

A “Common Spectacle” of the Race: Garveyism’s Visual Politics of Founding

ADOM GETACHEW *University of Chicago*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adom Getachew , Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, agetachew@uchicago.edu.

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

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

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

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

If I attempt to expand our conception of founding by exploring the role of images and performance in political empowerment, I also intend to contribute to rethinking Garveyism as mass movement. Conceived primarily as the highpoint of classical Black nationalism, interpretations of the movement center on the assumed telos of statehood (Jagmohan 2020; Moses 1978). While the formation of a Black state was not insignificant to the movement’s self-understanding, a range of aspirations from repatriation and economic self-help to racial pride and anti-imperialism contributed to the movement’s popular success (Harold 2007; Moses 2004, 249–50). In this essay, I extend Adam Ewing’s recent call to view “Garveyism less as an ideology but as a method of organic *mass* politics” (Ewing 2014, 6). Situating Garveyism within contemporaneous interwar debates about and practices of mass politics, I set aside the question of the movement’s

ends to consider its political practices. Visual spectacles of the parade and mass assembly were only one such practice. At the annual convention and reiterated in the local divisions, these spectacles became political rituals that performed the movement’s commitments to internationalism and instilled a sense of political empowerment. When they gathered, Garveyites saw themselves—in how others reacted to them, in the shape of their leader—and a new self-image came into focus.

FOUNDING THE UNIVERSAL NEGRO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Garveyism shared with Randolph and Owen’s vision a commitment to political radicalism, but where they located class at its center, Garveyism followed what Harrison called a “race-first” program (Harrison [1920] 2001, 109; Martin 1976). “The international fact to which Negroes in America are now reacting,” Harrison argued, “is not the exploitation of laborers by

capitalists; but the social, political and economic subjection of colored peoples by white.” Internationalism, which stemmed from “a similarity of suffering” around the world (Harrison [1919] 2001, 103) distinguished Garveyism from the US-centered New Negro movement. Locke, for instance, acknowledged growing Black internationalism as “an effort to recapture contact with the scattered people of African derivation,” but he saw the New Negro’s objectives as “none other than the ideals of American institutions and democracy” (Locke 1925, 15; Mitchell 2010, 645–46). Garveyism’s prioritization of the international stage, its investment in a Black politics articulated to a global scene of racial/imperial domination, was central to the conception of the Universal Negro.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A COMMON SPECTACLE OF THE RACE

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

Through the parade, the Universal Negro was visually conjured from the multiplicity of regional and national affiliations. The procession was organized according to the divisional structure of the UNIA, which highlighted the local settings of its members. The “Negroes of the World” were not one undivided people, but “represented under the banner of [their] respective country, state or island.” Additionally, the participants carried signs that reflected competing demands and political positions. Slogans like “Africa for the Africans” and “Africa a Nation One and Indivisible” stood in conjunction with banners that read “We Believe in the Liberal Institutions of America” and “Long live America” (Hill 1983b, 493). Liberty

Hall, where the convention proceedings took place, was decorated with “buntings and flags of various countries [including] England, Africa, the United States, Haiti, Panama, Central America, San Domingo, and other world empires, and nations” (Hill 1983b, 642).

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

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

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

citizens developed a “reverential self-regard” (Frank 2014, 25). Through the creation of new images of peoplehood in spectacular performances of popular sovereignty, the people pry their awed gazes from the dethroned king to regard themselves as self-authorizing and capable of political transformation (Frank 2014; 2017, 150).

When situated in this wider context of popular self-representation, three features of the UNIA’s opening parade come into view. First, the parade appears as a form of *auto-spectacle* orchestrated and organized to transform the self-regard of participants primarily and then secondarily Black spectators. As we will see in the next two sections, the audience played an important role in enabling the transformation of self-regard, but participants rather than spectators were the primary target of the performance. My emphasis on auto-spectacle is distinct from a reading of the parade that highlights its satirical quality. By opening on August 1 (Emancipation Day in the West Indies) and by mimicking the royal procession at the opening of the British House of Commons, the convention reflected the UNIA’s origins in the British imperial world and the continued significance of West Indian migrants to its base in the United States. Robert Hill argues that the parade emerged from a Caribbean aesthetic that involved “a strong element of masquerade and burlesque of aristocratic and monarchical forms” (Hill 1994, 197). Its satirical dimensions generated an “intentional burlesque of the ritual of European imperialism and statecraft” (Morss-Lovett 1923; Stephens 2005, 97). Though attention to satire captures Garveyism’s critique of imperial power, this perspective leaves unattended the inwardly directed effort of developing and transforming Black self-regard.

Second, to perform this labor, the common spectacle worked by engendering awe and admiration. A *sublime* image of the Negro race was the means of developing reverential self-regard. This dimension of the parade is productively illuminated when read alongside Edmund Burke’s account of the sublime as delightful horror. According to the UNIA’s *Convention Bulletin*, the parade “presented a thrilling, spectacular scene that was dazzling to the eyes of the most imaginative.” “This time,” the coverage continued, “imagination has been outguessed as every onlooker must admit” (Hill 1983b, 492). The scene of the parade interrupts the public association of blackness with denigration and recasts a racial unity initially predicated on disenfranchisement. In its place, it inserts an image of political empowerment, an image that acts out the as-yet unrealized aspiration for self-government. This is a stunning picture, one that observers cannot take their eyes off. Twice the *Bulletin* describes the gaze of spectators as taking the form of a “morbid curiosity” (Hill 1983b, 543, 646). Observers at first experience awe and “negative astonishment,” but by the closing parade on August 31, this initial affect is transformed into “sympathy, respect, and admiration” (Hill 1983b, 646).

Akin to the structure of Burke’s sublime, the spectacular staging of the Universal Negro initially produces astonishment and fear, which is then gradually

transformed into admiration. For Burke, “delightful horror ... is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” where delight is understood less as indolent pleasure than the “removal of pain or danger” (Burke [1757] 2004, 115, 84). Like the *Bulletin*’s description of a “morbid curiosity,” Burke’s sublime also initially produces an “astonishment,” which is incapacitating. “All the motions are suspended,” Burke writes, and “the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other.” The sublime has an “irresistible force” and overtakes the faculties of reason. The secondary effects of this encounter with the sublime “are admiration, reverence and respect” (Burke [1759] 2004, 101). Where Burke is concerned with the first and “highest degree” of the sublime—awe and astonishment, the *Bulletin* emphasizes the secondary effects of admiration and respect.

This brings us to the third feature of the parade. In deploying spectacular mass assembly to engender reverential self-regard, the parade articulates an approach to racial pride concerned less with a history of past achievements than a present staging of political empowerment. Garveyism, like other Black nationalist movements, is deeply associated with efforts to undo the social stigma and shame associated with Blackness. Central to this effort are often strategies of representing the historical achievements of African-descended peoples (Shelby 2005, 95). Though the UNIA was engaged in reconstructions of Black and African history, the convention emphasized a newly discovered collective power.

The distinctiveness I am suggesting is illuminated by contrast with an almost parallel effort to deploy theatrical performance in the service of racial pride—W. E. B. Du Bois’s pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*. While Du Bois was deeply critical of Garveyism, including its visual practices, he shared with Garvey a view of art and aesthetic representation as a tool in the project of racial liberation (Du Bois 1926; Martin 1976, 26; Rogers 2012, 195). Du Bois decided “the pageant must be tried” after concluding that it is the “one new thing in the dead level of uninteresting exhibitions” (Du Bois 1915, 91). Du Bois had participated in this “dead level” when he put together the “Exhibit of Negroes” for the 1900 world’s fair in Paris. At the time, he had celebrated this effort as “an honest, straightforward exhibit of a small nation of people, *picturing* their life and development without apology or gloss, and above all made by themselves” (Du Bois 1900, 577; emphasis added). The pageant, with its spectacular theatricality and mythical presentation of history, offered a new vehicle for picturing the race and displaying this image before a mass audience.

Du Bois wrote his pageant in 1911, and it would be performed in New York two years later to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. This first staging involved 350 actors performing the history of the Negro race from the Iron Age to the twentieth century before an audience of 14,000 people. Subsequent performances with larger casts and audiences took place in Washington DC (1915), Philadelphia (1916), and Los Angeles (1925). In Du Bois’s pageant, Ethiopia embodied as “Mother of Men” leads a “mythic procession” that begins with the introduction

of iron welding in West Africa, walks through ancient civilizations in Egypt, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, narrates the tragedy of new world slavery, and depicts the journey “up from slavery ... with Toussaint [L’Overture] and [Frederick] Douglass who build a new and mighty Tower of Light on which the star of freedom gleams forever” (Du Bois 1915, 91).

Like the UNIA’s *Convention Bulletin*, Du Bois emphasizes the affective responses this drama of Negro history occasions. He reports audiences moved to tears and gripped by the narrative (Du Bois 1915, 91). In Du Bois’s account, this performance is directing toward transforming Black self-perception and expanding the capacity for judgment among white citizens (Rogers 2012, 195). The pageantry of Negro history does not strike the viewer with an image of collective power but rather ennobles Black striving across centuries in service of racial uplift and education (Du Bois 1916). It stimulates, as Du Bois puts it, a “reasonable race pride”—neither too strident nor brazen and able to induce white sympathy through the narrative of tragedy and triumph (Du Bois 1916, 173).³

As we shall see, Du Bois joined a number of Black intellectuals in criticizing the UNIA’s convention for its exuberance and excess. From his perspective, it verged on comedic (Du Bois 1923, 539). Its spectacular character, however, was connected to its construction as a moment of founding, marking a rupture in Black politics. It was the founding of a “race that now, after centuries of injustice, was celebrating its new birth, the dawning for them of a new day, an age undreamt of by their ancestors” (Hill 1983b, 643). Where Du Bois’s pageant employs the ancestors to engender race pride, the UNIA’s project of reverential self-regard is made possible by a distinction with the past. Whereas Du Bois targets his education of the senses at the audience of the pageant, in the UNIA parade, the performers are themselves the teachers and the students of the lesson. There is a recursive quality to the working of race pride understood as reverential self-regard—for it is one’s own performance of empowerment that inspires reverence.

A MIRROR OF REVERENTIAL SELF-REGARD

How do you see yourself with reverence? How do you know the performance of political power in which you are engaged inspires awe and admiration? For interwar radicals inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and seeking new strategies of self-representation in the age of mass politics, these questions drew them to theatrical, performative, and representational strategies that destabilized the distinction between participant and spectator, actor, and audience (Jonsson 2013, 226; Romberg 2018, 44). By occupying both roles one could enact and view one’s own self-representation. In contrast, the UNIA’s parade maintains the distinction

between actors and spectators. It is recounted by an omniscient narrator who frequently employs the perspective of specifically located spectators to witness the scene of political empowerment. Spectators of the parade are presented to be awed by the example of Black political power. By showing how spectators experience the transformation of negative astonishment and morbid curiosity into feelings of admiration and respect, the audience of the parade appear as a *mirror* that reflects back the newly felt power of UNIA members.

The heuristic of the mirror appears in some of Garvey’s earliest writings. In his 1913 essay “The British West Indies in the Mirror of Civilization,” and the 1917 “British West Indies in the Mirror of Truth,” Garvey reconstructed the history of enslavement and post-emancipation racial domination in the Caribbean to set the stage for his prophecy of racial awakening (Hill 2011, 711–20, 818–23). He employs a global and comparative mirror to rouse the “sleeping West Indian” who will be “the instrument of uniting a scattered race” (Hill 2011, 820, 719). Garvey’s use of the metaphor of mirroring suggests that one consequence of racial and colonial domination is that one always sees oneself in the eyes of a world made by imperial and racial domination. The strategy of the essays and of the parade is not to reject the dependence on mirrors but instead to resituate them, place them in a different location and light, such that they reveal a new image of the race. In the parade, the omnipresent white gaze, which reproduces an image of the Negro as inferior and incapable, is embodied. Garveyites see the awe and admiration their parade inspires in the eyes of white women and Irish observers—both groups that are engaged in their own political struggles.

The *Bulletin* reports that “white women were seen to cry” at the scene of the parade. This response to the parade’s “insistent note of liberty” is not registered as emerging from fear of the uniformed Black paraders. Instead, their cries are spurred by having “beheld the Negro achieving that measure of success that they themselves, under similar distressing conditions, in other parts of the world, are fighting to achieve for themselves” (Hill 1983b, 491). Here the *Bulletin* makes reference to the on-going struggle for the right to vote in Britain where suffragists had won a partial victory with a 1918 expansion of the franchise to include a select group of propertied women. There is in the women’s cries a recognition of these parallel efforts. They admire the enactment of political power and come in the process to reflect on the on-going struggles for women’s emancipation.

The parade’s capacity to inspire admiration and respect is reinforced when the coverage turns to examine the responses of Irish spectators. As the parade arrives on 125th street, an Irishwoman “with tears upon her cheeks, in the anguish of despair, in the gloom of hopelessness, cried: ‘And to think the Negroes will get their liberty before the Irish’” (Hill 1983b, 491). Irish nationalism had long served as an inspiration to Garvey, who often situated the project of Black self-determination alongside the Irish struggle for

³ Du Bois was disappointed, however, that the white public had “shown little or no interest” in the pageant (Du Bois 1916, 173).

independence.⁴ During the convention, he announced that he was sending a telegram to Eamon de Valera, then leader of Sinn Féin, to express “sympathy of Negroes of the world for [the] cause” of a free Irish Republic (Hill 1983b, 499). Here, the Irishwoman’s anguished response registers the political power made visible in the UNIA’s parade. Although the cause of African liberation was often discussed by Garvey as a decades-long project of self-emancipation, the strident march of the UNIA members impressed the view that Black liberty was already at hand, that it had in fact overtaken the model of Irish nationalism. This recognition produces for the woman a sense of pity for the Irish cause that now lags behind this image of Black self-assertion.

Her reaction is recorded as just one sign of “a visible change in the attitude of the Irish towards the Negro as manifested in to-day’s parade” (Hill 1983b, 491). A more “astonishing” example can be found among the Irish police reserves on duty during the parade whose “behavior was exemplary [and] so notably different from their customary conduct.” Instead they are, at least momentarily, drawn to the sympathy and “fellow-feeling” that “make us so wondrously kind to each other” (Hill 1983b, 491). This sympathy does not emanate from a preexisting solidarity but is catalyzed by the experience of viewing the manifestation of an assertive and empowered Black race.⁵

If the creation of the Universal Negro required overcoming the old Negro’s subservience and ingrained habits of racial inferiority, there was no better testament to the figure’s representation of political unity and empowerment than how its staging inspired awe among white spectators. Their envy, respect, and sympathy serve to reflect back to the participants the political power manifested in the parade. But because self-regard depends in this way on the spectatorial gaze, it is a fragile enterprise, always in

need of reinforcement. While the *Bulletin’s* narrative assures us that spectators have indeed been appropriately awed by the scenes of Black political empowerment, there is always a chance that the mirror of their gaze might not register the sublime image of the race. The reportage indicates the fragility of this dependence when it notes the reactions of “white journalists” who are dispatched to cover the convention but “seem nonplussed by its unusual character and far-reaching objects.” These spectators view the project of racial redemption as nothing but “a wild dream” (Hill 1983b, 542).

It is for this reason that the founding of the Universal Negro could not be limited to one extraordinary moment. Instead, it was a reiterative practice not only repeated at the annual international conventions but also inserted into everyday and local organizational practices. The convention functions in this context as a “scenario” that provides broad outlines for reenactment and simulation (Taylor 2009, 1888–90). As a formulaic structure, the scenario, Diana Taylor argues, “predispose[s] certain outcomes, yet allows for reversal, parody and change” (Taylor 2003, 31). The repetition of the conventions’ elements reinforces the development of reverential self-regard through the recurring performances of racial unity and political empowerment. Given the interplay between the formulaic and the improvisational, these performances are best understood as instances of reactivation rather than duplication (Taylor 2003, 32). The *Negro World* catalogues these reiterative local enactments of the convention. A November 1923 issue included a brief report on a convention in Camagüey, Cuba (Angus 1923). The following year, as the international convention closed in New York, UNIA members in Camagüey and Banes staged mass parades that replicated the form of the New York procession (James 1924; Provost 1924). According to the reporter covering the Camagüey parade, “for the first time in Cuban history an assembly of Negroes, united under the one, true, and sublime cause of the UNIA paraded the principal streets of the city” (Provost 1924). These reiterated performances reinforced the cultivation of reverential self-regard. And they did so by both replicating the structure of the convention and incorporating new elements such as the insertion of images and rituals associated with Cuban nationalism (Guridy 2010, 97–98; Sullivan 2019, 69–75).

A CONTAGIOUS SELF-REGARD

While white spectators mirror back a sublime image of the race, the far larger Black audience is enlisted into the UNIA’s political project through its visual politics. Harlem’s Black residents did not just line the streets during the parades but were also invited to attend sessions of the convention at Liberty Hall. Drawn at first by the spectacular and unprecedented gathering, “curiosity seekers” flocked to the meetings, particularly in the first week’s sessions. At work here too is a “morbid curiosity”—a spectacle that compels by being

⁴ Garvey’s interests in Irish nationalism date back to his involvement in the National Club of Jamaica, whose founder S. A. G. Cox was influenced by Sinn Féin while he studied at Middle Temple. The Club’s paper *Our Own*, where Garvey’s early writings were published, was the English translation of Sinn Féin. Other parallels include the UNIA’s Liberty Hall modeled on the Dublin hall and the *Negro World’s* reference to the *Irish World*. Garvey closely identified with Valera, fashioning himself as Provisional President of Africa just as Valera used the title of “President of Dáil Éireann” when he visited the United States between 1920 and 1921 (Hill 1983a, lxxi–lxxiv). The British imperial context of emerging West Indian nationalism and Irish nationalism facilitated these connections. At the same time, the wider Black nationalist tradition evinces an enduring interest in the Irish question as one instance of the problem of a “nation within a nation” (Delany [1852] 1993, 12).

⁵ Striking in this encounter with Irish police is the contrast it suggests with the paradigmatic instance of the interaction between police and Black mass action exemplified in the Civil Rights Movement. Non-violent mass action, as Karuna Mantena has recently argued, “was centrally linked to the staging of *suffering and discipline*” (Mantena 2018, 79–80). It dramatized state violence in its effort to convert moral opponents. The parade, by contrast, stages a political power that disarms the agents of state violence. This act does not engage in moral appeal but is instead staged to manifest to those assembled in the parade a sense of their own political power.

disruptive and disturbing. But in the course of attending the convening, curiosity is “changed, subconsciously, to a feeling and spirit of enthusiasm by what they see and hear, only to be converted before leaving the room to a belief in the worthiness and greatness of the cause” (Hill 1983b, 543).

The *Bulletin* describes this transformation as conversion, which in contrast to persuasion, suggests a process that works less at the level of rational argument and deliberation than in the realm of affects and habits. The spectator is converted by the “irresistible force” of the sublime (Burke [1759] 2004, 101). The awe-inspiring spectacle of the Universal Negro unmoors one from settled convictions and perceptions. It compels and attracts new adherents. As a result, the reverential self-regard of UNIA members becomes contagious. The choice of contagion might appear infelicitous here not only because of its association with disease but also because it was the language of antidemocratic critics of mass action and crowd politics. In Gustave Le Bon’s formulation, crowds are characterized by “an excessive suggestibility,” which allows certain illusions to spread among its members (Le Bon [1985] 2002, 14).

Contagion captures the virality of affect, which we will soon see. But in contrast to suggestion, which functions as a form of pathological transmission for Le Bon, I would like to read the source of contagion, following Freud, as an intersubjective process of *identification*. Identification, Freud writes, “may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not the object of the sexual instinct” (Freud [1922] 1959, 50). The more significant the common quality is, the more likely it is the identification will function as the “beginning of a new tie” (Freud [1922] 1959, 50). Read in this way, what makes the political empowerment displayed at the convention contagious is that it elicits the possibility of identification. Spectators are drawn to identify with the image of the Universal Negro staged and performed during the convention, to see themselves as tied to and part of the newly empowered political people. Let us now see how the proceedings of the convention illicit identification and engender a contagious form of reverential self-regard.

To draw in passive, even skeptical Black spectators, the “perfect order” and “becoming decorum” of the proceedings are highlighted (Hill 1983b, 544). The recurring emphasis on the orderliness of the convention bespeaks a self-consciousness about the critical and mocking depictions of the UNIA’s theatrical politics. For Herbert Seligman, the pomp of the parades, especially the knighting of officials at the second convention, was “frankly in the manner of the governments that have gone out of style in Europe” (Hill 1985, 243). A year later, Du Bois jibed, “a casual observer might have mistaken [the parade and convention] for the dress rehearsal of a new comic opera and looked instinctively for Bert Williams and [Flournoy] Miller and [Aubrey] Lyles,” evoking the Bahamian actor and African American performing duo who were mainstays of vaudeville theater stages (Du Bois 1923, 539). Du

Bois recognizes the aesthetic quality of the convention, but where the UNIA aspires to produce a sublime image of the race, he perceives comedy. He reiterates this view in his 1928 novel *Dark Princess*, where the hero of the story Matthew Townes describes Perigua, a fictionalized Garveyite, as “too theatrical” (Du Bois [1928] 2007, 35).

The *Bulletin* does not name any specific critics, but it links the ridicule of the convention to past depictions of “Negro assemblages.” It specifically names the “Lime Kiln Club,” a fictional Black fraternal organization introduced by the humorist Charles Bertrand Lewis to readers of the *Detroit Free Press* in the late nineteenth century. Often written in the voice of “Brother Gardner” who is elected president of the club, Lewis (writing by the pen name M. Quad) rendered Black political oratory incomprehensible and absurd (Quad 1895). The Lime Kiln Club was a recurring skit in minstrel and vaudeville performances at the turn of the twentieth century and would be adapted as a silent film in 1913, the first ever to include an all-Black cast with Bert Williams in the starring role. Through a variety of markers including the use of “dialect ... garbled syntax, non-sequiturs, botched Latin,” performances of the Lime Kiln Club represented “a conspicuous communicative incompetence” in which the “generic markers are all right, but the execution all wrong” (Bauman and Feaster 2005, 49). Juxtaposing the UNIA convention to the Lime Kiln Club, the *Bulletin* insists that form and content are properly assembled at the UNIA convention. The delegates engage in their deliberation with “mutual respect.” No one attempts “to play to the galleries” or to “ride rough-shod over anybody else.” There is “no indulgence in personalities or acrimonious debate.” Instead, the delegates model an exemplary form of political deliberation that is “highly commendable and in keeping with the grave and momentous problems of the Race” (Hill 1983b, 544).

The bulletin draws attention to the ways the convention follows normative scripts of political assembly. It is a performance that properly acts out oratory, deliberation, and procedure. But rather than staid and subdued, it generates enthusiasm and excitement. Take for instance the public reading of the *Declaration of the Rights of Negro Peoples of the World* on the thirteenth day of the convention. The *Declaration*, referred to as the “Mag[na] Charta [sic] of Negro rights and liberty,” is itself a script of political claims making, which signals the UNIA’s embodiment of proper political form (Hill 1983b, 348). The act of declaring rights is recalled as “a solemn, dramatic occasion.” The *Declaration* is a “sacred document” because it is the declaration of a new race, “of black people of the world [who] no longer will ... suffer injustice and wrong” (Hill 1983b, 585). Yet as each article is read, solemnity is interrupted by “uproarious applause.” The enthusiasm of the audience, exhibited in “cheering and shouting, even whistling, with the waving of handkerchiefs, was almost indescribable.” The audience is “frantic with joy, and seemed unable to give sufficient vent to the feelings of approbation” (Hill 1983b, 585).

Here, in a description that mimics the experience of religious frenzy, the *Bulletin* attempts to capture the virality of affective responses that the sublime image of the race engenders. The image of self-authorization, represented in the reading of the *Declaration*, overpowers the audience. Their exuberant response has a spontaneous and a contagious quality that envelops the whole room. On one hand, the exuberant and excessive response of the Black audience registers once more the staging of political empowerment. On the other hand, this response indicates the transformation of passive spectators who have “caught the spirit” of the UNIA. These spectators are drawn to see themselves in the image of the Universal Negro by coming to identify that they share with the participants a common political vision.

If white spectators are introduced to mirror back an image of an empowered race, the same image instills among its Black viewers an identification with the scene of political empowerment. But just as the white spectatorial gaze could fail to register the sublimity of the Universal Negro and thereby threaten the development of reverential self-regard, the effort at winning new adherents may not yield the kind of transformation depicted above. The *Bulletin* notes that the enthusiasm generated in the course of the convention was not enough to win over all viewers. For this group of spectators “inclined to stay aloof,” the “fine musical program” and “eloquent, soul-inspiring addresses,” may illicit some pride, but do not catalyze an identification with the UNIA’s political project (Hill 1983b, 543).

That identification with the cause of the UNIA may not be completed in the course of the convention indicates once more the fragility of the enterprise of political founding. The work of generating a common spectacle was as Garvey put it “a difficult proposition,” one that required reiterative staging and restaging. As an opening salvo into this ongoing practice, the first convention in August 1920 marked a rupture. It was the founding of a “race that now, after centuries of injustice, was celebrating its new birth” (Hill 1983b, 643). And this rebirth was centrally tied to the UNIA’s visual politics, to its effort to generate a common spectacle, to set before Black people a moving picture of their collective power.

REGARDING THE LEADER

I have so far recounted how collectively enacted spectacles of the race during the convention produced a sublime image that engendered reverential self-regard. Yet as with other moments of political founding, the UNIA frequently appealed to a single and unified founder in the figure of Garvey himself. The convention *Bulletin* repeatedly returns to the “unmatchable leadership” of Marcus Garvey and his “genius” as the source of the convention’s spectacular proceedings (Hill 1983b, 543). And while it is the collective image manifested in the convention that produces astonishment and admiration among its spectators, Garvey is

celebrated as its architect, as the “one man, who by his vision and backbone, is putting the Negro on the map of real achievement” (Hill 1983b, 490). He would be elected “Provisional President of Africa” during the convention. As the lawgiver, Garvey was represented as a “heteronomic” agent who was “simultaneously the source of legitimacy for the new order and its authorizing agent whose own legitimacy is unquestionable and indeed superior” (Frank 2007, 114, 116; Bernal 2017, 60).

The sartorial choices of academic regalia and later military attire registered key tropes of the founder—the philosopher-king and the soldier-statesman. Not only in his self-fashioning, but also in his writings, Garvey readily embraced the role of the lawgiver. His 1925 essay “Governing the Ideal State” advocated rule of the virtuous statesman as an alternative to the decadence of the modern democratic state. The ideal was one in which absolute authority is vested in the president, a strict gendered division of labor in the home underwrites the public sphere, and crimes of state, especially corruption and treason, are severely punished (Garvey [1925] 1987, 29–32). Garvey’s harsh penal system in this essay is drawn directly from Plato’s *Laws*, and he later described the essay as a hypothetical founding similar to the city in speech of Plato’s *Republic* (Hill and Bair 1987, xl–xlv).

Although this essay was written while he was in jail for mail fraud, Garvey’s grandeur continued to play a central role in the annual conventions. In fact, as Erica Edwards argues, Garvey’s physical absence paradoxically magnified his stature and suspended the movement in a “messianic temporality” between “the memory of the leader’s past triumph and the hope for his reappearance” (Edwards 2012, 44). Represented by an academic robe draped over the seat Garvey would have occupied during the 1924 and 1926 conventions and pictured through a life-size oil portrait in the 1926 parade, Garvey was figured as “a spectacular presence and spectacular void” (Edwards 2012, 45). Beyond the convention, Garvey’s image circulated in signed postcards, framed photographs, and medallions (Raiford 2013, 272).

Critics of the UNIA noted how the UNIA’s theatricality and images centered Garvey. Writing for the Urban League’s *Opportunity*, A. F. Elmes argued that Garveyism was predicated on exploiting the “psychology of the people” who were drawn by the “love of symbols, craving of power ... [and] showy parades” (Elmes [1925] 1974, 124). Du Bois similarly concluded that Garvey “appealed to the crowd” with all the “arts of the demagogue” (Du Bois 1923, 546). Rather than reworking and rehabilitating Black self-regard, Garveyites directed their gaze up at the enthralling figure of the leader. Instead of sites of collective political empowerment, they were scenes of enervation with the masses bewitched by the spectacle of Garvey. Such assessments were particularly pronounced after the second convention in 1921, which introduced honorary societies called the “Knighthood of the Sublime Order of the Nile” and “Knighthood of the Order of Ethiopia” (Hill 1984, 704). For Howard University professor

Kelly Miller, this ceremony indexed the movement’s attachment to “the tinsel glory and barbaric splendour of oriental pomp and display” (Miller 1927, 496).

At the center of these critiques was an anxiety that Garveyism’s theatricality reproduced the aesthetics of monarchy or evoked fascism. In 1940 C. L. R. James made the latter connection, picked up more recently in Paul Gilroy’s account of Black fascism (Gilroy 2000). While James celebrated Garvey’s capacity to enlist the Black masses in “a new vision of society,” he likened him to a “race fanatic” who eerily resembled Hitler. “His program had a nebulousness similar to the Nazi program,” and in his emphasis on “uniforms, parades, military guards, in short, the dramatic and spectacular” Garvey anticipated Nazism (James [1940] 1996, 114–116). That in 1937 Garvey himself claimed Garveyites were the “first fascists” from whom Mussolini had borrowed his political style appears to confirm James’s statement and vindicate Du Bois and others who identified Garveyism as a dangerous form of crowd politics (Hill and Bair 1987, lviii; Moses 1978, 262).

The question of political leadership in Garveyism requires greater attention than I am able to give in the remaining space of this essay, but I want to suggest an alternative to a picture in which the leader leads simply by authoritarian imposition or stealth manipulation. This alternative is offered by Freud and Ernesto Laclau who argue that the leader “presents, in a particularly marked fashion, features that he shares with those he is supposed to lead” (Laclau 2018, 59). He is both one of the group, “with typical qualities” of the individuals in the group, and first among them insofar as those qualities appear to be more pronounced in him (Freud [1922] 1959, 79). This duality is captured for instance in the opening page of each *Negro World* where Garvey addresses his readers as “Fellow-Men of the Negro-Race,” and signs “Founder and President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.”

Both equality and distinction structure the leader’s place and make possible identification with him. Consider for instance the following description of listening to Garvey speak by former UNIA member Virginia Collins: “When he spoke, it was as if you were speaking yourself. It was not like somebody speaking to you, but like he was you, or you was he, and it just was a connected link and it was somethin’ like fire, like lightning, like something that went through everybody at the same time” (Nelson 2001). The “as if” in Collins’ formulation along with the interchangeability of “you” and “he” establishes horizontality. In this moment, Garvey takes the place of the mirroring audience we encountered at the parade. Reverential self-regard is here produced by seeing oneself through the spectacular performance of Garvey’s speech making.

The entries to a 1927 *Negro World* essay contest on the question of “Why I am a Garveyite” reinforce this view that the image of Garvey catalyzes a transformation of self-perception. The choice *Garveyite* as opposed to “UNIA member” for instance is already telling of the centrality accorded the figure of the leader. The first prize essay by Joseph Lloyd of Cuba

notes Garvey “has given me a new and lofty viewpoint to quicken my imagination” (Lloyd 1927). According to another entry, this expansion of imagination allows “Negroes to see the Deity in [their] own image” (Deane 1927). The authors frequently note that before becoming Garveyites, they already recognized the need for a new political program. I was “groping in the dark after something,” according to another submission (Simons 1927). On one hand, this suggests that the race needed the leadership of Garvey to emerge from the dark, to awaken racial consciousness. But this need can only take us “half-way.” For the leader to fill this need, he must share the group’s ideals (Freud [1922] 1959, 17, 79).

Insofar as Garvey introduces a new image or viewpoint of and for the race, he does not do so *ex nihilo*, but activates and actualizes what lies dormant. Take as an example another entry to the competition. “From a child I have resented the contemptible theory of white superiority and the so-called stigma of black inferiority,” begins Arthur Gray of Oakland, California (Gray 1927). Just as Collins hears herself in Garvey’s words, Gray finds his long-held views captured in Garvey’s political project. Garveyism’s signal achievement for Gray is its realization of racial unity on the global stage. Garvey “has succeeded in arousing members of his race 9,000 miles away in defiance of ... the European nations” (Gray 1927). This achievement of collective aspirations is why Gray considers “*identification* or association, with such a distinguished and outstanding character a most honorable and signal privilege” (Gray 1927; emphasis added). Driving this identification is Garvey’s dual position as both part of the collective striving for racial emancipation and as the singular figure endowed with a distinctive capacity to realize this vision.

I point to both moments to suggest that the leader/people relation is not unidirectional but one site of collective enactment. The figure of Garvey appears in these reflections as an alternative mirror of the race that magnifies and augments reverential self-regard. Like the lens of the common spectacle, he appears as a perspectival prosthesis, which fulfills the “desire to see the race’s agency and sovereignty reflected in world history” (Stephens 2005, 91). In this sense, collective enactment and identification with the leader might not be easily disaggregated in the case of Garveyism. This is not to accept unquestioningly the messianic figurations of Garvey. Nor is it to relegate Garveyism to the dustbin of history for its excessive identification with the leader. Instead, following the work of Erica Edwards (2012), we might trace how this image of the leader was contested and reimagined within the movement even as it was reproduced, an investigation to be undertaken elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

This essay sets the stage for that reconsideration by attending to one element of Garveyism as mass movement—the visual politics of founding.

Garveyism's deep investments in spectacle, theatricality, and performance are tied to the central and generalized political problem of how to constitute a people. In particular, the strategies by which a people come to see themselves as endowed with new political capacities are themselves a site of political action.

The specific conditions of founding a transnational people out of the experience of racial domination revealed two things: First, engendering reverential self-regard depends on the regard of others in ways that constantly threaten its development. The fragile character of this political enterprise brings into sharp relief the reiterative labors of staging, enacting, and viewing necessary to the practice of founding. This suggests that constituent moments must always be understood in relation to the particular conditions and mechanisms of domination to which they are addressed. Second, I have argued that the figure of the leader proved to be a productive site for repairing self-regard, for through the leader the regard of the other is transformed into the regard of a "fellow-man of the Negro race." Collective enactment of mass assembly and the moment of identification with the leader are entangled elements in the development of self-regard.

Extending our thinking about the visual politics of founding through the example of Garveyism on one hand, we may also view Garveyism within the interwar context of mass politics on the other. The wreckage of liberal civilization in 1918 called forth new performances of peoplehood along racial, class, and national lines around the world. Recognizing these convergences, we might also begin to assess the contradictions and dilemmas of Garveyism less as particular to its brand of Black nationalism or to the psychological profile of its leader. Instead we might view Garveyism as a window into wider questions about popular politics.

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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