Mena took on expanded leadership roles within the UNIA. From 1929 to 1930, she was the American field organizer—charged with the important task of overseeing UNIA divisions in the United States.21 Sometime in 1930, De Mena assumed directorship of the UNIA’s periodical, the Negro World, providing her with a crucial opportunity to influence the types of articles that would appear in the newspaper during this period.22 Importantly, writers in the Negro World newspaper actively discussed developments taking place in Japan. A 1931 article entitled “Japs Succeed; Latins Failed” emphasized the imperialist successes of the Japanese and criticized the failed efforts of Spanish and Italian leaders. “Where Italians and Spaniards have failed in the colonization of Brazilian forest regions,” the article notes, “the Japanese have made brilliant success…”23 After explaining how the Japanese planned to build new towns in Brazil, the writer concluded the article by letting readers know that the settlements “have been opened by the Japanese for residence to peoples of any and all nationalities.”24

This article joined many other articles in the Negro World that lauded Japan’s imperialist ventures. Significantly, these articles underscore the complexities of black internationalists’ visions of freedom. Many black internationalists during this period envisioned Japan as the “Champion of the Darker Races”—an “important symbol that destroyed the myth of white superiority”—and embraced the belief that Japan was a political ally in the struggle against racial oppression.25 Yet,

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21 A number of Negro World articles describe De Mena’s widespread travels across the United States and the crucial role she played in organizing (and reviving) UNIA divisions. See, for example, “Prosperity Division” of Phila. Struggled Hard, But Successfully,” Negro World, 2 January 1932; “Ethiopian Club,” Negro World, 2 January 1932; “Excelsior Div.,” Negro World, 20 February 1932.
24 Ibid. (emphasis added).
these activists had to also contend with Japan’s military aggression towards other people of color including the Chinese, another ethnic group that black internationalists often identified as potential role models and political allies.\(^{26}\) Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in September 1931, perhaps more than any other political development during this era, brought these issues to the fore.

While De Mena and other nationalist activists grappled with these concerns, a lively discussion ensued on the pages of the *Negro World*. In November 1931, an editorial entitled “Japanese Holdup of Manchuria” appeared on the front page of the newspaper. “It is regrettable that the Japanese militarists have defied their saner civil officers [by invading Manchuria],” the writer indicated. “If Japan’s aim was to keep the white powers out of Manchuria,” the author continued, “she has made an unwise move in trying to swallow up China, which will certainly prove too big in the end.”\(^{27}\) While the writer of the article clearly maintained some misgivings about Japan’s invasion of Manchuria, this individual also attempted to justify Japan’s actions. Importantly, the writer refrained from outwardly denouncing Japan’s military actions and criticized Japanese officials simply for being too ambitious.

In a subsequent article, which appeared in the *Negro World* newspaper a week later, the writer was far more critical. “Friends of Japan have no cause to be jubilant over the antics of Japanese militarists in Manchuria,” the writer stated unequivocally. Without mincing words, the writer argued that although Japan had successfully “defied and discredited the League of Nations and made the United States look like ‘two cents,’” the nation’s “imperialistic aggression in China” was no less “odious, nor excusable.” While acknowledging that “white European and American imperialists”

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\(^{26}\) This point of view is also evident in the *Negro World*. See, for example, “Woosung the Chinese Thermopylae,” *Negro World*, 20 February 1932.

employed the same tactics, the anonymous writer insisted that there was no justification for Japan’s “mistreatment of China.”

If readers of the Negro World presumed that the newspaper had somehow shifted positions on Japan, they might have been surprised by a subsequent article, entitled “Garveyism’s World Opportunities.” Published only a few months after Japan’s invasion of Manchuria, the article attempted to set the record straight on Japan. “No true Garveyite who is instinctively anti-imperialist will show sympathy to the imperialist activities of Japan in China,” the article began. “However,” the author continued, “Japan’s high-handed action in Manchuria has opened new opportunities for the triumphal march of Garveyism…” While seemingly denouncing Japan’s military aggression towards other people of color, the author proceeded to show how Japan’s rise would still benefit people of African descent. Referencing Japan’s departure from the League of Nations, the international peacekeeping organization established at the end of World War I, the writer pointed out that Japan’s military successes reveal the “impotency of any peace organization or peace treaties.” Arguing that “world peace will always be threatened as long as imperialists will hold on to their ill-gotten territories in China, India, Near East and Africa,” the author concluded that “[e]very nation that is sufficiently interested in its own sovereignty will henceforth have to depend on their own well-organized defense.”

With these words, the writer advised readers to worry less about Japan’s imperialist ventures and focus more on advancing the cause of universal black liberation. “All this uncertainty of peace,” they carefully explained, “ought to unite all Garveyites to better plan an attack on the problem of

28 “Siding with the Strong?,” Negro World, 28 November 1931.
30 “Garveyism’s World Opportunities,” Negro World, 5 December 1931.
redeeming Africa.” The *Negro World* writer justified Japan’s invasion of Manchuria by insisting that while the actions of Japanese officials had negative consequences on China, they fell within the general patterns of imperial behavior. In addition, the writer implied that Japan still served as a model and potential ally for black nationalist activists: “The only way we can make inroads on the common enemy is when he is hard pressed.” To that end, the writer concluded the article with a poignant question for readers to ponder—“Will the Garveyites rally to the standard of their leader without delay to prepare for the day of redemption of Africa that is soon approaching?”

The newspaper articles capture the internationalist vision of black nationalist activists who admired Japan for their military prowess and envisioned the struggle against white imperialism as a global one. Their visions were certainly fraught with contradictions. While these activists believed that people of color needed to form a united front against white racism and imperialism, they were unwilling to fully denounce Japan’s aggression towards the Chinese. Partly as a result of the belief that Japan’s military skills would prove instrumental for combating global white supremacy, black internationalists were often willing to look the other way. This does not suggest that activists did not care about China. However, their vision of Japan as the “Champion of the Darker Races” shaped their political worldview and strengthened their belief in the inevitable defeat of global white supremacy with Japan’s aid.

While the names of the authors are not included in the aforementioned *Negro World* articles, Maymie De Mena was certainly one of authors who propagated the idea of Afro-Asian unity. De Mena might have strategically decided not to include her name on these specific articles for fear that

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31 Ibid.
34 See Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese*. 

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they might attract unwanted attention from the state. Throughout the twentieth century, the federal government often encroached on the Black public sphere—specifically targeting the Black press in an attempt to prevent black Americans from openly challenging racism to white (and black) audiences.\(^3\) As an experienced journalist, De Mena was not oblivious of this fact.

Irrespective of the authors’ actual identities, the overwhelming presence of these pro-Japanese articles in the *Negro World* during this period is significant. In her capacity as owner and managing editor, De Mena played a central role in reviewing all articles and may have had the final say regarding which articles would (or would not) be included in the paper. There is no evidence to suggest otherwise. Some Garveyites were so convinced that De Mena was conducting the affairs of the *Negro World* solely on her own accord that in one instance, UNIA leaders advised De Mena to produce letters to prove that Garvey “approves of her publishing the *Negro World*…”\(^3\)

Ironically, that request came around the same time De Mena began to gradually drift away from the Garvey movement. Sometime around 1933, De Mena ventured into Father Divine’s Peace Mission. The religious organization, which promoted race neutrality, celibacy, and communal living, drew a significant following among African Americans and people of other races during the early 1930s.\(^3\) After Garvey’s deportation, a number of Garveyites turned to Father Divine despite the religious leader’s emphasis on a “race-less” society—a clear departure from Marcus Garvey’s “race-first” ideology. While we may never know the full circumstances surrounding De Mena’s decision to join Father Divine’s movement, UNIA factionalism played some role.


\(^3\)Letter to Charles James, 10 May 1933, UNIA Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio, Reel 1.

In the years that followed, De Mena became an active member of the Peace Mission and also played a seminal role in the movement by introducing the Peace Mission’s newspaper, *World Echo*. Importantly, De Mena made the decision to use the former presses of the *Negro World* to circulate *World Echo* during the early 1930s. On the pages of the *World Echo*, De Mena promoted Father Divine’s theology and reprinted the religious leader’s sermons in multiple languages. However, Garvey’s political philosophy continued to influence De Mena’s ideas. For example, De Mena continued to promote West African emigration in the *World Echo* newspaper.\(^38\)

Despite De Mena’s attempt to balance her commitment to Father Divine’s religious principles while upholding some of Garvey’s teachings, she decided to leave the Peace Mission, and ultimately returned to the UNIA not long after. In May 1934, only four months after she introduced the Peace Mission’s newspaper, *World Echo*, De Mena introduced her own newspaper entitled *Ethiopian World*.\(^39\) While the full details concerning the newspaper’s readership and circulation is unclear, the *Ethiopian World* mostly likely appealed to many of the same black men and women who read the *Negro World*—especially considering De Mena’s visibility as a Garveyite leader. Referring to her readers as “children of Ethiopia”—as a gesture of Pan-African solidarity and in support of contemporary Ethiopia—De Mena laid out the goals of the newspaper in a lengthy editorial.\(^40\) Describing the newspaper as “a champion of [the] rights [of the scattered children of Ethiopia], a true friend, and counselor,” De Mena promised to provide only “clean, constructive, fearless and

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38 *Watts, God, Harlem, USA*, 113-114.
progressive journalism that will help the race to find its true and noble place among the other great races of our common human family.” De Mena urged “all serious-minded, forward-looking, and progressive men and women of the race” to discard all “personal animosities, jealousies, and squabbles” for the freedom of the race.41

An examination of the articles in De Mena’s Ethiopian World reveals the extent to which De Mena combined her commitment to black nationalist and internationalist politics. Alongside a range of editorials with Pan-Africanist themes—including a lengthy article entitled “African Culture” by Paul Robeson—the newspaper’s first issue also included a wealth of articles on global developments and a designated section on “Foreign Affairs.” An article entitled “3 Airplane Carriers Planned by Japan,” for example, described, in detail, plans for an expansion in Japan’s military.42 Another article, included in the inaugural issue of the Ethiopian World, described Japanese officials’ precautionary steps towards preventing acts of terrorism.43 In yet another article in the paper’s inaugural issue, writers of the Ethiopian World, alerted readers to the British government’s fears concerning Japan’s apparent rise towards superpower.44

While these specific articles on Japan failed to include any personal commentary, their inclusion in De Mena’s newspaper could not have been mere coincidence. Perhaps the articles served as a message to black readers that Japan was a nation on the rise—one that might serve as a model of racial progress. The inclusion of a brief Ethiopian World newspaper article addressing how Japanese army officials might be able to help Ethiopians build an effective air force—in response to Ethiopia’s brewing crisis with Italy—suggests that De Mena, and perhaps other editors, continued to

42“3 Airplane Carriers Planned by Japan,” Ethiopian World, 26 May 1934.
43“Scandal Upsets Japan’s Political Activities,” Ethiopian World, 26 May 1934.
44“Britain to Oppose Japan’s Ambition to Fleet Equality,” Ethiopian World, 26 May 1934.
envison the Japanese as potential allies in the struggle for black liberation. While De Mena used the pages of the *Ethiopian World* to bring attention to Japan’s rising empire, other nationalist women promoted Afro-Asian solidarity through other venues.

**Pearl Sherrod and the Development of Our Own in Detroit**

During the 1930s, Pearl Sherrod emerged in Detroit as one of the leading black nationalist women involved in pro-Japanese political movements. Born in the state of Alabama around 1896, Sherrod worked as a laundress in her home during the early years of the Depression. A former member of the Nation of Islam (NOI), Sherrod became actively involved in a pro-Japanese organization called the Development of Our Own (TDOO). Established in 1933 by George Grimes, a local black worker, TDOO served as a political site for black activists in Detroit to ally with other activists of color—“yellow, brown, and black against all white people.” The TDOO appealed to mostly working-class blacks in the city, and attracted an estimated following of ten thousand members.

Pearl Sherrod was one of these individuals. Like a number of Islamic nationalists during this period, Sherrod embraced the political view that “the African-American economic and political struggle against Western imperialism [was connected] with that of the dark races in Asia.” Sometime in 1934, Sherrod joined TDOO in Detroit and crossed paths with Satokata Takahashi, a

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47 Quoted in Allen, “When Japan was Champion of the ‘Darker Races,’” 32.
Japanese activist, during one of his speaking tours. Born Naka Nakane in Japan in 1875, Takahashi relocated to Victoria, British Columbia sometime around 1900 where he resided until 1921, when he and his family relocated to the Tacoma, Washington. During the early 1930s, Takahashi began to frequent UNIA meetings in the city of Chicago. Claiming to be affiliated with the Japanese embassy, Takahashi advocated Afro-Asian solidarity and at some point, enlisted the aid of Ashima Takis to recruit African American supporters in the urban North. By 1934, Takahashi obtained a significant following in the U.S. Midwest with Takis’ assistance.

However, Takis quickly found himself in a conflict with Takahashi concerning how to effectively organize black residents. Though the full details are murky, Takis attempted to form his own organization called the Original Independent Benevolent Afro-Pacific Movement of the World. While Takis attempted to launch his own movement from St. Louis, Missouri, Takahashi took over the leadership of the TDOO in Detroit. In February 1934, he married Pearl Sherrod—two months before he was deported to Japan after his political activities began to draw the ire of state and federal authorities. As historian Ernest Allen, Jr. has argued, the marriage between Takahashi and Sherrod was especially crucial for sustaining the political organization. The union, Allen asserts, “provided the Development of Our Own with a sense of organizational continuity as well as an event that could be used to mask news [of Takahashi’s deportation].”

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50 Allen, “When Japan was Champion of the ‘Darker Races,’” 31.
51 FBI files on Pacific Movement of the Eastern World [65-40879-324].
52 Allen, “When Japan was Champion of the ‘Darker Races,’” 31.
53 FBI files on Pacific Movement of the Eastern World [65-40879-324].
54 See Allen, “Waiting for Tojo.”
55 It is significant to note that while Takahashi was born in Japan, he was a naturalized citizen of Canada.
56 Allen, “When Japan was Champion of the ‘Darker Races,’” 34.

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husband’s deportation, Pearl Sherrod became de facto leader of TDOO, in some ways mirroring the experiences of Amy Jacques Garvey who assumed leadership in the UNIA during her husband’s incarceration.\footnote{Paisley, \textit{Glamour in the Pacific}, 207. On Amy Jacques Garvey, see Ula Taylor, \textit{The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).}

One of the first steps Sherrod took as the new leader of TDOO was to launch a letter-writing campaign in an effort to expand her coalition of supporters. Sherrod was deeply committed to promoting Afro-Asian solidarity, and quickly reached out to like-minded activists across the United States. For instance, Sherrod identified Mittie Maude Lena Gordon—the founder of the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) who had collaborated with Ashima Takis in 1932—as a potential ally.\footnote{I discuss Gordon’s political activism in Chicago in Chapter Two of this study.}

In June 1934, she sent a detailed letter to Gordon asking to arrange a meeting in Chicago: “I beg to say if a date can be made for me to meet you I shall be glad to talk to you.”\footnote{FBI records indicate that the original letter was 3 pages long. See Mrs. P.T. Takahashi to Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, 11 June 1934 (Exhibit 167) in FBI Files on the Development of Our Own [65-562-109].}

“This movement is too serious to be played with,” Sherrod insisted. Referring to federal authorities, Sherrod noted with a sense of assurance, “They can not make any more connections with Japan than you or [any] one else here. Accept my statement as it is true.” Attempting to preemptively ease any doubts Gordon might have about her sincerity, Sherrod added, “I shall also bring letters showing you my authority direct from Japan and if no one else can do that I am asking you not to accept them for your people[’s] sake.”\footnote{Ibid (emphasis added).}

Whether or not Gordon responded to Sherrod’s letter remains a mystery. Given the widespread pro-emigration campaign in which Gordon was engaged during this period, it is likely that she never followed through with Sherrod’s request. The letter, however, offers a glimpse into
how Sherrod attempted to keep the pro-Japanese movement afloat even in the face of mounting government suppression. Sherrod was clearly knowledgeable about Gordon’s pro-Japanese views, and reached out to the activist in hopes of expanding TDOO’s base of support. Importantly, Sherrod facilitated a grassroots social movement that sought to deepen political alliances between black and Asian activists across the country.

This was no small matter. Sherrod’s decision to lead the movement in her husband’s absence was a dangerously bold move, particularly in a climate of intensive political repression. She ran the risk of being discovered—especially considering the fact that authorities seized her husband and other TDOO leaders in her apartment. Yet, in many ways, Sherrod’s political career was characterized by her willingness to take risks when opportunities arose. In June 1934, Sherrod wrote a passionate editorial in the Detroit Tribune newspaper in which she audaciously declared that African Americans needed to join forces with the Japanese: “[O]ur minds have been diseased, and we have tried ‘Mr. White Man’s’ medicine and failed; tried ‘Mr. Black Man’s’ medicine and failed. Now we must try ‘Mr. Brown Man’s medicine.’ “No doubt he will cure us of the mental disease which was caused from a lack of organization,” Sherrod continued, “then we can develop ourselves.”

Sherrod’s comments offer a glimpse into the activist’s pragmatic approach to combating global white supremacy and achieving black political self-determination. Identifying the apparent shortcomings of “Mr. White Man’s medicine” and “Mr. Black Man’s medicine,” perhaps alluding to the efforts of mainstream civil rights activists and black separatists, Sherrod urged readers to try a new antidote—“Mr. Brown Man’s medicine” or political collaborations with the Japanese. Through

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62 On the pragmatic political approach of black activists during this period, see Douglass Flamming, Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
a weekly column of the *Detroit Tribune*, Sherrod publicly promoted Afro-Asian solidarity and attempted to convince readers that her organization was a viable alternate site for political engagement as well as a vehicle through which people of African descent and other people of color could achieve universal liberation. Significantly, Sherrod’s writings in the *Detroit Tribune* exemplify the activist’s engagement in grassroots internationalism. With little access to financial resources, Sherrod strategically used her newspaper columns to promote Afro-Asian solidarity and engage black internationalist discourse.

Interestingly, the activist managed to facilitate these things without much opposition from federal officials. A review of the FBI files on the Development of Our Own (TDOO) reveals that federal authorities were far more interested in the Japanese activist—“Major Takahashi”—and his affiliation with the Black Dragon Society than they were in his “Negro wife.” Similar to nationalist activist Celia Jane Allen, who was instrumental in organizing thousands of black sharecroppers in the U.S. South, Sherrod was largely invisible to federal authorities. Sherrod’s invisibility bolstered her political engagement in myriad ways. Sherrod played a seminal role in popularizing the movement in Detroit and spreading her pro-Japanese ideas across the country without much restriction. Despite internal challenges in the organization—specifically, multiple efforts to usurp her leadership—Sherrod appeared to be undeterred. As she recruited new members for the organization, Sherrod also made time for leisure and even flaunted the wealth that was intended for her husband. Using the funds that members of TDOO donated to assist Satokata Takahashi with

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63 This observation is based on the FBI files that have been released to the public. See FBI Files on the Development of Our Own [65-562-109].
64 I discuss Celia Jane Allen’s political activism in the U.S. South in Chapter Three.
65 Allen, “When Japan was Champion of the ‘Darker Races,’” 35.
living expenses and legal fees, Sherrod put on a flamboyant display of material success.\textsuperscript{66} On the eve of 30 October 1936, she held an extravagant dinner party in Detroit, featuring a list of distinguished guests and a “delightful five-course dinner.”\textsuperscript{67} Strategically, Sherrod hosted the elaborate dinner at a local dancehall, where TDOO often held meetings, rather than at her more modest apartment on Baltimore East Avenue.\textsuperscript{68}

While Sherrod certainly benefitted from her political invisibility, she often desired to abandon the “covert style” of activism that other nationalist women like Celia Jane Allen employed.\textsuperscript{69} No doubt the elaborate dinner party brought far more attention to Sherrod’s social life than it did to her radical political activities. However, the elaborate dinner party may also be seen as a visible political move in other ways. It certainly helped to reinforce the public image the activist wanted to maintain. In an earlier public announcement of Sherrod’s marriage to Takahashi, the \textit{Detroit Tribune} described Sherrod as “a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute” and a “member of a prominent colored family.”\textsuperscript{70} While much of Sherrod’s early life is shrouded in mystery, her own statements to census-takers, on two separate occasions, reveal that she had received a fourth grade education and had not attended college.\textsuperscript{71} These inconsistencies suggest that Sherrod attempted to hide the truth concerning her limited formal education and modest socioeconomic background. She may have concealed these specific details in an effort to bolster her political leverage. Perhaps Sherrod reasoned that her façade would provide her with greater access to individuals with means.

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67}“Dinner Party,” \textit{Chicago Defender}, 31 October 1936.
\textsuperscript{68}FBI Files on the Development of Our Own [65-562-109].
\textsuperscript{70}“Local Woman Weds Japanese Officer,” \textit{Detroit Tribune-Independent}, 21 April 1934.
Or perhaps Sherrod’s ostentatious behavior was another tool to draw more followers into the movement—a practice employed by black religious leaders like Charles “Daddy” Grace and Father Divine.  

Despite the internal criticism from some TDOO members who despised her excessive lifestyle, Sherrod’s actions did not provide a deterrent to her political activities. If anything, they seemed to amplify her political visibility. Sherrod’s unexpected arrival at the 1937 conference of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA), an international women's organization that promoted “cross-cultural exchange and interracial harmony,” in Vancouver, Canada is a case in point. With an entourage of black women supporters “in a chauffeur driven car and wearing expensive clothes,” Sherrod made a grand entrance at the conference, which quickly drew the attention of conference attendees. Elsie Andrews, the conference’s international secretary, later recounted the course of events in the PPWA’s conference dairy. Though she was not originally scheduled to present at the conference, Sherrod earned an opportunity to speak before a crowd of conference attendees who were impressed by her expressive show of wealth.

However, Sherrod’s arrival at the PPWA conference was far more than another flamboyant display. She and her supporters drove to Vancouver from Detroit because they wanted to make sure conference attendees did not lose sight of “the position of the coloured folk.” Representing herself as a leader of an organization with a quarter of a million members—in a clear effort to conceal the

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75 Ibid., 207.
76 Quoted in Ibid.
true nature of TDOO and exaggerate the organization’s reach and influence—Sherrod asked PPWA women to “appeal to the white race all over this world to give the dark races their constitutional rights.”77 “I wish to utilize a few moments on this occasion to mention this issue growing out of race prejudice and injustice,” she carefully explained.”Now I am appealing to you international women,” she continued, “to let us join hand and heart together and find the cause of the broken peace which is injustice and discrimination[,] and let us kill the germ of it.”78

The appearance of Sherrod’s speech in the Vancouver News Herald underscores the magnitude of her words and the significance of her presence at the PPWA conference. While she made no specific reference to TDOO or her commitment to Afro-Asian solidarity, Sherrod used her visit to the PPWA conference as a platform from which to demand universal emancipation for people of African descent and other non-whites globally. Her decision to use the 1937 PPWA conference as a site to promote these ideas underscores the activist’s internationalist vision and interest in collaborating with Asian activists in order to combat white imperialism. Established in Honolulu in 1930, the PPWA was organized for the purpose of bringing together women activists from the “Pacific Rim settler colonial nations with those from Japan and China towards promoting social reform in the region.”79 The 1937 PPWA conference, held from July 12 to 24, drew 125 official female representatives from eight countries in the Pan-Pacific region: Australia, Canada, China, Hawai‘i, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the United States.80 PPWA President Tsune Gauntlett, the leading Japanese delegate who presided over conference proceedings, called for a

78Ibid.
“new social order in which and by which peace may prevail between the countries bordering the Pacific.”\textsuperscript{81}

Despite their emphasis on world peace and interracial harmony, PPWA leaders largely overlooked the concerns of people of African descent. None of the thirty official U.S. representatives at the 1937 conference were African American, and previous conferences did not address African American concerns.\textsuperscript{82} Sherrod’s unexpected arrival, then, spoke volumes. Not only did she ensure that African American women had a place in this international conference but she quickly took advantage of the opportunity to speak on behalf of black Southerners facing racial violence and terror under Jim Crow. Reminiscent of journalist activist Ida B. Wells, who traveled across the U.S. and in Great Britain to condemn lynching, Sherrod and her supporters openly denounced lynching at the PPWA conference and displayed newspaper clippings as evidence of its widespread occurrence in the U.S. South.\textsuperscript{83}

Sherrod’s memorable presentation at the PPWA conference in Vancouver marked one of the activist’s few documented public appearances.\textsuperscript{84} She resurfaced again in 1938, one year after her visit to Vancouver, when she and a group of TDOO supporters showed up in Chicago attempting to meet with the Japanese Consul for the purpose of “making a contribution to the Japanese war effort.” Despite a very public marital dispute with her husband in 1938, which resulted in her removal from leadership in the organization, Sherrod was determined to promote Afro-Asian solidarity and remained steadfast in her belief that Japan’s military triumph and political ascendancy was a viable step towards realizing black liberation. To that end, she and a group of supporters made

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{82} Paisley, “From Nation of Islam,” 23.
\textsuperscript{84} Paisley, “From Nation of Islam to Goodwill Tourist,” 23.
another visit to the office of the Japanese Consul in 1939—this time with a financial contribution of an estimated three hundred dollars for the Japanese government.85

**Mittie Maude Lena Gordon and Afro-Asian Solidarity during the 1940s**

The outbreak of World War II in Europe marked a crucial turning point in black nationalist women’s engagement in Afro-Asian solidarity. As one black journalist of the period explained, “this Second World War has served in a small way to give these nationalist radicals a new lease on life.”86 Like many other black activists during World War II—an era which historian Penny Von Eschen has described as a “diaspora moment”—nationalists viewed the War as a pivotal opportunity for black people to confront global white supremacy and secure their economic and political freedom.87 The significance of a political alliance with Japan appeared all the more pressing as many feared that the war would bolster white imperialist aspirations. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the other Japanese military ‘victories’ that followed, signaled to many black nationalists that an alliance with Japan was absolutely necessary since Japan appeared to have the upper hand.88

Maintaining a deep sense of urgency, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon became far more aggressive in her pronouncements of Afro-Asian solidarity. While she never lost sight of her pro-emigration campaign, she also attempted to forge alliances with Japanese diplomats and military officials—much like Pearl Sherrod. With limited financial resources, Gordon engaged in grassroots

85 Hill, *FBI’s Racon*, 515.
88 It is significant to note that there were varied responded to Pearl Harbor in black internationalist circles. See Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China*, Chapter 4.
internationalism by initiating a letter-writing campaign directed to the Japanese. Drawing a link between white imperialists in Russia and the United States, Gordon insisted that the “destruction of the white man in Asia is the destruction of the white man in the United States.”^89  Writing to Kenji Nakauchi, then Japanese Consul General in Chicago, at the dawn of World War II, Gordon solicited the assistance of the Japanese government. “We are seeking the assistance and cooperation of your people in this our darkest hour,” she wrote. “We have suffered untold misery in America over three hundred years and now our condition is far worse than ever,” she continued. Gordon then requested a “private interview” and assured Nakauchi that she would be willing to “meet on [his] own terms.”^90 While it does not appear that Gordon’s letter resulted in any serious consideration from Nakauchi, the letter captures the activist’s internationalist vision and sustained interest in Afro-Asian solidarity.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, Gordon amplified her efforts to forge an alliance with the Japanese from her base in Chicago. In a letter to Sadao Araki, a Japanese military general, Gordon requested a truce between the members of her organization, the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) and “the dark skin people of the East[ern] world.” Making it clear to Araki that she and her supporters were “not [enemies] to the Japanese,” Gordon called for peace and “confraternity” between the two groups. “This war is between the white man and the Japanese and we are not included,” Gordon added. ^91  Robert O. Jordan, a West Indian activist in Harlem, expressed similar sentiments, arguing that “the Japs had [never] ill-treated the darker races but on the contrary had

^90 Gordon to Kenji Nakauchi, 22 May 1934, Exhibit 164a in Report by Special Agents Francis A. Regan, Aubrey Elliott, Jr., and Richard W. Axtell, FBI Investigative File no. 100-124410.
been kind to them.”  

From his base in Cleveland, Ohio, James R. Stewart, Marcus Garvey’s successor in the UNIA, offered a scathing critique of U.S. policies, pointing out the ironies of a war for freedom abroad when African Americans lacked full citizenship rights at home. “These same [black soldiers] dressed in the uniforms of their nation,” Stewart argued, “were shot down in Louisiana…not by Japanese, not by Germans, but by the very people for whom they were to chance their lives…”

To be sure, Stewart did not fully embrace pro-Japanese sentiments. But, like many other black activists during this period, Stewart maintained serious misgivings about supporting U.S. interests in a war against Japan and other nations. With disenfranchisement, racial violence, and Jim Crow segregation at home, many black Americans were ambivalent about supporting American military aspirations even if they did not exactly desire an alliance with Japan or relish the idea of an Axis victory.

While mainstream civil rights activists including leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter White, among them—demanded an improvement in racial conditions at home, Gordon and her supporters called for stronger ties with Japan in order to secure black political self-determination and universal emancipation. She was convinced that the Japanese would, in fact, obtain victory in the war and help nationalists establish a black nation-state in West Africa. Therefore, Gordon urged her supporters to

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92 FBI file on the Ethiopian Pacific Movement, 100-56894-129.
94 Stewart unequivocally stated that he was not pro-Japanese. See “Ohio State Conference Hears President General” (May 6 and 7, 1944) reprinted in New Negro World, April and May 1944.
“be of good cheer for those who are suffering now will not have to suffer much longer. Everything is working in our favor all over the world.” “In the very near future,” she optimistically predicted, “the black man will be free.”96 Importantly, Gordon’s pro-Japanese writings, her efforts to form alliances with activists across the globe, and her sense of solidarity with members of the “dark races,” illuminate the means by which she engaged in grassroots internationalism. Unable to travel because of her limited financial resources, and as a consequence, international travel, Gordon nonetheless attempted to forge alliances across racial, gender, and geographic boundaries.97

**Conclusion**

An examination of the political ideas and practices of Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Maymie De Mena, and Pearl Sherrod capture the myriad ways nationalist women activists promoted Afro-Asian solidarity during the 1930s and 1940s. During the economic and political upheavals of the period, these women activists envisioned Japan as a model and potential ally for people of African descent in the struggle for universal emancipation. Using their writings and speeches, and attempting to forge alliances with Japanese activists and diplomats, they attempted to dismantle global white supremacy and thereby advance their nationalist political goals. Government repression and censorship, however, thwarted their efforts. Perhaps already ‘seeing the writing on the wall,’ Madame Maymie De Mena quickly shifted her political focus in the late 1930s, staying clear from any pro-Japanese activities. After her newspaper, the *Ethiopian World*, folded in 1934, she continued to engage in nationalist politics in the United States and across the diaspora. In the late 1930s, she relocated to Jamaica to live with her husband, Percival Aiken, a Jamaican political activist.98

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96 Gordon to T.H. Bernard, 29 July 1942; Exhibit 110 in Report by Special Agents Francis A. Regan, Aubrey Elliot, Jr., and Richard W. Axtell, FBI Investigative File no. 100-124410.
97 West, et. al., *From Toussaint to Tupac*, xi.
Similarly, Pearl Sherrod tempered her pro-Japanese activities, quietly resuming her previous life and taking up residence in her Detroit apartment with her son, Emerson, from her previous marriage. Identifying herself as a widow to 1940 census-takers, the forty-four-year old nationalist activist admitted to being unemployed without any reliable source of income. Perhaps she obtained some limited assistance from her twenty-seven year old son who held a position as a construction worker for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Ultimately, her life in 1940 was a far cry from the one on display only a few years prior. In 1945, an anonymous informant reported to federal authorities that Sherrod was no longer engaged in any political activities and instead chose to spend most of her free time with friends at a summer resort in Idlewind, Michigan.

Mittie Maude Lena Gordon was not as fortunate. On 20 September 1942, federal officials showed up at a PME meeting with a warrant for her arrest. Along with eleven other African American leaders who had been arrested during this period, including members of the Nation of Islam, Gordon was charged with sedition. According to one FBI informant, Gordon had dissuaded her supporters from serving in the U.S. army, insisting that “Japan would come and deliver the colored people out of the hands of slaveholders.” Gordon later denied the accusations, but her letters told a different story, providing FBI officials with sufficient evidence to bolster their case. Despite an appeal in the months that followed, the court maintained Gordon’s guilt,

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101 On this date, Gordon was arrested for the second time. Her first arrest was on August 2, 1941, but the case was dismissed on August 29, 1941. The second arrest in 1942 led to her imprisonment. Eighty-five African Americans were arrested in Chicago on this date. While twelve were charged with sedition, the remaining individuals were charged with draft evasion.
sentencing her to two years in prison.\textsuperscript{103} Writing to a political ally from prison in 1944, Gordon insisted, “I have done my best. I have give[n] my life for my people.”\textsuperscript{104}
CONCLUSION

The women in this study embraced black nationalism as a viable political strategy for resisting racism, colonialism, and white imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s. During a period of economic and political uncertainty, these women activists emerged on the black nationalist scene, agitating for the rights and dignity of black men and women in the United States and across the African diaspora. These women were united in their political view that people of African descent constituted a separate group on the basis of their distinct culture, shared history, and experiences.¹ They rejected mainstream white society and culture, and advocated Pan-Africanism, African redemption (from European colonization), racial separatism, black pride, political self-determination and economic self-sufficiency. They shared a sense of hope about the future of the black race. Significantly, they maintained an unwavering belief that the “freedom of the race” was essential, and they were determined to do everything within their power to ensure its reality.

To achieve this goal, black nationalist women leaders—Amy Jacques Garvey, Maymie De Mena, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, Ethel M. Collins, Ethel Waddell, and Celia Jane Allen, among them—were pragmatic activists who employed a range of protest strategies and forged alliances with individuals from various racial and ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic and political backgrounds.² In the absence of a strong and centralized Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), women activists engaged in black nationalist politics in new, innovative, and idiosyncratic ways—drawing on Marcus Garvey’s ideas and extending well beyond them. In this way, women activists articulated

“inspirational Garveyism,” engaging in nationalist politics on their own terms and without Garvey’s direct influence and leadership.³ For example, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon established the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME) in Chicago during the early 1930s.⁴ While Gordon drew inspiration from Garvey, she formulated her own philosophy, blending aspects of Garveyism—racial pride, African redemption, economic self-sufficiency, racial separatism and political self-determination—with other religious and political ideologies including Islam, Moorish Science, and Ethiopianism.

While the women in this study shared a common thread of black nationalism, their political ideas and practices were far more fluid, complex, and complicated than this one term suggests. As “community feminists,” nationalist women leaders advocated the expansion of women’s leadership opportunities, on one hand, and reinforced traditional roles and expectations on the other.⁵ Moreover, while these women openly challenged global white supremacy, they were often complicit in promoting imperialist and civilizationist discourses. Black nationalist women’s uncritical admiration for Japan’s military prowess, for example, underscores the contradictory nature of women’s politics during the 1930s and 1940s.⁶ While Maymie De Mena, Pearl Sherrod, and Mittie Maude Lena Gordon actively promoted Afro-Asian solidarity, these women activists largely overlooked Japan’s military aggression towards other people of color.

The activities of Amy Jacques Garvey, Celia Jane Allen, Mittie Maude Lena Gordon, and Ethel Waddell illustrate the paradoxical nature of black nationalist women’s political theory and

⁴ See Chapter Two of this study.
⁶ See Chapter Six of this study.
praxis. During the 1930s and 1940s, these women made the controversial decision to ally with influential white supremacists like Senator Theodore G. Bilbo and Earnest Sevier Cox. Though these women activists advocated black self-sufficiency and political self-determination, they found common cause with white supremacists who advocated racial purity and not surprisingly, supported black emigrationist movements. Recognizing the limitations of their political reach—during a period in which African Americans had limited access to *formal* politics—nationalist women activists attempted to bolster their political and economic power by collaborating with influential white supremacists who they envisioned as bridges between their goals and an achievable reality. In the end, this controversial decision failed to yield the results these women expected, and sparked bitter internal disputes among their followers.

The conflicts that ensued over women’s controversial political alliances exemplify one of the many significant differences that existed among these activists. While the women in this study embraced the black nationalist intellectual traditional, they had distinct concerns, interests, and political approaches that were often related to their organizational affiliations, their specific locales, the social contexts in which worked, and their socio-economic backgrounds. An examination of the political activities of women like Maymie De Mena, an Afro-Latina, the Jamaican-born Amy Jacques Garvey, and black Southerner Celia Jane Allen, capture the diasporic reach of black nationalism and the diversity among its practitioners and theoreticians during the 1930s and 1940s. The diverse practices and ideals within black nationalist movements are further exemplified by the range of organizations in which these women activists were involved—namely, the Peace Movement of Ethiopia (PME), the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Nation of Islam (NOI) and The Development of Our Own (TDOO).

7 See Chapters Four and Five.
With the exception of Amy Jacques Garvey, Maymie De Mena, and Henrietta Vinton Davis, the women chronicled in this study were members of the black working-poor. During the years of the Great Depression and World War II, these women were at the forefront of black liberatory movements while struggling to meet their basic material needs. Ethel Waddell, a hairdresser, ran a salon from her Chicago apartment during the 1930s while she engaged in political organizing as a leader in multiple organizations including the PME, and later, the UNIA. With few financial resources, Celia Jane Allen worked tirelessly to galvanize black men and women in the rural South, and depended on the kindness of strangers for her basic necessities. Similarly, Pearl Sherrod maintained a public façade of wealth, but struggled to earn a living during the Depression years, relying heavily on the money raised from the mostly working-class members of TDOO in Detroit.

Despite their efforts, black nationalist women activists failed to achieve all of their political goals. While they managed to galvanize significant numbers of black men and women across the globe, many of their tangible goals were never met. For instance, the Greater Liberia Bill did not become a reality. African liberation struggles waged on during the post-World War II era and despite the gradual dismantling of global white supremacy during the 1950s and 1960s, black nationalists did not witness the complete freedom of the race. Their efforts did not eradicate white supremacy and in fact, some of their actions actually undermined the same goals they fought so vigorously to achieve. In their struggles to advance universal black liberation during the 1930s and 1940s, black nationalist women leaders made many political missteps and errors in judgment.

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8 Jacques Garvey, De Mena, and Vinton Davis can be classified as members of the black middle-class on the basis of their upbringings and educational backgrounds.
9 See Chapters One and Four.
10 See Chapter Three.
11 See Chapter Six.
However, political movements cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of human foibles and imperfections. As historian Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, social movements should not be judged based on whether or not they were “successful” in achieving all of their intended goals. The significance of these movements, Kelley argues, lies in their “alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change.”

By this measure, black nationalist women leaders led and participated in a series of political and social movements that significantly transformed the lives of countless black men and women. During the tumultuous years of a global depression and political crisis, these activists dared to dream of a better future, and sought to (re)awaken the political consciousness of black men and women in the United States and across the African diaspora. They openly challenged sexism, racism, discrimination, and global white supremacy, and advocated revolutionary social changes in order to secure a more just and equal society.

Black nationalist women’s political activities during the 1930s and 1940s depict the range of protest strategies and tactics individuals employed to resist domination, degradation, and exploitation. Excavating these women’s stories enriches our understanding of how black nationalist women, including members of the working poor and individuals with limited formal education, functioned as key leaders, theorists, and strategists—at the grassroots, national, and international levels. These women did not accomplish all of their political goals, but the “freedom dreams” they envisioned propelled them to create new spaces and opportunities for people of color to openly confront racial and sexual discrimination and assert their political agency. In so doing, they left an indelible mark on the lives of countless black men and women in the United States and across the globe, and inspired generations of black activists for many, many years to come.

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