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Author(s): Marc C. McLeod

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“SIN DEJAR DE SER CUBANOS”:

Cuban Blacks and the Challenges of Garveyism in Cuba

— *Marc C. McLeod*

Abstract...

While the history of Garveyism in Cuba has attracted significant attention from scholars in recent years, most studies assume – based largely on the lukewarm reception given by the members of the exclusive Club Atenas to Marcus Garvey when he visited Havana in 1921 – that Cubans of African descent generally ignored the movement. This article examines more closely the Afro-Cuban experience with Garveyism and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The writings of Cubans who identified as Garveyites, especially letters to the editor published in the official UNIA newspaper, *The Negro World*, help us to better understand the dimensions of Afro-Cuban involvement with the UNIA. What were the goals of those Cubans who did identify as Garveyites? What aspects of the UNIA’s program appealed to them most strongly? What particular obstacles and pressures did they face as native Cubans advocating mobilization along racial lines? In seeking to answer these questions, this study examines the ideology of Cuban Garveyites and explores the challenges they confronted as they attempted to promote black pride, racial equality, and Pan-Africanism without denying their identity as Cuban citizens.

The prevailing notion of a “raceless” Cuban national identity and a myth of racial equality in Cuba ultimately served as the greatest obstacles to the further spread of Garveyism among the Afro-Cuban population.

Keywords: Cuba, Marcus Garvey, Garveyism, UNIA, nationalism, race relations.

Sinopsis...

A pesar de que la historia del garveyismo en Cuba ha generado el interés de los investigadores recientemente, la mayoría de los estudios asumen que los cubanos de descendencia africana desconocían el movimiento. Esta percepción se fundamenta principalmente en la tibia recepción que los miembros del exclusivo Club Atenas le dieron a Garvey cuando visitó La Habana en 1921. Este artículo examina más de cerca la experiencia afrocubana con el garveyismo y la Asociación Universal para el Mejoramiento del Negro (UNIA). Los escritos de los cubanos identificados como garveyistas, especialmente las cartas publicadas en el periódico oficial de UNIA, *The Negro World*, nos ayudan a comprender mejor las dimensiones del grado de participación de los afrocubanos con UNIA. ¿Cuáles eran los objetivos de aquellos cubanos que se identificaron como garveyistas? ¿Qué aspectos del programa de UNIA eran los que más fuertemente los atraía? ¿Qué obstáculos y presiones particulares confrontaron como cubanos que promovían la movilización fundamentada en criterios raciales? Con el propósito de contestar estas preguntas, este estudio examina la ideología de los cubanos garveyistas y explora los desafíos que confrontaron al intentar promover el orgullo negro, la igualdad de raza y el pan-africanismo sin negar su identidad como ciudadanos cubanos. La idea prevaleciente de una identidad

nacional cubana “sin raza” y el mito de la igualdad racial en Cuba sirvieron, en última instancia, como grandes obstáculos para la propagación del garveyismo en la población afrocubana.

Palabras clave: Cuba, Marcus Garvey, garveyismo, Asociación Universal para el Mejoramiento del Negro, nacionalismo, relaciones raciales.

Résumé...

Malgré l'intérêt que l'histoire du garvèisme à Cuba a récemment généré chez les chercheurs, la plupart des études assument que les Cubains de descendance africaine ignoraient le mouvement. Cette perception est construite principalement sur la tiède réception que les membres de l'exclusif Club Atenas ont donné à Garvey lorsqu'il a visité la Havane en 1921. Cet article examine de plus près l'expérience afrocubaine avec le garvèisme et l'Association Universelle de l'Amélioration du Noir (UNIA). Les travaux des Cubains identifiés comme garvèistes, surtout les lettres publiées dans le journal officiel de l'UNIA, “The Negro World”, nous aident à mieux comprendre le degré de participation des afro-cubains avec l'UNIA. Quels étaient les objectifs de ces Cubains qui se sont identifiés comme garvèistes? Quels aspects du programme de l'UNIA attiraient le plus fort? A quels obstacles et pressions particulières se sont-ils heurtés en tant que Cubains qui encourageaient la mobilisation basée sur les critères de race? En vue de répondre à ces questions, cette étude examine l'idéologie des cubains garvèistes et il explore les défis auxquels ils se sont heurtés, en essayant de promouvoir la fierté noire, l'égalité des races et le pan-africanisme pour nier leur identité en tant que citoyens cubains. L'idée qui reste d'une identité nationale cubaine “sans race” et le mythe de l'égalité raciale ont contribué, en dernière

échéance, à faire obstacle à la dissémination du garvéisme à l'intérieur de la population afro-cubaine.

Keywords: *Cuba, Marcus Garvey, Garveyisme, Association Universelle pour l'Avance de la Race Noire, nationalisme, relations de race.*

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By the third and final day of his visit to Havana in March 1921, Marcus Garvey must have been well aware of the difficulties he and his followers would face as they attempted to share their message of race pride and African redemption with the Cuban people. Having spoken to large crowds on the previous two evenings in the Parque Santos y Artiga in Havana Vieja and met with a number of Cuban politicians, including the president and president-elect of the republic, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) confronted one of his toughest challenges—winning over the members of the exclusive Club Atenas. After a full day of interviews, meetings, and visits to other *sociedades de color*, including the Unión Fraternal and the Abraham Lincoln Club, Garvey called upon the elite of Afro-Cuban society at the Club Atenas around 9 p.m. on March 3rd.

Interviewed by a reporter from the Havana newspaper *Heraldo de Cuba* earlier in the day, Garvey anticipated that his program might encounter some opposition in Cuba. “I have no intention of meddling in the internal affairs of this country,” he assured Cuban readers. “I seek only the support of Cuban blacks to achieve a greater cooperation among all blacks in the world and their social and economic progress.” The Jamaican-born leader of the UNIA recognized that—behind the ties forged by common experiences with racial inequality and discrimination—the distinct social, political, and economic contexts in which they lived distinguished different groups within the African diaspora from one another. “The problems

of American and Cuban blacks are essentially different, although they have a common denominator in the preoccupations there are against the race,” he continued. “I believe that in order to solve different problems each should use appropriate procedures; but the end that I pursue is common to all blacks.” Perhaps asserting what the *Heraldo de Cuba* reporter referred to as his “rare ability [with] masterful evasions,” Garvey did not elaborate upon what strategies might be appropriate in the Cuban context (*Heraldo de Cuba* 1921: 3). In any event, UNIA organizers in Cuba would have to demonstrate that the organization’s emphasis on universal black unity and the establishment of a black-run state in Africa would meet the specific needs and concerns of the Afro-Cuban population.

In an exchange of speeches between Garvey and the Atenas president, Miguel Angel Céspedes, on the night of March 3rd, it became clear that Garvey’s black nationalism clashed with the club members’ strong sense of Cuban patriotism and belief that relative racial equality reigned in Cuba. Céspedes introduced the UNIA leader by saying “that fortunately Cubans belonging to the race of color enjoyed the same privileges as Cubans of the white race, and that the roads to progress were open to them as to the others.” Garvey responded by noting his surprise “that the blacks who had fought so brilliantly for independence in several countries looked at his Pan-African ideal with indifference and that the same efforts to liberate Cuba are required to constitute the great African nation that he envisions.” His appeal for support from the leaders of Afro-Cuban society by making reference to the critical role played by black Cubans in the struggle against Spanish colonialism, however, apparently fell upon deaf ears. In his closing remarks, Céspedes again demonstrated his patriotic pride and belief in the promise of racial equality in Cuba. “Cuban blacks endeavored to create a Republic where they could live with dignity and exercise all of the rights of free and civilized men,” he declared, “thus, they cannot conceive of having a motherland other than Cuba” (*Heraldo de Cuba* 1921: 1, 3, 10). While members of the Club Atenas occasionally used their visible

position in Cuban society to protest some of the most visible manifestations of racial injustice in Cuba (such as the 1919 lynching of a Jamaican immigrant in Regla, the expulsion of black Cubans from a public park in Santa Clara in 1925, and the exclusion of Afro-Cuban athletes from certain sporting events in Havana in the late 1920s), the encounter with Garvey served to illustrate their conviction that a fundamental equality of opportunity existed on the island.

The Havana press was quick to highlight the expressed differences between Garvey and Céspedes as evidence that black Cubans in general felt little attraction to the UNIA. “Garvey’s visit to the Club Atenas has the greatest importance,” a journalist for the *Heraldo de Cuba* averred. “[I]t has served as a reason for Cuban blacks to declare publicly through their brightest institution that they feel Cuban first and black second, and that they espouse no aims related to Garvey’s Africanist propaganda” (*Heraldo de Cuba* 1921: 10). The sub-title of a headline in another Havana daily, *La Prensa*, similarly declared that “Africanist propaganda does not have reason to be in our country” (*La Prensa* 1921). It seems that Garvey, the masterful orator accustomed to leaving his listeners spellbound, could only claim limited success as he departed Havana bound for eastern Cuba.

While Garvey’s visit to the Club Atenas was an important event that occurred as his movement was expanding in the Caribbean, it also helps us to better understand the process by which the historiography of Garveyism in Cuba has been produced. Although the UNIA was particularly popular in Cuba—at least fifty divisions existed there in the mid 1920s, more than in any country other than the United States (Universal Negro Improvement Association 1927)—the topic had been largely neglected by historians of Cuba for many decades. Recent studies of Garveyism in Cuba argue that the Cuban people remained indifferent to the affairs of the UNIA. As proof, they all refer to the exchange between Garvey and Céspedes at the Club Atenas to conclude that black Cubans rejected the UNIA’s message of race pride and Pan-African identity (Lewis 1988: 108-111; Rodríguez 1987-1988: 296; García Domínguez

1991: 299-302; de la Fuente 1996: 353-354; and Fernández Robaina 1998: 120-128). But we must bear in mind that the members of the Club Atenas were the elite of Afro-Cuban society, and hardly representative of the island’s population of African descent in general. In this regard, Garvey’s encounter with Céspedes and the other members of the Club Atenas speaks to the nature of power and historical production. If we are to fill in the silent spaces around the history of Garveyism in Cuba—and to understand how they have been produced in the first place—we must move beyond this event and examine the experiences of black Cubans with the movement more closely (Trouillot 1995).¹

The ranks of the UNIA in Cuba were primarily filled by British West Indian immigrants, although some Cubans of African descent did affiliate with the organization and participate in its activities.² While sources are limited, an initial exploration into the Afro-Cuban experience with Garveyism—one that extends beyond the brief visit made by Garvey to the Club Atenas—is possible. Close reading of the official UNIA newspaper, *The Negro World*, for instance, provides access to writings from black Cubans who identified as Garveyites. What were the goals of these Cuban Garveyites? What aspects of the UNIA’s program appealed to them most strongly? What particular obstacles and pressures did they face as native Cubans advocating mobilization along racial lines? This article examines the ideology of Cuban Garveyites and explores the challenges they confronted as they attempted to promote black pride, racial equality, and Pan-Africanism “without”—as Pedro Montenegro wrote from Havana in 1929—“ceasing to be Cuban” (Montenegro 1929a). Such an analysis benefits from (and hopefully, in some small way, contributes to) a substantial scholarly literature on the comparative construction or “articulation” of race in the Americas.³ Cuban Garveyites shared with their counterparts in the UNIA throughout the African diaspora the essential tenets and goals of the movement. A pervasive myth of racial equality in Cuba and a powerful sense of Cuban nationalism, however, prevented Garveyism from spreading more extensively among the Afro-Cuban population.

In the end, Cuban Garveyites could come to terms with the tensions and contradictions created by the encounter between the ideology of Garveyism —especially its emphasis on black nationalism and African redemption— and the articulation of race and national identity in Cuba. The majority of Cubans, however, did not.

While the interpretation of Garveyism in Cuba as a movement dominated by British West Indians immigrants is accurate, such an analysis tends to underestimate the potential appeal of Garveyism to black Cubans and overlooks the efforts of UNIA organizers to reach out to them. Given the socioeconomic inequalities faced by Cubans of African descent and their limited access to political power despite universal male suffrage, it seems likely that many of them would have been receptive to the UNIA program. Some Cuban blacks demonstrated an early interest in Garvey's message. Joshua Cockburn, captain of the Black Star steamship "Frederick Douglass," reported in 1919 that "the people at Havana are mustering in thousands to see the ship." The presence of the UNIA vessel anchored in Havana harbor apparently elicited particular interest from the large number of Afro-Cuban dockworkers who worked there (Cockburn 1919a). Although he might have had reason to exaggerate the popularity of his organization in Cuba, the founder of the UNIA similarly claimed that he received a warm welcome upon his arrival in the Cuban capital in 1921. "The people turned out by the thousands to hear me..." Garvey wrote, "not only the West Indians and American Negroes who were domiciled in Cuba, but the native Cubans came by the hundreds and by the thousands to hear me" (Garvey 1921).

Throughout the 1920s, UNIA organizers in Cuba endeavored to attract a following from among the Afro-Cuban population. Bridging the language gap was a paramount concern. A copy of the UNIA constitution and rulebook was thus translated into Spanish and published in Guantánamo for distribution among the Cuban population (Universal Negro Improvement Association & African Communities League n.d.).

The official UNIA newspaper, *The Negro World*, also contained a section in Spanish on an intermittent basis during the 1920s. Meetings of the local UNIA branches frequently included speeches in Spanish, and specific gatherings were occasionally designated as “Cuban Days” in an effort to reach out to the Afro-Cuban population (McLeod 1996: 144, n. 72). In the early 1920s, Cuban-born Eduardo Morales served as official UNIA commissioner to his homeland. At the 1924 international convention, R.A. Martin, president of the Florida division and delegate from Camagüey Province, proposed that the association make a more concerted effort to communicate with native Cubans (as well as Haitian immigrants). He encouraged the distribution of UNIA materials in Spanish and French and requested that a Spanish- and French-speaking person be sent to Cuba to replace Morales, who no longer occupied the position of commissioner (*The Negro World* 1924a). Richard H. Bachelor, a Garveyite from Guantánamo, was appointed to the post, after which he traveled the length of island delivering addresses in both English and Spanish. Similarly, during Henrietta Vinton Davis’ tour of the island in 1927, Miss Rafaela Thomas of the Guantánamo division accompanied her, translating her orations into Spanish (McLeod 1996: 144).

UNIA organizers in Cuba adjusted their program in an effort to appeal to black Cubans in particular. Recognizing the strong nationalist feelings of many Afro-Cubans, local UNIA branches reached out to black Cubans on a symbolic level. While political parties and other organizations in Cuba regularly used songs, parades, banners, statues, and other similar means to elicit popular support, that a movement which saw Africa as the ultimate site of redemption also attempted to make such patriotic appeals is more remarkable. The Cuban flag frequently was displayed side by side with the red, black, and green of the UNIA at parades and meetings, while the Cuban national anthem often opened UNIA events. In a festival to commemorate the 4th International Convention of the UNIA in 1924, the Victoria de la Tunas branch displayed the Cuban flag, played the Cuban national anthem, and elected Sra. Josefa Reyes and Beatrice Goodhall as “Cuban queen” and “African queen,”

respectively. “The Cubans shouted in all directions: ‘Viva Cuba libre! Viva Africa libre! Africa para los Negros! Viva Marcus Garvey!’,” reported the local UNIA secretary (*The Negro World* 1924b). The third ship of the Black Star Line, the “Kanawha,” was renamed the “Antonio Maceo” by the parent body in New York. In 1929, *The Negro World* provided its readers with a brief historical sketch of this “black general who routed Spain’s armies.” Garveyites in Cuba also paid homage to Maceo, the Cuban national hero, by naming the UNIA school in Camagüey after him and by referring to him at local meetings as one of the greatest heroes of the black race. On at least one occasion the association attempted to confront directly the discriminatory practices faced by black Cubans: in 1924, members of the Camagüey division marched from their Liberty Hall to Agramonte Park, “where no Negroes are allowed to enter,” and delivered public addresses in both English and Spanish (McLeod 1996: 144-145). Through such varied efforts, Garveyism in Cuba seemed to be attracting followers from the Cuban population over the course of the 1920s.

Afro-Cuban participation in the UNIA was most prominent in the urban centers of Havana and Santiago de Cuba. Early in the 1920s, a group of black Cubans had founded Capítulo Cubano 71 in the eastern city of Santiago. In 1927, this “Spanish-speaking division” hosted a visit from the international organizer Henrietta Vinton Davis (Capítulo Cubano No. 71 1927; Monier and Machado 1927). The Cuban chapter claimed as many as 200 members, and at the very least could produce more than 50 signatures on public manifestoes (Capítulo Cubano No. 71 1925). Whereas Cubans and British West Indians maintained separate UNIA branches in the eastern city of Santiago, in the Cuban capital they were united in the same Havana division. In 1928, three Cubans served as officers of the large UNIA branch in the capital: Rogelio Galindo as president, José Hernández Esteban as assistant secretary, and Eustaquio Gutiérrez as assistant treasurer. In 1931, Mr. E. Manahan of the amalgamated Havana and Guanabacoa division delivered an address in Spanish “to the

fifty or more Cubans who thronged the doors and windows” of Liberty Hall (McLeod 1996: 145).

A close reading of the historical record reveals an Afro-Cuban presence in the UNIA in rural areas of the island as well. María “Reyita” de los Reyes Bueno, for instance, recalled that she joined the local UNIA branch in the eastern town of Cueto in the early 1920s along with as many as fifty other Cubans (Rubiera Castillo 1997: 24). At an October 1925 meeting of the Morón division, D.H. Campbell spoke in Spanish “for the benefit of the numerous Cubans that were present” (*The Negro World* 1925b). Although the majority of UNIA organizers and branch officials were British West Indian immigrants, some Cubans did play leadership roles in the organization. At the Central Río Cauto, near Bayamo, eleven Cubans and seven British West Indians came together to form a single UNIA division in 1929 (Sucursal de la Asociación Universal para el Adelanto de la Raza Negra No. 282 1929). A number of native Cubans took leadership positions in other UNIA locals as well: Mercedes Rojas served as the lady president of the San Cristóbal division, Victoriano Fernández as second vice president in Morón, and a Mrs. López as head of the Black Cross nurses in Central Báguanos (*The Negro World* 1924c; 1925b; 1928b). In cases where they were not active, dues-paying members of the association, Cubans of African descent often attended weekly meetings and other UNIA activities. Reports from local divisions in *The Negro World* thus make regular reference to speeches made in Spanish. The submission of letters to the UNIA newspaper by Cuban readers further suggests another form of affiliation with the association short of full membership. Afro-Cuban participation in the UNIA, in other words, seems to have been greater than previously recognized. What was it, then, that attracted Cubans to Garveyism and the UNIA?

Garveyites in Cuba shared with their counterparts throughout the African diaspora an ideology and program that centered on black economic success, race pride, and Pan-African nationalism (Hill 1983: xxxv-xc). These three

interrelated goals point to the unique and even paradoxical nature of Garvey's movement. On the one hand, as in the United States, the notion of racial uplift and economic enterprise appealed to middle-class sensibilities in particular and helped to reproduce class as well as gender divisions in black communities (see Gaines 1996). On the other hand, emphasis on racial self-determination and the establishment of a black-ruled state in Africa held out potential to unite all persons of African descent regardless of class, gender, or nationality. In translating their message to the Cuban milieu, however, Garvey and his followers discovered that the notion of Pan-Africanism proved to be most problematic.

The universal tenets of Garveyite ideology clearly resonated with those Cubans who affiliated with the UNIA. The ideals of racial success and economic achievement – so central to Garvey's own vision and the UNIA in general (see Hill 1983: xxxix-xliv; Stein 1986) – were shared by many Cubans. The members of *Capítulo Cubano 71* in Santiago de Cuba, for instance, declared that “our brothers of the race who work for its advancement and betterment have come to the conclusion that by means of its industrial, commercial, and educational establishment, they will be able to acquire independence, more respect, and consideration, thus becoming an acknowledged power” (Monier *et al.* 1925). The desire for economic advancement led a number of Cubans to support the entrepreneurial undertakings of the UNIA. “Just a handful” of black stevedores in Sagua la Grande “just in a twinkle” purchased \$250 worth of Black Star shares upon arrival of the “Frederick Douglass” in December 1919, reported Captain Joshua Cockburn (Cockburn 1919b). Cuban blacks also demonstrated a willingness to contribute to international fundraising campaigns organized by the UNIA. More than twenty Cuban Garveyites from Santiago de Cuba and at least five Cuban members of the Havana branch, for example, donated to the Marcus Garvey Appeal and Defense Fund in 1923 (*The Negro World* 1923a; 1923b).

As with their counterparts elsewhere in the African diaspora, Cuban Garveyites saw education and cultural self-

improvement as a principal vehicle for racial advancement. Afro-Cubans in general viewed education as the principal avenue to social mobility, and evidence suggests that black access to educational opportunity increased to some degree during the early republic (de la Fuente 2001: 138-149). For its part, the UNIA promised to further the education of its members in Cuba, whether by sponsoring schools, staging poetry readings, serving as a forum to discuss current affairs, or in any number of other ways. This educational role for the association may have appealed to Afro-Cuban women in particular. “The work of the black woman is a labor of perseverance and of love; it begins in the home and continues in the field of struggle for existence,” averred Amparo V. la Rosa from the city of Cárdenas. “We, black women, are the ones called to mold the sentiments of our children, inculcating in them respect for their origins and love of their race, giving them as well the highest level possible of culture, shining light that guides humanity” (La Rosa 1929). Nevertheless, whereas British West Indian immigrant women played a critical role in the UNIA (see McLeod 1996: 147), few Afro-Cuban women appear in the historical record on Garveyism in Cuba.

UNIA organizers in Cuba would not have faced much trouble in sparking the race pride of black Cubans. “For Garvey, the black man was universally oppressed on racial grounds,” writes Tony Martin (1976: 23), “and any program of emancipation would have to be built around the question of race first.” Afro-Cuban contributors to *The Negro World* often evoked the painful past of slavery—not abolished in Cuba until 1886—in their writings. “Blacks of America, whatever your language, consider that our origin is tied to the same fact, that for the same reason you were brought to these lands,” wrote Miguel G. Casanova, an active member of the Marianao Division in Havana. “We will recall in sad reminiscence the odyssey of our ancestors” (Casanova 1924b). The common history of slavery shared by all peoples of the African diaspora thus might serve to unify them regardless of national origin.

Cubans of African descent could also reflect with pride upon their recent contribution to the making of the Cuban

nation. Garveyites in Cuba regularly referred to the critical, if not dominant, role played by Afro-Cuban combatants in the struggle for independence from Spain during the second half of the nineteenth century. When transferred to the Cuban milieu, the social consciousness born from the fierce pride of the independent peasantry in the British Caribbean that was so fundamental to the emergence of Garveyite ideology in general may have been supplanted by a sense of self-esteem and national honor derived from Afro-Cuban participation in anti-colonial insurgency.⁴ For Cuban members of the UNIA, the struggles of the past made the persistence of discrimination and inequality in the present all the more intolerable. The notion of “equal rights to all citizens,” observed Angel Estrada in 1925, “these words engraved in our Constitution by the glorious blood of Maceo, Martí, and so many other liberators, is a dead letter, it is not fulfilled” (Estrada 1925b). “The sacrifice of our never-properly-mourned brothers Maceo, Crombet, and many others, is not compensated for by the treatment of our race by that other element,” echoed Carlos Collazo in 1928. “The black man in Cuba has to overcome many barriers to reach a certain mediocrity, whether in the economic realm or the intellectual one” (Collazo 1928b; see also Estrada 1925a; Estrada 1925b).

But Afro-Cuban participants in the UNIA did not merely dwell on a traumatic past or an unjust present; they also saw hope that the association would serve as a vehicle for racial advancement and uplift, as a sign that obstacles had been overcome and progress was all but assured. “Our race in the civilized world enters into the apogee of its splendor,” Miguel Casanova declared (Casanova 1924b). Memory of the past is sad,” remarked Angel Estrada from Remedios, “let us cover it with a thick veil and, looking towards the future, fight so that in a not so distant day the black man, rebellious and free, ... moves forward to die on his native soil” (Estrada 1925a) Cuban Garveyites thus remained confident and optimistic that—with the acquisition of political representation and power promised by the UNIA—equality and justice could be achieved.

Despite the opposition encountered by Garvey at the Club Atenas, the Cubans who did affiliate with the UNIA clearly

related to the Pan-Africanism inherent in his vision. More than just a fraternal organization seeking economic advancement and cultural self-improvement, the UNIA embodied a program of political nationalism. The slogan ‘Africa for the Africans’ and the ideal of African redemption had become “the cardinal and distinctive features” of Garveyism by the early 1920s (*The Negro World* 1922). Cuban Garveyites shared with their UNIA counterparts elsewhere in the world the goal of creating a black republic in Africa. Pedro Montenegro, for instance, supported the “brilliant idea ... of an independent nation” and became a member of the UNIA branch in Havana because “it asks for that which legitimately belongs to the black element, the African motherland” (Montenegro 1929a). Writing at the time of the UNIA convention in Kingston in 1929, Montenegro advocated that the association submit a proposal to the League of Nations to recognize the right to an independent black republic (Montenegro 1929b).

In espousing the goal of African redemption, Garvey and his supporters in Cuba and elsewhere were driven by different desires. Many of them saw black folk culture, whether in Africa or in the diaspora, as backward and anachronistic, as an obstacle to racial progress. Garvey himself, despite his vocal condemnation of European imperialism in Africa, measured black success in terms of white European values (Hill 1983: 1-1v). For Cuban Garveyites like Miguel Casanova, concern with the fate of Africa also revealed a paternalistic view of the continent’s inhabitants. “Our race ... only dreams of drawing near its own people, victims still of ignorance and barbarity, to accomplish its educational mission,” Casanova commented (Casanova 1924b). “To Africa!,” he exhorted a couple of weeks later. “Vindicate the memory of our ancestors, raising a free and civilized people where a tribe of slaves and ignoramus crawls” (Casanova 1924c). European imperialism in Africa imbued Garveyites in Cuba with a sense of urgency. “Can we accept without an outcry, without a protest, the repetition in Africa of the events of the conquest of America?,” asked Casanova. “Will the destiny of the sons of Ethiopia be that of the Incas, Aztecs, Araucanos, etc., etc., primitive inhabitants of

America, degraded when not exterminated?” (Casanova 1927). Interest in Africa, however, extended beyond the fate of the people who lived there.

For Casanova and other Cuban Garveyites, the establishment of a black nation in Africa was ultimately necessary to defend and represent the interests of all people of African descent throughout the world, including in Cuba. “As events transpired,” writes Robert Hill (1983: lxxxvii), “the belief in the redemption of a benighted Africa became transformed into a belief in the political primacy of Africa, now seen as the locus and agency of a regenerated national culture and of racial success.” In this regard, Garveyites in Cuba reflected the changing vision of the movement’s leader. “The creation of a black state, independent and powerful, ought to be the aspiration of every black man,” insisted Casanova in 1928. “[I]f the black man does not organize in a nation capable of demanding that they respect him, capable of proclaiming his condition worthy of estimation for the excellence of his aptitudes in the concert of universal life, he will vegetate, always, on the margin of all humiliations, sick from all moral abandonment” (Casanova 1928). Cuban followers of Garvey thus believed that racial fraternity and uplift would not be sufficient. Equality, respect, and success could only be attained through political power. Convincing other Cubans of African descent to share their conviction in this regard, however, proved to be quite challenging.

Afro-Cuban adherents to the UNIA cause often commented on the challenges and obstacles the organization faced in Cuba. As part of an international movement, Cuban Garveyites confronted many of the same forces that contributed to the decline of the UNIA’s influence on a global scale. Garvey’s legal troubles, factionalism within the parent body, and financial problems all took their toll on the association’s popularity by the mid 1920s. This was a time when the UNIA would have been in a position to attract significant attention from the Afro-Cuban population, not only because basic knowledge of the association itself would have been more widespread in Cuba

by then, but also because the role of race in Cuban society was increasingly being debated, redefined, and contested.⁵ Cuban members of the UNIA were not immune to the charges of mismanagement and self-interest that plagued the organization in the United States. As with the many allegations directed against Garvey, critics of the UNIA in Cuba contended that the leaders of the organization exploited unsuspecting rank-and-file members for their own financial and political gain, prompting Miguel Casanova to respond that the UNIA “is not, as the eternal mudslingers preach, a plot towards the exploitation of the race by a group of bloodsuckers (*vividores*)” (Casanova 1924b). If the UNIA were to overcome such calumny, its leaders would have to educate the Cuban people about the program and goals of the organization.

Aware that the spread of Garveyism in general was contingent upon the propaganda generated by the movement, Cuban members identified the need to increase publicity about the UNIA on the island as a main priority.⁶ In so doing, they revealed a concern with communicating with other Garveyites who had already joined the association. “Until now, the *Negro World* is the only shining torch that puts the noble and just aspirations of this organization in touch with the black element of this island,” claimed Carlos Collazo in a letter to the paper, requesting that Garvey himself send him information about any other UNIA divisions in Cuba. “Through the appropriately substantive articles in Spanish,” he continued, “I have managed to convince individuals who for lack of a broad knowledge were not aware of the goals that this august movement of exaltation pursues” (Collazo 1928a). Cuban Garveyites also recognized that potential members would not be won over to the cause of the UNIA without first learning about the association’s true purpose. “I know that there is a great element that admires the program of the organization, which is only partially known, and it would be very convenient to initiate an active and extensive propaganda,” observed Miguel Casanova in an open letter to Garvey published in *The Negro World*. “May your propaganda reach Cuba with greater efficiency and be sure that you will not lack hearts like mine, ready to sacrifice for our

true exaltation,” Casanova assured the leader of the UNIA (Casanova 1924a). Writing from Havana, Julián B. Toscano similarly insisted that Garvey’s speeches be published widely and in many languages, “so that all our element can assimilate the wisdom and the foresight [and] the eloquence of that great man” (Toscano 1924).

Increasing the public visibility of the UNIA was thus a critical goal. As noted above, UNIA chapters on the island occasionally denoted certain meetings as Cuban Days, “in which the Spanish-speaking people could get a thorough knowledge of the program of the UNIA.” Such was the case in August 1928, when Domingo León, “who said he did not thoroughly understand the workings of the Association,” arrived at the local Liberty Hall in Havana “to get inspiration” (Rennie 1928). Other Cubans also provided personal testimony that they had once been unaware of the UNIA’s activities, but quickly joined upon learning about the organization. When Pedro Montenegro became a member in 1929, he did so only shortly after hearing “rumors” alluding to the UNIA (Montenegro 1929a). Similarly, Carlos Collazo pointed out that he himself had been ignorant of the aims of the UNIA until another Cuban, Eduardo Oviedo, convinced him to join the organization (Collazo 1928a). Regardless of the success of propaganda in the Cuban case, however, it seems clear that many black Cubans, even if they learned about the UNIA, never affiliated with the association.

In many ways, the Cuban environment was not conducive to the diffusion of Garvey’s ideology and program to the country’s population of color, in spite of the long history of slavery and racial inequality on the island. The UNIA competed for the allegiance of black Cubans with other organizations that enjoyed a rich tradition on Cuban soil. Many Cubans of African descent already belonged to *sociedades de color* before the UNIA ever appeared in Cuba, and thus may have felt less need to join what they saw as another social club organized along racial lines (see Howard 1998; Hevia Lanier 1996; Helg 1995). Membership in other fraternal organizations or mutual-aid societies certainly did not preclude anyone from also affiliating with the UNIA. In fact, such societies often provided

a forum in which individuals were first exposed to the ideas of Marcus Garvey, and many British West Indian immigrants in Cuba belonged to the UNIA and to other fraternal societies at the same time. Still, Garveyite leaders identified competition from lodges and other fraternal organizations as the “real impediment” to the expansion of the movement in Cuba (*The Negro World* 1928a; Davis 1929). If (as discussed below) black Cubans were less inclined to accept the Pan-African component of Garveyite ideology, and they could continue to attempt to address their cultural, educational, and mutual-aid needs through other long-established *sociedades*, then the fraternal function of the UNIA —so central to the popularity of the association among British West Indian immigrants in Cuba (see McLeod 1996; Giovannetti 2001)— would have been less influential among the Afro-Cuban population.

The prominence of patronage and prevalence of corruption in the post-colonial political system in Cuba also worked against the expansion of the UNIA on the island. As Louis Pérez, Jr. (1986) in particular has shown, U.S. imperialism in the aftermath of independence from Spain created a system in which “the pursuit of politics” became the principal means of social and economic mobility and stability for Cuban citizens. Hoping to gain a share of the sinecures distributed as the spoils of office by government officials, Cubans of African descent actively participated in electoral politics during the early republic; as a result, Afro-Cuban access to jobs, education, and political representation —although still quite limited— did increase (de la Fuente 2001). Casting their lot with the UNIA, rather than with the Liberals or another political party in Cuba, thus would have threatened the ability of black Cubans to take advantage of any benefits that did accrue from participating in the Cuban political system.

The expanding Cuban labor movement of the 1920s and early 1930s also may have drawn black workers away from the UNIA. Cuban historiography has generally accepted that Afro-Cuban workers played a prominent role in organized labor, especially after the founding of the Confederación Nacional Obrera de Cuba (CNOC) and Cuban Communist Party (PCC)

in 1925. Close, empirical analysis of Afro-Cuban involvement in the labor movement is needed, but recent studies suggest that the role of the PCC and CNOC in the popular uprising known as the “Revolution” of 1933 has been overestimated (Whitney 2001: esp. 93-100; Carr 1996), and that these organizations’ ties to the Afro-Cuban population may have been more tenuous than previously recognized (Carr 1998: 98-103). Similarly, widespread working-class support for anti-immigrant measures during the 1930s (McLeod 2000: 121-126, 243-280; Giovannetti 2001: 141-191) belies the claim that PCC and CNOC efforts had succeeded “in organizing a cross-racial, multinational labor movement” (de la Fuente 1997) by 1933. Nevertheless, it still seems quite likely that many Afro-Cuban workers, driven by the persistence of race-based inequalities and the economic downturns of the 1920s and 1930s, joined unions and actively participated in worker uprisings at the time. Although simultaneous participation in both labor union and UNIA activities was certainly possible, the majority of black workers in Cuba apparently chose class struggle over racial mobilization.

The unique character of Cuban race relations—in particular the strong sense of patriotism shared by most Cubans regardless of color and a prevailing myth of racial equality—further inhibited the spread of Garveyism among Cubans of African descent. Although the vast majority of black Cubans would never have imagined setting foot within the privileged halls of the Club Atenas, many of them did share a fervent Cuban nationalism (derived in no small way from the critical role played by Afro-Cuban combatants against Spanish colonial rule) and perhaps even a belief that racial inequality had been reduced during the early years of the republic. As they recalled the recent massacre of thousands of black Cubans amidst the crackdown on the Partido Independiente de Color in 1912, moreover, they would have thought twice before aligning themselves with the UNIA.⁷ Although de la Fuente (1998; 1999) argues that black Cubans were able to utilize the myth of racial democracy for their own benefit while the acceptance of such a myth placed limits on the actions of white

Cuban elites, his analysis fails to adequately explain why the massacre of thousands of black Cubans in 1912 could occur in the first place, nor does it demonstrate the specific ways in which political, social, economic, or cultural opportunities were opened up for the Afro-Cuban population (Giovannetti n.d.). Even if Cubans of color were able to use a myth of racial democracy as enfranchised citizens to make demands upon their country’s political leaders, any advances they achieved were still quite limited and significant inequality along racial lines continued to exist. More importantly, as de la Fuente himself (1999: 63) concedes, the notion of racial democracy “delegitimized any form of racially based mobilization as un-Cuban and a threat to national unity.” In this way, constructions of race and nation in Cuba clearly stood as considerable obstacles to Afro-Cuban acceptance of Garveyite ideology and participation in UNIA activities.

Although the UNIA initially received a warmer welcome in Cuba than in much of the Caribbean, where *The Negro World* had been banned by most British colonies by 1920 (Elkins 1972), Cuban organizers faced obstacles that were more subtle—but in some ways more challenging—than the direct repression encountered elsewhere. The notion of racial equality and harmony, for instance, forced the UNIA to tone down its rhetoric in Cuba. When the leaders of the Havana branch sought legal recognition from the Cuban state in 1920, to cite just one pertinent example, they felt obligated to leave the words “Negro” and “African” out of the association’s name (Universal Improvement Association and Communities League 1920), thus concealing the racial focus of the UNIA (and also, perhaps, avoiding the negative connotations of inferiority and primitivism associated with the term “African” in dominant Cuban discourse). The notion that all Cubans regardless of race enjoyed the same economic and political privileges in independent Cuba meant that any effort to address racial inequality could itself be labeled racist. Fear of retaliatory violence, such as that which occurred in 1912, undoubtedly played in the minds of black Cubans who considered joining up with Garvey’s movement. Portraying the UNIA as an organization which discriminated

against whites and thus violated constitutional guarantees of equality, the dictatorial regime of Gerardo Machado harassed the association at the end of the 1920s as part of a general attack on civil liberties as popular opposition to the government increased (Guridy 2003). By the end of the decade, then, the myth of racial equality even served to justify direct repression of the UNIA in Cuba.

Cuban Garveyites were well aware of the challenges posed by the belief that racial democracy existed in Cuba. "To proclaim equality when a thesis about relations between the races issues forth, only leads with extreme candor to the utmost hypocrisy," contended Miguel Casanova (Casanova 1924a). After discussing the accomplishments of Antonio Maceo and other Cubans of color in the achievement of independence, Angel Estrada of Remedios lamented: "But, oh cruel reality! Democracy has been an empty word and liberty a myth" (Estrada 1925b). The notion that racial equality prevailed in Cuba presented Garveyites there with a difficult dilemma. Should they minimize the racial focus of the movement to avoid accusations of being racist and even anti-Cuban? Or should they aggressively confront the nature of race relations in Cuba, calling into question the equality and democracy that allegedly existed, but in so doing running the risk of alienating potential supporters in Cuba? Not surprisingly, Afro-Cuban Garveyites reacted in different ways. At times, they quickly denied that the organization disturbed relations between the races in Cuba. "The work of the Universal Negro Improvement Association is not, as some believe, the ambition of breaking our harmony with the white race," Miguel Casanova declared (Casanova 1924b).

At other times, however, Afro-Cuban Garveyites responded more directly to accusations of racism. "As long as one gets scared at the slightest indication that he might be called a racist by those who know that that qualifier will discourage him, weakening his energies to struggle as a conscientious individual," argued Alejandro Estrada, "our element in general will simply be here an instrument of the other races" (Estrada 1924). Criticism of the UNIA only served to reinforce the resolve of the association's staunch supporters. "Every movement of

progress that tends to benefit one part of humanity will find great opposition,” observed Lázaro García, “but we who support this movement of improvement for our race, we who are committed to this struggle, we are determined to utilize all our abilities and all our energies for its success” (García 1929). Miguel Casanova himself commented that “Such an erroneous concept of our aspirations exists in our environment that we are the object of scorn when we manifest our points of view, radical in all ways, with respect to forming a nationality that will enable the black man to fulfill all his functions as a free man” (Casanova 1924a). In an editorial entitled “I, Racist,” he declared: “I am a racist and I do not deny it, if to this term is given its true meaning and not the one that it is given by error or malice.” For Casanova, to be “racist” meant not only to exhibit pride in one’s racial identity —“We blacks should feel proud of our color,” he insisted— but also to support the goals of black nationalism (Casanova 1928). The divergence in Casanova’s own responses thus speaks to the predicament he and other Cuban Garveyites faced as they attempted to promote a program of race pride and black nationalism in a setting that downplayed the existence of racial injustice and denied the legitimacy of racial mobilization.

Despite the power of Cuban nationalism and the presence of a myth of racial equality on the island, a number of black Cubans did choose to affiliate with the UNIA. For some, racial inequality and injustice were simply too severe to ignore. “The oppressed races have to unite sooner or later in order to untie the knot of the rope that asphyxiates them, living with dignity or dying with honor,” proclaimed J.B. Toscano from Havana in 1930. “We do not want to be on our knees any more and for this reason we rise up to remain standing” (Toscano 1930). Even if black Cubans were receiving limited opportunities in education, politics, and the labor market during the early republic, it was not enough. For Cuban followers of Garvey, one could struggle for success through the Cuban political system as well as through the UNIA. They did not see any contradiction in identifying as Cubans and Garveyites, in their

patriotic pride and their belief in the redemptive promise of black nationalism. As Pedro Montenegro declared after joining Division 24 in Havana in 1929: “Without ceasing to be Cuban and without ceasing to belong here to a political party, I will support the cause that the Universal Negro Improvement Association defends, because it is a noble, just, and generous cause” (Montenegro 1929a). In the end, however, Pedro Montenegro, Miguel Casanova, and the other Cuban Garveyites remained exceptions to the rule. For most Cubans of African descent, the apparent contradiction between Garvey’s message of race pride and Pan-African nationalism, on the one hand, and the myth of racial equality and prevailing notion of a “raceless” Cuban national identity, on the other, proved too powerful to overcome.

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Notes

¹ Trouillot (1995: 26) further observes: “[S]ince the overlap between history as social process and history as knowledge is fluid, participants in any event may enter into the production of a narrative about the event before

the historian as such reaches the scene.” Coverage of Garvey’s visit to Havana in the Cuban press, as described above, is particularly telling in this regard. Palmié (2002: 1-77) provides a fascinating discussion of the nature of historical knowledge in general and as pertaining to Afro-Cuban history in particular.

- ² On the history of British West Indian immigration and Garveyism in Cuba, see especially Giovannetti (2001) and McLeod (1996).
- ³ The notion “articulation of race” comes from James (1998: 101). Some of the earlier influential works dealing with the differential ways that race has been constructed in the Americas are Freyre (1946); Tannenbaum (1946); Elkins (1959); Hoetink (1967); Klein (1967); and Degler (1971). If, as Aline Helg (1995: 3-4) contends, Cuba’s social construct of race occupies an intermediate position between the two variants often associated with Iberian colonial traditions on the one hand and northwestern European traditions on the other, then the study of Garveyism in the Cuban context should be particularly revealing.
- ⁴ Hill (1983: xxxvi-xxxvii) identifies the integration of the search for racial justice and heightened racial awareness in the United States with a long tradition of social consciousness and resistance among the independent peasantry in the British Caribbean as the basic foundation of Garveyism.
- ⁵ Among the recent works which examine changing constructions of race in Cuba during the 1920s and 1930s, see Schwartz (1977); Fernández Robaina (1990); Moore (1997); Brock and Castañeda Fuertes (1998); Morrison (1999); Bronfman (2000); and de la Fuente (2001).
- ⁶ On “the success of propaganda” by the UNIA in general, see Hill (1983: lxxxvii-lxxxix).
- ⁷ On the history of the Partido Independiente de Color, the 1912 massacre, and the development of a myth of racial equality in Cuba, see Helg (1995).

U. N. I. A. NEWS

By WM. H. FERRIS

RT. HON. HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR CUBA, MR. EDUARDO V. MORALES, TAKES HAVANA DIVISION BY STORM; LEAVES HER IN THOROUGH WORKING CONDITION

Having been informed previously that His Grace the Chaplain-General would visit the Havana Division on Wednesday and Thursday, 28 and 29, we looked forward to the visit with great interest and high hopes. The committee appointed for the reception met from early morning to meet the

applause from the audience. The recitation, "Cantata U. N. I. A.," by Miss [name] well [name]. The new [name] Jesu [name]

guage, it is with you come you to this me when you came up cause you have seen the purpose of this. Then he spoke Marcus Garvey with citation; his being kings and queens, said, traveled in all and found the Negro others are tolling their own. He bl the Negro to wake. In less than four four millions of me ships' of the "Black which had been in year ago named the lass" and whose are welcomed by ex-Pr published in "E another, ago.

THE NEWS

THE NEGRO WORLD, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER

SOLA, CAM., CUBA

INTERESTING CRICKET MATCH PLAYED ON MORON OVAL, CAMAGUEY, CUBA

MORON, Camaguey, Cuba, Sept. 1-
On Emancipation Day, August 21,
the Moron C. C. (under their colors)
again met the Ciego C. C. of that go
old city, Ciego Oval, and Victorious
boys on both sides still looking
The morning opened gloomy
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to be abandoned, but at 2 o
the train from Ciego de Avila
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but let's add
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FLORIDA, CUBA

Never in the history of the Universal Improvement Association has the division played such an important part in the magnificent Silver-Tee which took place on Sunday April 20.
Program rendered on this occasion considered the best of its history was held for the function in the building of and the Sola division of the 100 per cent rally contributed to
turned precisely at Hall. The hall is most capacity. Behind the ranks. On entering the
written speakers of Nuevitas de secre- tion, and expedie
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