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# PRESSED TO THE WALL, DYING, BUT FIGHTING BACK

AFRO-CARRIBEAN MIGRANTS IN AMERICAN RADICAL POLITICS, 1914-1940

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Strolling down the street in Harlem in the second and third decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one would have been likely to hear impassioned soapbox speeches from members of radical<sup>1</sup> organizations like the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the African Blood Brotherhood, the Socialist Party, and later the Communist Party. It is also likely that the orators would have spoken with an accented English, suggesting Caribbean origins. In fact, for the size of their population, Afro-Caribbean immigrants comprised a disproportionate percentage of both the rank-and-file and leadership of American radical organizations – traversing the spectrum from Black Nationalist to Marxist organizations. In general, relative to African Americans, the Afro-Caribbean population exhibited an attraction to radical ideas incommensurate with their numbers. Observing this phenomenon raises several important questions: (1) What forces impelled the immigration of people of African descent from their islands of origin in the Caribbean to American cities? (2) What factors contributed to the radicalization of Afro-Caribbean people? (3) What organizations and ideological currents did Caribbean radicals engage with and what was the nature of this engagement? While this essay will pay particular attention to radicalism in Harlem, New York – an epicenter of black culture and politics after the turn of the century – it will focus more broadly on situating the emergence of Afro-Caribbean radicalism in migrants' experiences in both their islands of origin and the new terrain of American cities. Far from being predisposed to radical ideas by nature, Afro-Caribbean people were subject to a unique set of social, political, and economic circumstances that contributed to the adoption, by some, of such ideas. Once radicalized, Afro-Caribbean people made a lasting contribution not only to black radical politics, but American radical politics more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

**SOURCES OF MIGRATION**

A complete understanding of Caribbean-American radicalism first requires an exploration of the forces that carried such significant numbers of people from the British Caribbean to places like the United States, Central America, and Cuba at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sugar, and its centrality in the Caribbean economy, is crucial to the story of emigration from the region. The abolition of slavery in British territories in 1833 saw the beginning of a long, contested process to determine the new organization of labor in the British sugar islands. Changes in Caribbean labor, land use patterns, and agricultural production from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought poverty and disease while the disadvantaged position of the black working majority relative to the white ruling class limited its ability to cope with increasing hardship. It was in this context that the seeds of radicalization would begin to be planted and the option of emigration would become a reality. Special attention will be paid to the islands of Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad – the former two prove interesting as they represented the largest sources of migrants from the British islands. Conversely, Trinidad is fascinating for the relatively small number who left its shores in this time period and for its peculiar position, for a time, as a destination of migrants from other Caribbean islands.

In the history of the colonization of the Caribbean islands, no crop held greater significance than sugar. Under slavery, the extremely labor intensive cultivation of the crop caused innumerable deaths and cemented the importance of the African slave trade as a means of replacing those enslaved people who had succumbed to the brutal working conditions. The cultivation of cane sugar first required the intensive process of preparing the soil for planting the crop followed by a less strenuous period where the crop was tended to as it grew and then the most intensive “in-crop” season that required workers to labor around the clock to provide cane from the field for the mill where it was ground into sugar with byproducts of molasses, and rum.<sup>3</sup> In the years following emancipation in 1833 and the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865, Jamaica saw significant changes in its export economy as the fruit trade achieved new prominence and fluctuations in the world sugar market brought a decline in the production of the crop on many British Caribbean islands. By the end of the century, in fact, the banana had toppled sugar as Jamaica’s primary export – its value increasing to over \$2 million by the turn of the century. While on one hand the emergence of the fruit trade en-

couraged the growth and independence of a black peasantry, on the other hand the forces of commercialization had the effects of creating an agricultural working class and eventually pushing the black peasantry to the margins.<sup>4</sup> The story of the fruit trade, then, is in part the story of economic restructuring that brought hardship and, in turn, fueled the emigration of many Caribbean people of African descent.

There was no bigger player in the Jamaican fruit industry than the United Fruit Company. Initially founded by Captain Lorenzo D. Baker as Boston Fruit, through the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century United Fruit established a virtual monopoly on the Jamaican banana trade. The company's eventual primacy can largely be explained by its superior technology for preserving and shipping its cargo. With its fleet of steamers, United Fruit first gained full control of the shipping trade, which allowed its eventual expansion into banana production.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, meant squeezing the peasantry that had initially stood as the primary supplier of the fruit by introducing competition or establishing its own plantations. Writes Thomas Holt: "The process of securing monopoly began at the point of sale; it was achieved once the buyer, rather than the sellers, dictated the price. But in order to dictate price, the buyer needed to control alternative sources of supply, either by securing other vendors or by producing fruit himself."<sup>6</sup> With all of its competitors out of business by the 1890s, United Fruit's ability to dictate prices to producers left the peasantry at the mercy of the company. Thus, there was no need for United Fruit's agents to cajole peasants into producing more and higher quality fruit – instead, they could drive a much harder bargain. "You need not make any extra exertion for bananas," Baker told his son. "Tell the people if they wish to sell their fruit they must bring it down."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, agents had full discretion in determining which fruit was of high enough quality for purchase and the protests of small producers mattered little to Baker. "Never mind what people say," he wrote, "throw it back on their barrels, let them suffer if they will not mind you."<sup>8</sup>

As banana cultivation expanded, more and more land fell under the control of fewer and fewer people. In addition, the increasing price of land meant fewer smallholders could acquire land in the regions of the island where the soil was fertile enough to grow bananas. That 97 percent of the land offered for sale by the government was owned by only 81 individuals by the mid-1890s further illustrates the extent to which landholdings had become consolidated.<sup>9</sup> No longer able to work independently on their own land, much of Jamaica's former peasantry fell under the employ of United

Fruit as wage laborers. Wages were low and conditions were miserable – disease, namely malaria, ravaged the laboring population. The effects of the disease were further complicated by the absence of doctors who, since the end of slavery, had consistently left the island’s fruit growing regions owing to the lack of incentive for the planter class to invest in the wellbeing of their employees in the free labor economy. Finally, while the emergence of agricultural capitalism succeeded in transforming the Jamaican peasantry into a working class, it did not provide work for everyone. The result was a large shift in population to urban centers where many battled unemployment to attain service sector jobs.<sup>10</sup> In a word, by the turn of the century, Jamaica’s once independent black peasantry had been uprooted and reconstituted as an agricultural working class forced to endure near unbearable hardship.

While circumstances were inauspicious for Jamaica’s black working population, historian Winston James argues there were several factors that helped them through the difficult times. First, the sheer will and determination to persevere in the face of enormous hurdles should not be underestimated. Second, the peasant and working population displayed a dedication to education as evidenced by the increase in the number attending school from 40,800 to 125,500 between 1861 and 1911. This dedication to education would, in turn, contribute to the emergence of a black intelligentsia, which would play a lasting role in the development of a tradition of radicalism among Caribbean people. Finally, the possibility of emigration for new economic opportunities stood as a significant alternative to remaining on the island and struggling to carve out a meager existence.<sup>11</sup> Chief among the destinations of early Jamaican migrants was Panama, which offered the prospect of construction jobs on the railroad and later the canal. Working conditions were dangerous – disease and work-related injuries were typical – and black migrants were forced to confront the ugly face of Jim Crow racism, but wages were markedly higher and this fact was attractive enough. The Jamaican planter class and colonial government were well aware of the threat that emigration posed to their vision of a large, exploitable laboring population and moved to set limitations. The most restrictive measure was the 1893 Emigrant Laborers Protection Law, which allowed for the government to declare countries “proclaimed places” – requiring permits, hinging on property requirements, to migrate legally. Still, this was not enough to curb the flow of migration. Writes James: “Despite the obstacles placed in the Jamaican workers’ path, traffic between the island and the Isthmus was heavy and brisk with at least 168,888 departures and 119,407 people re-

turning between 1882 and 1915.”<sup>12</sup>

Of all of the Caribbean islands, Barbados – located some 800 miles southeast of Jamaica – lost the highest proportion of its population to migration at the turn of the century. Like Jamaica, this can be understood principally as a response to the extreme hardship endured by the laboring population – nowhere was this hardship more extreme, in fact, than on Barbados. Unlike Jamaica, the fruit trade never found an in-road in the Barbadian economy and following emancipation the planter class gained control of most available land, leaving little room for the emergence of a black peasantry. Sugar, through all of its tribulations, remained the dominant crop. This meant that as the sugar industry declined, workers were paid even less to compensate for falling prices. Owing significantly to the squalid living conditions resulting from this decline, Barbados had the highest infant mortality rate in the Caribbean at the turn of the century at 282 deaths per 1000 births.<sup>13</sup> While agricultural industries in Jamaica and Barbados took divergent paths in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their parallel migratory patterns can be attributed to the similar plights of the islands’ working people. A string of natural disasters that struck the region between 1879 and 1918 further exacerbated the suffering of the populations of Jamaica and Barbados. Furthermore, the disproportionate amount of devastation endured by working people in the wake of these disasters underscores the degree to which power and resources were stratified in the British Caribbean. Drought struck Jamaica repeatedly over this time period followed by several hurricanes – the most severe in 1903, virtually obliterating the fruit crop – floods, and even an earthquake. While the hurricane was directly responsible for countless deaths, the homelessness and disease that were blown in with the storm further intensified the suffering. Worse still, several more storms, including hurricanes in 1915 and 1917, made landfall in the years after 1903 – with predictably similar results.<sup>14</sup> The extreme poverty and hardship of the Jamaican and Barbadian working classes, then, explains not only the decision on the part of many to seek new opportunities in the United States, Panama, or Cuba, but it also explains why the havoc reaped by the natural disasters took the shape it did. Writes Winston James:

The effects of natural catastrophes such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and droughts are profoundly mediated by social, economic, and political relations. Put simply, God may send hurricanes, but their consequences are not God-given. The

damage that hurricanes, floods, and droughts do is clearly related to the degree of power one has over the effects of these natural phenomena, and the mechanisms at one's disposal to cope with their aftermath.<sup>15</sup>

The history of emigration from another British island, Trinidad, stands in stark contrast to that of Jamaica and Barbados. While people of African descent were flocking out of these islands at the turn of the century, Trinidad lost a relatively small proportion of its residents to emigration. In fact, for a period, the island was even a destination of intra-Caribbean migration. It was not until later, in the 1930s and 40s, that emigration to the United States emerged as a popular option for Trinidadian people. Why is this? Like the histories of emigration from Jamaica and Barbados, socioeconomic factors go a long way towards explaining the initial lack of migration from Trinidad. While Trinidad's primary crop was also sugar, the island had been more heavily invested in than either Barbados or Jamaica, had better technology, was less densely populated, and had a more diverse economy making it better able to respond to the falling price of sugar. Thus, the Trinidadian working class earned higher wages, on average, than their counterparts on most other islands while the lower price of land was conducive to the sustained presence of a black peasantry.<sup>16</sup> These factors, when weighed against the grim circumstances facing those on many other islands, must have made Trinidad seem like an attractive destination. It was only in the years between World Wars that emigration became a popular current among Trinidadian people. The economic, political, and social instability that arrived with the United States occupation of the island certainly must have weighed heavily into the arithmetic of migration for many who decided to leave. One historian estimates that of the more than 100,000 blacks who migrated to the United States in the period between 1900 and 1930, only Jamaica and Barbados contributed more than Trinidad.<sup>17</sup>

A final, important motivation for emigration from the British Caribbean came with the end of competitive examinations for positions in the Jamaican civil service in 1911. Having provided a valuable alternative to laboring on fruit plantations or service sector work, the end of competitive examinations made positions in the civil service virtually unattainable for blacks. For some, this was the last straw – enough to tip people already precariously situated over the edge and out of their homeland in search of new opportunity. Moreover, for many, the experience of being denied work for which they



were qualified based solely on the color of their skin had a radicalizing effect; one of several factors that contributed to the turn to radical politics made by some Caribbean migrants.<sup>18</sup> This combination of economic and political imperatives, though they affected the British Caribbean unevenly, laid the basis for the movement of a large and influential segment of the population to North American cities over the course of several decades. For many, the process of radicalization began with experiences in the Caribbean and continued upon arrival in the profoundly different social, economic, and political climate of the United States.

### SOURCES OF RADICALIZATION

The bridge from the Caribbean to the United States had been constructed by Caribbean people of African descent as a passageway from what was seen as the struggle, strife, and hopelessness of their homelands to the opportunity and hope that the United States was thought to represent. Coinciding with the movement of large numbers of Afro-Caribbean people to American cities was a massive internal migration of African Americans from the American South to Northern cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. More than just the movement of bodies, the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the circulation and creation of new ideas and attitudes regarding black political activity. It was in this context that radical politics gained a hearing among the black population – the Caribbean contribution to this emergent radicalism was of enormous significance. Though there is no uniform narrative for the process by which Caribbean-American immigrants became radicalized, it is necessary to interrogate those forces and experiences of migrants on their islands of origin that set them on the path to radicalization. While some came to the United States already having been radicalized and with organizational experience, others, coming from societies where they constituted the vast majority and arriving in a society where they were suddenly in the minority, exposed to new manifestations of racism, were radicalized upon arrival – after becoming acquainted with the American socio-political reality.

The second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw several of the world's capitalist powers engage in a military struggle, jockeying for economic and political primacy on the global stage.<sup>19</sup> While the violence of the First World War claimed tens of millions of victims, many Afro-Caribbean men approached the prospect of military service with enthusiasm. Service under

the British crown was seen as offering an alternative to the difficulty and uncertainty of life in the Caribbean and providing an opportunity for men of African descent to display their loyalty to the crown while simultaneously allowing them to assert a humanity that had long been denied to them. However, the racism and second-class status that greeted the British West Indies Regiment upon their arrival overseas had a profound impact on the political perspectives of returning servicemen. For many black servicemen, this treatment was a radicalizing experience. Moreover, the impact of this treatment abroad extended beyond just servicemen as many more who remained in the Caribbean received word as well and were driven towards radicalism.

The efforts of the Colonial Office to encourage the formation of a black West Indian contingent to serve overseas with the British armed forces was resisted initially by the War Office. Both offices shared the racist view that black soldiers should not have been able to fight white soldiers as well as racialist notions of the adaptability of black soldiers to cooler climates. Further, the War Office clung to ridiculous beliefs in blacks' inferiority in combat. Naturally then, any likelihood of the inclusion of black troops in British regiments was rejected outright. But the clamoring for inclusion in the war effort of black West Indians could not be ignored any longer and proposals to raise a West Indian contingent to serve in East Africa and the Middle East in the months following Britain's official entry into the war in August of 1914 began to roll into the War Office. Still, it took the intercession of King George V to finally gain approval for a West Indian contingent that included black enlistees. The more than 1,000 volunteers for service prompted the War Office to make a single regiment, known as the British West Indies Regiment.<sup>20</sup>

High expectations of newly enlisted black servicemen collided full-force with the harsh reality of racism within the ranks of the British military as well as in War Office policy. First, following training, the British West Indies Regiment was dispatched primarily to Egypt – a great distance from the European theater and the majority of the fighting. Other common locations included present-day Iraq, Palestine, and Cameroon.<sup>21</sup> Though, even if they had been sent to Europe, they would not have seen combat. Most black members of the regiment were relegated to menial work that amounted to cleaning the white soldiers' camp, construction duty, and carrying ammunition. What's more, the military bases were strictly segregated and white soldiers and officers made sure to enforce this segregation. Forced to use more than just separate accommodations, blacks coped with vastly inferior food,



housing, transportation, and medical care. These substandard conditions lent themselves to disease as illustrated by the fact that “[a]lmost six times more men died of illness than killed or died of wounds: while 1,071 died of sickness, mainly pneumonia, only 185 were killed or died of wounds.”<sup>22</sup> Exacerbating this problem was the fact that black soldiers only had access to second-rate medical facilities. As one historian has noted, instead of being sent to the same hospitals as British soldiers, black West Indians serving in Taranto, Italy were sent to native hospitals where they were largely neglected – several died.<sup>23</sup> While for many West Indian soldiers the assumption upon enlistment was that they would receive the same treatment as their British counterparts, in practice this was clearly not the case and British officers had no illusions to the contrary. Upon the protest of the commanding officer of the battalion stationed in Taranto, his superior responded that “...he had no intention of treating West Indians like British troops, that they were only niggers and were better fed and treated than any nigger had a right to expect.”<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the radicalizing power of disillusionment, blacks in the service took measures to resist the racist dehumanization they encountered that foreshadowed a future attraction to radical organizations. In December of 1918 a battalion of the British West Indies Regiment staged a violent revolt wherein “...there were several incidents of ‘insubordination’ as working and fatigue parties ‘mutinously refused’ to carry out their duties.”<sup>25</sup> The revolt had its roots in the ongoing maltreatment of black servicemen, but centered on discrepancies in financial compensation between black and white troops. The War Office responded quickly by disarming those participating battalions and returning them to the West Indies. In the wake of the uprising, however, disgruntled black soldiers organized the Caribbean League as an outlet through which they could promote the unity of servicemen from many Caribbean islands and to challenge the racist practices embedded in the British military – for instance, the racial discrepancy in the appointment of non-commissioned officers. Though the League was subverted before it could reach its stated goals, among its most significant aims was a plan to organize a general strike of West Indian soldiers for higher wages.<sup>26</sup> The revolt of the British West Indies Regiment and the formation of the Caribbean League reflected a growing combativeness and radical consciousness that had been forged in the context of abuse and discrimination over a span of several years abroad. In this light, it becomes easier to understand the attraction of ex-servicemen to Marcus Garvey’s Universal

Negro Improvement Association as well as their presence in the highest ranks of the organization.

While some Afro-Caribbean migrants arrived in the United States having already been radicalized and with organizational experience, others were radicalized following arrival on American soil. What was it about American society that lent itself to the radical political activity of migrants? Furthermore, what differences in the experiences of African American people and Afro-Caribbean people help explain the latter's disproportionate attraction to radical ideas? One factor that likely had an impact on the radicalization of Caribbean migrants can be attributed to the markedly different systems for expressing racial difference that existed between the two regions. In the British Caribbean there emerged a multi-tiered racial hierarchy that assigned different status to individuals according to their hue. In the United States, a person who would have invariably been considered "black"<sup>27</sup> could, in the Caribbean, have fallen into any category from "colored" to "mixed" depending on their complexion. Upon arrival in the United States, even the lightest skinned person of African ancestry was black as far as the law was concerned and was to be treated as such. The encounter of Caribbean migrants with the American racial caste system and the subsequent treatment that encounter entailed – for lighter skinned migrants, at least – likely radicalized some.

The extensive travel of many West Indian migrants was a central facet of the radicalization narrative. Compared to the rather insular existence of many African Americans, Afro-Caribbean people were much more likely to have traveled the Atlantic World – whether it was to Europe, to Africa and the Middle East during the war, to Central and South America, to the United States, or to other Caribbean Islands. As people traversed the Atlantic World, they came into contact with new people, cultures, languages, and ideas in an environment that was generally favorable to the circulation of new approaches to political activity.<sup>28</sup> The early travels of Marcus Garvey encapsulate this experience quite well. Born on the island of Jamaica in 1887, he was apprenticed as a printer at a young age where he gained a strong command of the English language. Like many other Jamaicans, Garvey departed the island in 1910 for Costa Rica in search of better prospects for work, though he would later state he did so to study the condition of the black man around the world. In Costa Rica Garvey was employed by United Fruit on a banana plantation where he witnessed the ruthless exploitation of agricultural laborers and made several attempts to agitate on their behalf. He would

see much of the same as he traveled across Central and South America between 1910 and 1912. Shortly following his sojourn in Latin America he would depart for London where his world-view would take fuller shape. Upon arrival he studied at Birbeck College, heard the speeches of British politicians, honed his own speaking abilities in Hyde Park, and worked for the Egyptian Pan-Africanist Duse Mohamed Ali. He would even come to write for Mohamed's journal, the *African Times and Orient Review*.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Garvey's years traveling around the Atlantic World as well as his time spent in London fostered the cultivation of his Pan-African sensibilities. It was on his return to Jamaica in July of 1914 that, along with his first wife Amy Ashwood, he would launch the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Of his experiences abroad that precipitated the formation of the UNIA, Garvey stated:

For the last ten years I have given my time to the study of the condition of the Negro, here, there, and everywhere, and I have come to realize that he is still the object of degradation and pity the world over, in the sense that he has no status socially, nationally, commercially (with a modicum of exception in the United States of America)...<sup>30</sup>

Finally, some of Garvey's earliest disciples are known to have been Afro-Caribbean sailors – their freedom of movement likely facilitating the dissemination of Garvey's message to a broad audience.

Afro-Caribbean migrants displayed much less of a commitment to religion than African Americans. Owing largely to the racism that pervaded American religious institutions, some newly arrived Afro-Caribbean people – who had already displayed less attachment to religion than African Americans – eschewed religious practice completely. It appears, however, that there was a dialectical relationship between Caribbean secularism and radicalism. On one hand, the repudiation of American Christianity opened the door for radical political activity among Afro-Caribbean migrants. On the other hand, however, even before their arrival in the United States, some migrants embraced a tradition of secular reading and political activity to which religion generally stood as a barrier.<sup>31</sup> Related to this point, and the last significant facet that set the body of Caribbean migrants apart from African Americans in their attraction to radical politics, was their educational status. Nearly one hundred percent of the black migrants entering the country by the

1920s were literate. This reflects, in part, the fact that there was a high concentration of the West Indian intelligentsia and petit bourgeoisie in the early waves of migrants – indeed, migrating at the time were such future luminaries as Marcus Garvey, Hubert Harrison, Cyril Briggs, and Richard B. Moore. This statistic also underscores a deep appreciation among Afro-Caribbean migrants for reading and oration – the love for reading possibly a result of the colonial education system and the love for spoken word an aspect of African tradition.<sup>32</sup> Of the best-known Afro-Caribbean radicals, many displayed a gift for moving oration and more still were voracious readers.

Thus, the radicalization of Afro-Caribbean migrants was an ongoing, uneven process that had its roots in the politics and economy of the Caribbean islands but can be traced across the Atlantic World with the movement of people and ideas. The process for many, though, was only completed upon arrival in the United States – and quite a time it was to arrive, indeed. The first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw American racism at its worst as race riots swept across cities while lynching and Jim Crow haunted the South. The lure of wartime jobs and the lynch mobs of the Jim Crow South saw many formerly disenfranchised African Americans migrate to Northern cities where they would be exposed to new avenues for political participation. In fact, the same organizations and ideologies that African Americans now found themselves engaging with, Afro-Caribbean migrants engaged with in even greater proportions.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL AND IDEOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS OF CARIBBEAN RADICALISM**

Coinciding with the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to Northern cities, Harlem, New York became a hotbed of radical political activity. The ideologies and organizations with which black people now daily interacted ran the gamut from the Pan-Africanist Nationalism of the UNIA to the Marxism of the Communist Party. The contribution of Afro-Caribbean migrants to the flowering black political radicalism reached far beyond their numbers. It is worth exploring in some detail the main radical currents and organizations that these migrants associated with, the roles they played within them, and the interaction of these organizations with one another. Particular attention will be paid to the UNIA, the African Blood Brotherhood, and the Communist Party, though the activity of Afro-Caribbean radicals was by no means limited to these groups. Finally, this section will

attempt to examine the political careers of prominent individuals while also recognizing the vital contributions of the many lesser-known participants in Harlem radicalism.

Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association was, by far, the largest and most visible black radical organization between 1910 and 1930 not just in Harlem, but in the entire United States. While Garvey founded the UNIA upon his return to Jamaica from England in 1914, he would initially attract only a small following of fewer than 100 members. Like many other Caribbean men and women at the time, Garvey would depart Jamaica for the United States in 1916 bringing the UNIA with him. Placing Garvey's migration in the context of both the broader migration of West Indian population to the United States and the fledgling tradition of Afro-Caribbean migration throws into relief the visibility of Afro-Caribbean people – many of whom were already familiar with Garvey in some capacity – in the UNIA. The stated goals of the UNIA were clear:

- To establish a universal confraternity among the race.
- To promote the spirit of race pride and love.
- To reclaim the fallen of the race.
- To administer to and assist the needy.
- To assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa.
- To strengthen the imperialism of independent African states.
- To establish commissaries or agencies in the principal countries of the world for the protection of all Negroes, irrespective of nationality.
- To promote a conscientious Christian worship among the native tribes of Africa.
- To establish universities, colleges and secondary schools for the further education and culture of boys and girls of the race.
- To conduct a worldwide commercial and industrial intercourse.<sup>33</sup>

The slogan of the Association – One God, One Aim, One Destiny – reflected the ambition of Garvey's platform. Through the 1920s, Garvey was able to build the UNIA into a mass movement drawing on the support of large numbers of African Americans and Afro-Caribbean migrants. With his flamboyant dress, extravagant parades, militant speeches, and vision of a better world for blacks, Garvey was able to tap into the hopes and dreams

of many. However, Garvey's political outlook was not without contradictions, and it was these contradictions that contributed to Garvey's marginalization and the eventual downfall of the UNIA.

Garvey held a deep admiration for Booker T. Washington ever since he read Washington's influential autobiography *Up From Slavery*. It is also clear that Garvey shared many of Washington's political sensibilities. Forged in the political climate of Jim Crow, Washington's program stressed the importance of self-reliance, accommodation to racism, and a form of elite brokerage that saw politics as primarily the responsibility of the most cultivated members of both races. Underlying Washington's dealings with the white elite was the mistaken notion that the white rabble was primarily responsible for the propagation of racism. On top of a similar program then, Garvey grafted his nationalist and Pan-Africanist aims. Like Washington, Garvey was firm in his support for capitalism and wished to replicate the system within the black community. Reflecting the black petit-bourgeois frustration with being barred from white institutions, Garvey's nationalist program sought to recreate similar institutions to which blacks would have access.<sup>34</sup> While Garvey wished to unite blacks around the world under a single banner, he did not necessarily consider all blacks to be on the same footing, frequently referencing the need for civilization from the outside for the "backwards" tribes of Africa. Finally, Garvey's pessimism in the ability of blacks and whites to coexist peacefully as well as his strong racial pride led him to advocate for the separation of the races – socially, economically, and politically.<sup>35</sup> Intermarriage was thus seen as race treason, wrote Garvey: "For a Negro man to marry someone who does not look like his mother or not a member of his race is to insult his mother, insult nature and insult God who made his father. The best tribute a race can pay to nature and God is to preserve its species..."<sup>36</sup>

Garvey had little luck in building the UNIA upon his arrival in Harlem in 1916. However, the general upsurge in black militancy in 1919 and 1920 that coincided with the end of WWI saw an astronomical increase in UNIA membership. Through the 1920s, the UNIA grew into a truly mass organization – at its height, Garvey boasted more than 2 million members worldwide. Perhaps the greatest symbol of the status the UNIA had assumed but also the internal weaknesses of the organization was Garvey's fleet of black-owned and -run steamships known as the Black Star Line. Connected to Garvey's message of racial separation, emigration, as well as black economic self-sufficiency, the Black Star Line provided an outlet for black in-



vestment. While it is unlikely that many blacks in America considered mass emigration and repatriation to Africa to be realistic, it was the symbolic power of “Back to Africa” in the face of American racism that won many to Garvey’s program. However, the financial difficulties of the UNIA which were exacerbated by the mismanagement of the Black Star Line, Garvey’s ideological marginalization from his courting of open racists like the KKK at a time when inter-racial, class-based politics appeared more possible, and Garvey’s legal troubles as a result of being watched carefully by the federal government all combined significantly to the collapse of the UNIA. The rise and fall of Marcus Garvey can best be understood as the result of the conflict between the enormously high hopes held for his program by the masses of black people and Garvey’s inability to deliver on those hopes. Lastly, Garvey’s meteoric rise made a West Indian migrant, for a time, arguably the most visible black man in the United States of America. This, as well as the conspicuous presence of Afro-Caribbean migrants among UNIA leadership and rank-and-file membership, is a testament to the centrality of West Indian people to the black American radical politics in this period.

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Cyril Briggs, a radical from the West Indian island of Nevis, founded the mysterious African Blood Brotherhood in 1919. Early in his political career, Briggs held nationalist convictions similar to those represented by the UNIA; a strong pride in his race, a belief in the need for black self-defense, and support for black self-determination. An intellectual of the highest caliber, he served as editor of the influential black newspaper, *The Amsterdam News*, until 1918 when he was fired for his outspoken nationalist views. He would soon go on to launch the *Crusader* in which he expressed his own unique radical perspective. *The Crusader* was also the medium through which Briggs publicized his plans for a political organization and in 1919 it would become the organ of the Brotherhood.<sup>37</sup> He shrouded the organization in secrecy, announcing cryptically in the *Crusader* that the Brotherhood was open to “membership by enlistment. No dues, fees or assessments. Those only need apply who are willing to go the limit...willing to make any sacrifice for the liberation of the Fatherland and the Glory of the Great Negro Race.”<sup>38</sup> There has been much historiographical disagreement over the exact purpose of the formation of the Brotherhood, as its program resembled quite closely that of the UNIA – in fact, for some time the *Crusader* openly pro-

moted both the UNIA and the Brotherhood. Historian Judith Stein has argued that Briggs envisioned his organization as being the “vanguard of the UNIA” – steering the organization away from the charlatanry and rightward tendencies of Garvey and his associates.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the relationship of the Brotherhood and the UNIA, though initially cordial, came to be marked by acrimony as the fierce polemics between Briggs and Garvey illustrate; Winston James has noted, however, that these polemics appear to have been motivated more by personal differences than political ones.<sup>40</sup> Both Briggs and the Brotherhood underwent leftward ideological shifts in the global political climate of the Russian Revolution. Increasingly, the racial nationalism of the Brotherhood would be interposed with revolutionary socialism.

Virtually the entire leadership of the African Blood Brotherhood was of West Indian origins. Among its best-known Caribbean founding members were the likes of W.A. Domingo, George Padmore, Richard B. Moore, Claude McKay, and Otto Huiswood. The organization attracted primarily intellectuals, disgruntled petit-bourgeois individuals, and workers. Likely detracting from the mass appeal of the Brotherhood was the emphasis on agitation around certain issues – like the liberation of Africa and lynching – while issues central to the day-to-day struggles of working Harlemites received less attention. To a certain extent, this is reflective of the class backgrounds of the Brotherhood’s leadership. Still, while it paled in comparison to the mass membership of the UNIA, the nearly 3,000 members that the Brotherhood was able to attract is impressive given the level of secrecy that surrounded joining the group. Speaking on the preponderance of Afro-Caribbean members in the organization, Briggs stated: “It was not comprised solely or mainly of West Indians living in the U.S. West Indians, however, did constitute the bulk of its New York membership and played [a] role in its Supreme Council out of proportion to their total membership *vis-à-vis* native born members.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the presence of Afro-Caribbean migrants in the African Blood Brotherhood not only directed its theoretical development, but also constituted a large segment of its rank and file constituency.

The relationship between the African Blood Brotherhood and the Communist Party was an interesting one. It was the Brotherhood that provided the Party with its core of black members, many of whom were of West Indian origin, as nearly the entire leadership of the Brotherhood was dissolved into the Party. Older scholarship on the organization has disagreed over its origins and organizational ties – some arguing that the Communist Party and the Brotherhood were fundamentally linked at the inception of the latter,

others arguing that Brotherhood was founded separately.<sup>42</sup> Other scholarship has painted the Brotherhood as a conscious effort to undermine the UNIA by siphoning off members from its base.<sup>43</sup> More recent scholarship, however, sees the relationship between the two organizations as far less conspiratorial. It is more likely that the dissolution of the Brotherhood into the Communist Party in 1923 coincided with a general leftward shift in the organization's orientation that put it in the same corner as the Party on many issues. Moreover, by the early 1920s much of the leadership of the Brotherhood had already become members of the Party. Briggs and his colleagues were impressed by the firm anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-racism of the Communist International, best illustrated by Lenin's 1920 "Thesis on National and Colonial Questions" in which he argued:

In all their propaganda and agitation – both within parliament and outside it – the Communist parties must consistently expose that constant violation of the equality of nations and of the guaranteed rights of national minorities which is to be seen in all capitalist countries, despite their democratic constitutions. It is also necessary...that all Communist parties should render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among the dependent and underprivileged nations (for example, Ireland, the American Negroes, etc.) and in the colonies.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear that Briggs was moved towards revolutionary socialism by news of the Soviet experiment. Standing firmly with the Soviet government after the revolution and moved by the Comintern's unique approach to the question of national liberation, Briggs stated:

“Of all the great powers Soviet Russia is the only power that deals fairly with weaker nations and peoples. She is the only power that has no skeleton of murderous subjugation and wrongdoing in her national closet – no spectre of a brutally oppressed Ireland or Haiti.”<sup>45</sup> Given the visibility of Afro-Caribbean radicals among the African Blood Brotherhood leadership and its ties to the Communist Party, it is easy to understand the largely Caribbean character of its first layer of Black cadre.

The Communist Party USA formed in 1919 out of a split in the Socialist Party over the question of support for the Russian Revolution. The Party distinguished itself from earlier Marxist and socialist parties in its out-

right support for the struggles of black people for self-determination and anti-racist agitation as central to the broader class struggle. Informed by Lenin's theses, the Comintern and national Party leadership sought to attract black membership to local branches through its commitment to the struggle for black liberation, as illustrated by its adoption of the influential, if ill-conceived "Black Belt Thesis" and its principled defense of the Scottsboro boys.<sup>46</sup> For the Party in Harlem in the 1920s, recruitment from the black population was a challenge. Though the black cadre of largely West Indian intellectuals was fast-tracked into positions of leadership in the Party, the 1920s proved a difficult time for recruitment of a black rank-and-file thanks to the Party's sectarian approach and isolated status in Harlem social and political life, as well as the hesitance of many blacks to join an overwhelmingly white, immigrant organization. Given the seeming indifference of some white members compared to the steadfast dedication of the Comintern to struggles for black liberation, black members tended to look to the International body to keep the American Party on course. "I was properly impressed," wrote Harry Haywood reflecting on conversation with his brother regarding the role of the Comintern in intervening in local Party affairs, "...by the idea that we could appeal our case to the 'supreme court' of international communism, which included such luminaries as the great Lenin."<sup>47</sup>

By the end of the 1920s local branches of the Party were forced to adjust to enormous vacillations in the increasingly Stalinized Comintern line. Still, the success of the Party in crafting a unique strategy oriented towards issues that effected black people on the ground in Harlem in spite of the Comintern's line allowed it to inject itself into the cultural and political flowering that was underway during the depression. Though it would never attract a mass black following that could compete with the UNIA, in the Party's heyday during the Popular Front period from 1934-39 it saw large numbers of Harlemites – workers, intellectuals, and artists – pass through its circles.<sup>48</sup> The West Indian migrants Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore, Otto Huiswood, Arthur Hendricks, and Claude McKay were among the earliest black members (or fellow travelers in the case of McKay) of the Communist Party and were of enormous importance in shaping early Party praxis in the United States.

Finally, Marcus Garvey's somewhat contradictory relationship to Communism – both internationally and on the local level – is fascinating. On one hand, Garvey expressed support for the Soviet project, writes Tony Mar-

tin: “In 1922 he referred to the experiment in ‘social democracy’ in Russia as one that would probably prove a ‘boon and a blessing to mankind.’” Further, upon Lenin’s death in 1924, “Garvey’s first response was a telegram to the All Soviet Congress which said in part, ‘to us Lenin was one of the world’s greatest benefactors. Long life to the Soviet Government of Russia.’”<sup>49</sup> His relationship with the American Party, however, was far from amicable. Wrote Garvey:

Communism is a white man’s creation, to solve his own [p]olitical problems and economic problems. It suggests the enthronement of the white working-class over the capitalistic class of the race. It was conceived by white men who were in sympathy with the economic struggles of their own white masses. It was never conceived and originally intended for the economic or political emancipation of the blacks, but rather to raise the earning capacity of the lowest class of white workers.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps it was easier for Garvey to identify with the emancipatory goals of the Bolshevik Party from thousands of miles away than it was for him to accept the challenge to the base of support for his position as a black leader that the American Communist Party presented. Or perhaps the presence of blacks in the United States set the country apart fundamentally from Soviet Russia in Garvey’s mind.

## CONCLUSION

Marcus Garvey died two deaths. Legend holds that upon reading a premature obituary by George Padmore printed in the *Chicago Defender* in late May of 1940, Marcus Garvey then had a stroke and died in early June. According to Padmore, Garvey died in London, “[a]lone, deserted by his followers, broke and unpopular...” While he may have overstated the extent of Garvey’s isolation, Padmore’s obituary reflected the reality that Garvey’s exile marked his fade from immediate relevance in black political life in the United States as well as the death of the UNIA as a mass movement. Even the critical Padmore could not deny the significance of Garvey’s project, calling the movement “undoubtedly the largest mass organization ever developed under Negro auspices.”<sup>51</sup> The marginalization of Garvey and the

death of the movement he stood for can be traced on one hand to active efforts of the United States government to undermine his influence within the UNIA and on the other hand to changing perceptions of the realm of political possibility for blacks in America and Garvey's failure to adapt to those changes. Still, the profound impact of Garvey and his movement – in its time and on future generations of radicals – stands as an emblem of the enormity of the Caribbean contribution to American radicalism.

In many ways, Marcus Garvey's meteoric rise to the throne of most visible person of African descent in the United States is indicative of a broader narrative of Afro-Caribbean migration and radicalization. Like many others, Garvey was driven from Jamaica in pursuit of a better living. The early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would see him follow well-trodden paths across the Atlantic World and continue his education – it was at this time that his political ideas would congeal more fully. Though Garvey's personal narrative can hardly speak for all of the Afro-Caribbean people who would arrive in the United States after the turn of the century, it highlights many important aspects of the process of migration, travel, and radicalization. The radicalization of Caribbean migrants was by no means a linear process; not all Afro-Caribbean people embraced the same strains of radicalism – some embraced no strain of radicalism whatsoever. Moreover, it is not possible to pin down a specific moment when radicalization occurred for the majority of migrants who did, in fact, adopt radical political views. Instead, it is necessary to view radicalization as a process occurring over a long span of time while taking into account socio-economic factors and the range of possible experiences of Afro-Caribbean people who migrated to the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “radical” and “radicalism,” as used in this essay, refer to a set of political ideas, strategies, or tactics aimed towards a fundamental transformation of society. Here it includes a range of political tendencies present in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Black Nationalism, pan-Africanism, revolutionary socialism, and Marxism chief among them. This essay will focus specifically on the Garvey movement – which embraced a nationalist solution to the problem of racial oppression in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America – and the Communist Party – which sought to build an alternative to American capitalism. “Radicalization” refers to the process of adopting radical political views.

<sup>2</sup> While the focus of this essay is primarily the radicalism of immigrants from the anglo-phone Caribbean, it is worth noting that the Spanish Caribbean displayed an equally vibrant and diverse involvement in radical politics that was very much shaped by the unique social, political, and economic landscapes of the Spanish islands and the experiences of people operating within those landscapes.



<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992), 60.

<sup>4</sup> Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1998), 14-15; Holt, 347-348.

<sup>5</sup> Holt, 350-352.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Holt, 356.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> James, 20-21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-34.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35; This point is not lost on recent history; the tragic toll of Hurricane Katrina has reaffirmed its relevance.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (Port-of-Spain: PNM Publishing, 1962), chap. 8, chap. 10, chap. 12, chap. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey R. Neptune, *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2-12, 64-68.

<sup>18</sup> James, 38-41.

<sup>19</sup> The Russian revolutionary leader V.I. Lenin's, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, is an interesting, and still relevant, analysis of the roots of WWI as events were still unfolding.

<sup>20</sup> C.L Joseph, "The British West Indies Regiment, 1914-1918," *Journal of Caribbean History* 2 (1971): 94-101.

<sup>21</sup> James, 56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph, 119.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-121; James, 63-65.

<sup>27</sup> Though it is more likely that a different word would have been used.

<sup>28</sup> The transformative qualities of travel in the Atlantic World date back well into the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of what one historian has termed "Atlantic Creoles" born out of the contact of European and African people on the West African coast. For one of the earliest accounts of travel in the Atlantic World by a person of African descent see: Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 24-26, 28-30.

<sup>30</sup> Garvey quoted in Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Strug-*

*gles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 6.

<sup>31</sup> James, 76-77; James notes, too, that Afro-Caribbean migrants did not exhibit the historical attachment to the Republican Party that many African Americans had.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-80.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Stein, 30.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Martin, 22-32.

<sup>36</sup> Robert A. Hill and Barbara Bair, eds., *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), 203.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1983), 5-6; Stein, 52; James, 157-160.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Stein, 52-53.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-142.

<sup>40</sup> James, 160.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in James, 156.

<sup>42</sup> Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 322-332.

<sup>43</sup> Martin, 237-238.

<sup>44</sup> V.I. Lenin, "Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions For The Second Congress Of The Communist International," in *Lenin Internet Archive* (June, 1920), <http://marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in James, 166.

<sup>46</sup> Naison, 10-11; Draper, 13-17, chap. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in James, 182.

<sup>48</sup> Naison, 193-219.

<sup>49</sup> Martin, 252.

<sup>50</sup> Hill, 296.

<sup>51</sup> George Padmore, "Marcus Garvey, U.N.I.A. Founder, Dies in London," *The Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1940, pg. 1.