



PROJECT MUSE®

---

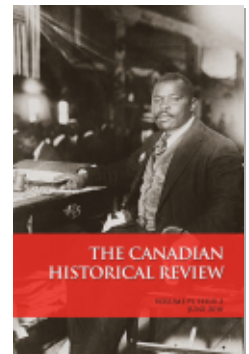
'Rising Strongly and Rapidly': The Universal Negro  
Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940

Carla Marano

The Canadian Historical Review, Volume 91, Number 2, June 2010, pp.  
233–259 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/can.0.0309>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/381730>

CARLA MARANO

# ‘Rising Strongly and Rapidly’: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940



*Abstract: Led by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) spanned the globe and enticed its followers with the dream of an independent black nation in Africa. The UNIA has been portrayed largely as an American and/or Caribbean phenomenon. Yet from 1919 to 1940, the UNIA played a central role in the lives of many blacks in Canada, especially West Indian immigrants. West Indian immigrants comprised the vast majority of UNIA members in Canada, and they used this organization as an outlet to create and express a unique ethno-racial identity. Distinctive commonalities among the West Indians, including high literacy rates, experience in trade unions, and a strong pan-African consciousness made them more likely to join the UNIA than African American immigrants and native-born Black Canadians. These shared traits became part of the fabric of a distinct West Indian identity, which they asserted as leaders, organizers, and participants in the UNIA.*

**Keywords:** Marcus Garvey, ethnicity, race, Canada, Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)

*Résumé : Cet article présente l'histoire du Garveyism et de l'Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) au Canada de 1919 à 1940. Créé et dirigé par Marcus Garvey, d'origine jamaïcaine, ce mouvement pour les droits civiques s'est répandu partout dans le monde et a encouragé ses partisans à réaliser le rêve d'une nation noire indépendante en Afrique. L'UNIA a été présentée à grande échelle comme un phénomène de l'Amérique ou des Caraïbes. Mais le présent article apporte la preuve que l'UNIA a joué un rôle de premier plan dans la vie de bon nombre de Noirs au Canada, particulièrement des immigrants antillais. Cette étude fait valoir que ces derniers forment la vaste majorité des membres de l'UNIA au Canada, et qu'ils ont utilisé cette organisation comme moyen de créer et d'exprimer une identité ethno-raciale unique. On explique comment certains liens communs chez les Antillais, y compris un taux élevé d'alphabétisation, de l'expérience en organisation syndicale, et une solide conscience panafricaine, les ont rendus plus enclins à se joindre à l'UNIA que les immigrants afro-américains et les Noirs nés au Canada. Ces caractéristiques communes font maintenant partie du tissu d'une*

*identité antillaise distincte qu'ils ont fait valoir en tant que leaders, organisateurs, et participants à l'UNIA.*

**Mots clés :** Marcus Garvey, ethnicité, race, Canada, Universal Negro Improvement Association, UNIA

## INTRODUCTION

In 1919 Garveyism, the international anti-racism movement led by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, blew into Canada like a chinook. Garveyism's 'strong and rapid'<sup>1</sup> growth in Canada was stimulated by the perfect storm that was brewing after the Second World War. The war had intensified xenophobic and racist sentiments by whites against the nation's immigrants, while Canada's changing economy sparked unprecedented levels of labour activism and trade unionism. Caught in the eye of this storm, an estimated five thousand blacks in Canada – about one-quarter of the total black population – became members of a Canadian division of the movement's organizing body, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Between 1919 and 1922, thirty-two separate UNIA divisions emerged across Canada.<sup>2</sup> Yet, surprisingly, scholars of Garveyism have not adequately addressed the role of the UNIA in Canada; instead, the movement has been presented mainly as an Afro-Caribbean and an African American experience.

For over five decades, historians of this anti-colonial and/or black nationalist movement have examined Garveyism from a variety of perspectives, especially along racial, class, and gendered lines. Several scholars, including Edmund Cronon, Tony Martin, Wilson Jeremiah Moses, and Dean Robinson conclude that Garveyism was fundamen-

1 Vernal Williams, 'Canadian Divisions U.N.I.A. Making Preparations for August Convention,' *Negro World*, 25 June 1921.

2 T.G. Vincent estimates that the UNIA divisions in Canada had a combined membership of approximately five thousand. Theodore G. Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* (Berkeley: Ramparts, 1971), 151. The number of divisions is derived from the figures offered in Leo W. Bertley, 'The Universal Negro Improvement Association of Montreal, 1917–1979' (PhD diss., Concordia University, 1983), 38–9, and Robert A. Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 7:997.

tally a movement aimed at raising race consciousness.<sup>3</sup> In other words, they argue that this was a movement created *by* blacks as a way to improve the lives of blacks. By contrast, Marxist historians like Judith Stein and Rupert Lewis contend that Garveyism was largely a working-class phenomenon. They favour a Marxist perspective because 'the racial experience, though pervasive, was not monolithic; it was not identical for black farmers and businessmen, lawyers and laborers, Africans and Afro-Americans.'<sup>4</sup> Nor was the racial experience identical for men and women. Karen S. Adler and Ula Y. Taylor examine Garveyism from a feminist perspective through the eyes of Garvey's second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey. They argue that feminism and black nationalism were inextricably linked by their common doctrines of self-determination and liberation.<sup>5</sup>

More recent studies by Mary Rolinson and Colin Grant prove that Garveyism remains a compelling topic in the twenty-first century. In *Grassroots Garveyism* (2003), Rolinson outlines the rural experience of Garveyites in the southern United States, whom she argues supported the UNIA because of its 'fiercely nationalistic philosophy' and its 'framework for coping with racial problems' like rape, lynching, and low economic status.<sup>6</sup> Grant touches on these topics and more in the latest biography on Garvey, *Negro with a Hat*.<sup>7</sup> Grant's most compelling chapters examine Garvey's early life in Jamaica, where colonial

3 Edmund David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955); Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport: Greenwood, 1976); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4 Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 4; and Rupert Lewis, *Marcus Garvey, Anti-Colonial Champion* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1988).

5 Karen S. Adler, "'Always Leading Our Men in Service and Sacrifice': Amy Jacques Garvey, Feminist Black Nationalist," *Gender and Society* 6, no. 3 (Sept. 1992): 346-75; and Ula Y. Taylor, "'Negro Women Are Great Thinkers as Well as Doers": Amy Jacques-Garvey and Community Feminism in the United States, 1924-1927," *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 104-26.

6 Mary G. Rolinson, *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 4.

7 Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

authority and a rigid colour hierarchy based on class laid the groundwork for Garvey's later philosophies on race discrimination.

Despite these nuanced analyses of Garveyism, Canadian participation in the movement has remained oddly inconspicuous in the literature. Only a few historians have examined Garveyism in Canada. Among them are Robin Winks, Leo W. Bertley, and Dionne Brand.<sup>8</sup> They assert that West Indian immigrants dominated the rank-and-file membership of the Canadian UNIA divisions. And while they agree that Garveyism was, in Brand's words, 'perhaps the first secular movement to rival the magnetism of the churches in the Black Community in Canada,'<sup>9</sup> none of these historians has adequately addressed *why* West Indian immigrants comprised an overwhelming majority in the UNIA, or documented the movement in Canada as a whole.

This article is the first to examine these questions while connecting its participants to the broader international movement and the African diaspora. It is also the first piece of Canadian scholarship to make use of the official UNIA records, convention minutes, court transcripts, speeches, and correspondence letters found in the ten-volume series compiled by Robert A. Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*.<sup>10</sup> Disappointingly, while these documents present information on the events, activities, and members of several Canadian divisions, they do not explain who was joining the UNIA in Canada, and why. To answer these questions, I have turned to reports found in the UNIA's newspaper, the *Negro World*, the first-hand accounts of former Garveyites in Brand's *No Burden to Carry* and Joan Weeks's *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton*,<sup>11</sup> and other secondary sources.

My evidence reveals that the UNIA in Canada owes much of its success to the organization of West Indian – and to a lesser degree African American – immigrants. In western Canada and in cities along the US-Canada border, it is likely that African Americans ran the small but numerous UNIA divisions, while West Indians led the larger eastern divisions, especially in Sydney, Toronto, and Montreal. By contrast, native-born blacks in Canada (which I will now refer to

8 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991); and Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 1983.

9 Brand, *No Burden to Carry*, 16.

10 Hill, *The Marcus Garvey Papers* (1983–2000).

11 Joan Weeks, *One God One Aim One Destiny: African Nova Scotians in Cape Breton* (Sherbrooke: Transcontinental, 2007).

solely as Black Canadians<sup>12</sup>) comprised a much smaller proportion of UNIA members.

The mixed levels of participation in the UNIA by Canada's black peoples points to the debate over the notion of a singular 'black community.' Bertley states that 'people of African descent have developed significantly different ideologies, points of view, and other ways of viewing themselves and their world.' Therefore, 'many Blacks [in Canada] continued to see themselves as West Indians, Americans, Canadians, and, even, Nova Scotians.'<sup>13</sup> George Elliott Clarke calls this phenomenon 'African-Canadianité,' a term he defines as 'the hegemony of heterogeneity' among Canada's black peoples. In essence, 'African-Canadianité' represents Canada's '*archipelago* of blackness' and highlights the importance of ethnicity to the formation of cultural and racial identities for blacks in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

Some commonalities among West Indian immigrants in Canada, including education, experience in trade unions, and a strong pan-African consciousness, made them more likely to join the UNIA than other black groups in Canada. These shared traits are part of the fabric of a distinct West Indian identity that was asserted through participation in the UNIA, especially in Sydney, Toronto, and Montreal. West Indians in Canada aimed to bolster their self-esteem and re-establish a sense of community as leaders, organizers, and participants in the UNIA. The UNIA, with its principles of racial unity, self-representation, and economic improvement provided an ideal outlet for West Indians to express and achieve their needs, desires, and beliefs, all of which were unique to their ethno-racial experience.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF GARVEYISM OUTSIDE CANADA

Garvey believed that racism was the principle that denied persons of African descent any political, economic, and social power. He rea-

- 12 The term *Black Canadians* is capitalized to address this particular group more emphatically. In this article it serves as a proper name, just as the terms *West Indians* and *African Americans* do. By contrast, the term *black* serves as a general qualifier that encompasses the characteristics and ideologies affecting all peoples of African descent.
- 13 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 223.
- 14 George Elliott Clarke, 'Contesting a Model Blackness: A Meditation of African-Canadian African-Americanism, or the Structures of African-Canadianité,' in *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 48–9.

soned that blacks would never achieve equality in a society governed by whites. In fact, Garvey contended that blacks who integrated into white society were submitting to a 'superior' white race and would never be considered social equals if judged by white ideals. In response, Garvey launched an anti-colonial/black nationalist movement that encouraged all persons of African descent to go 'back to Africa,' or more specifically Liberia. There, they would create a racially pure 'empire' or 'nation' of blacks (Garvey was vehemently against miscegenation and initially disallowed people of mixed race to join the UNIA) that would become 'one of the greatest commonwealths that will once more hold up the torchlight of civilization.'<sup>15</sup> So in July 1914 Garvey founded and became president-general of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Communities (Imperial) League (ACL). Hill explains, 'The distinction was not merely semantic, since it reflected a basic dichotomy of purpose which made the UNIA, as originally conceived by Garvey, only the fraternal-benevolent arm of the wider movement,'<sup>16</sup> while the ACL would serve as the body in charge of re-colonizing Africa. The UNIA's original goals were

to establish a Universal Confraternity among the race; to promote the spirit of pride and love; to reclaim the fallen; to administer to and assist the needy; to assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa; to assist in the development of Independent Negro Nations and Communities; to establish a central nation for the race; to establish Commissaries or Agencies in the principal countries and cities of the world for the representation of all Negroes; to promote a conscientious Spiritual worship among the native tribes of Africa; to establish Universities, Colleges, Academies and Schools for the racial education and culture of the people; to work for better conditions among Negroes everywhere.<sup>17</sup>

The membership certificates allotted to dues-paying Garveyites vouched that each UNIA member worked for 'the FREEDOM, MANHOOD, and NATIONALISM of the Negro,' which would 'hand down to posterity

15 Marcus Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey, 'The Negro's Place in World Re-organization,' in *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey or Africa for the Africans* (London: Cass, 1967), 2:36.

16 Hill, 'General Introduction,' in *The Marcus Garvey Papers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 1:lix.

17 Garvey and Jacques Garvey, 'Aims and Objects of Movement for Solution of Negro Problem,' in *Philosophy and Opinions*, 2:38.

a FLAG OF EMPIRE.’<sup>18</sup> The language on the membership certificates is indicative of Garvey’s ability to converge popular discourses of nationalism, manhood, and class mobility – a tactic that appealed to working-class blacks in North America.

In the postwar era, African Americans became very interested in Garvey’s message of a separate black nation and all that it entailed. Their political, economic, and social subjugation during this period prompted African Americans to develop a race consciousness that was informed by, but worked in opposition to, white nationalist rhetoric. The war had ushered in a new age of nationalism, and burgeoning world powers like the United States began to define their own national identities. Americans identified the United States as a nation of self-determination, liberation, citizenship, and independence – the same principles informing early-twentieth-century notions of manhood. However, whites excluded blacks from their concept of the nation and consistently discriminated against them on account of their race. This shared experience of racism led them to become a ‘nation within a nation,’ as W.E.B. Du Bois eloquently stated.<sup>19</sup> Between 1900 and 1930, ‘whiteness became the privileged grounding and metaphor for the empty abstraction of U.S. citizenship,’ posing blackness as its ‘apparent contradiction.’<sup>20</sup> On American soil, where nationhood was virtually synonymous with whiteness, African Americans defined their own nationality through race. They had become black nationalist, and expectedly, they found the UNIA’s promotion of racial uplift through self-government attractive.

Accordingly, white concepts of manhood – self-determination, liberation, citizenship, and independence – influenced how black men defined their own manhood. Definitions of black manhood were also affected by the popular black literary and cultural movement called the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance gave birth to the character known as the ‘New Negro,’ an icon who embodied the principles of the movement. The New Negro celebrated his African roots and culture, and improved his social status and that of the race through education, citizenship, and leadership. The New Negro, then, represented the ideal black man of the early twentieth century. As M.P. Guterl states, ‘Proponents of a New Negro Manhood Move-

18 Bertley, ‘The UNIA of Montreal,’ 92.

19 W.E.B. Du Bois, ‘A Negro Nation within a Nation,’ in *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*, ed. Josh Gottheimer (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 170–3.

20 Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 21.



ment argued that black men were self-sacrificing protectors of race and womanhood, and that “world’s work” – from anti-imperialism to black nationalism – was race work, or men’s work.’<sup>21</sup> Garvey believed this character exemplified the core principles of the UNIA, and frequently used New Negro imagery and rhetoric to promote his message of racial uplift.

As mentioned above, Garvey’s message was especially persuasive among working-class blacks who constantly strove for upward social mobility. In fact, black skilled labourers who belonged to or had experience in trade unions seemed particularly adept at ‘race work.’ Skilled workers from the Caribbean, for example, found much resistance in the workplace upon arrival in Canada and the United States; in these countries, ‘there was rigorous gatekeeping on the basis of race,’ which denied them access to skilled jobs. As a result, ‘the more skilled the migrants were, the more resistance they were likely to encounter in the workplace, and this, in turn, would tend to heighten the political nature of their response in the direction of black nationalism, ... revolutionary socialism, or ... trade unionism.’<sup>22</sup>

For blacks in the West Indies, Garveyism was a medium through which they could overcome the powerful colour-class system of the Caribbean. There were three ‘classes’ of people in the Caribbean: the ‘white’ ruling class, which was a significant minority; the ‘brown’ middle class of mixed European and African origin; and the ‘black’ working class, which comprised an overwhelming majority and whose members were the descendents of slaves.<sup>23</sup> The colour-class system was a colonial invention that was instituted by the British during the slave trade. The British ensured that the ‘white’ plantation class from England maintained control over the ‘black’ servile class from West Africa. The plantation class was successful in preserving their status because, according to Aggrey Brown, advancement in the West Indies ‘meant accepting English mores, English values, and English beliefs,’ including ‘the belief in the African’s own inferiority and in the

21 Matthew Pratt Guterl, ‘Bleeding the Irish White,’ in *The Color of Race in America, 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 92–3.

22 Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1999), 84.

23 In the early twentieth century, Jamaica had a population of approximately one million. About five thousand Jamaicans were of the ‘white’ elite class, while fifteen thousand ‘brown’ residents comprised the middle class. The remaining majority were ‘black’ citizens. See Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

superiority of the other.’<sup>24</sup> Thus, to be ‘black’ referred not only to one’s race, but also to one’s social status. Garvey explains that in the West Indies, ‘class prejudice divides the race here, and leaves the poorer people practically without education, moneyed leadership and guidance, and more than that, the better class Negroes and mulattos align themselves with the few real whites to keep the blacks in “their places,” which means at the bottom of everything – the lowest strata.’<sup>25</sup> Certainly, Garvey helped to reinforce the point that class and race oppression in the Caribbean were inextricably linked, but could be contested under the banner of the UNIA.

As Hill comments, ‘At the simplest level, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA symbolize the historic encounter between two highly developed socioeconomic and political traditions: the social consciousness and drive for self-governance of the Caribbean peasantry and the racial consciousness and search for justice of the Afro-American community.’<sup>26</sup> Playing on these two traditions helped make Garveyism one of the strongest anti-racism movements of the twentieth century. The movement spread across the globe via transient labour to Latin America, and by immigration to the United States, Europe, and Canada. By 1922, the UNIA claimed a membership of six million ‘Negroes,’ with African Americans comprising about one-third of that number.<sup>27</sup>

However, between 1922 and 1925 the UNIA’s popularity waned. In 1922, Garvey was arrested for eleven counts of mail fraud. He was later imprisoned in February 1925, serving five years at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. During this period, infighting over Garvey’s attempt to consolidate power from prison divided West Indians and African Americans. The media portrayed Garvey as a liar, a cheat, and a radical, prompting the US government to stringently monitor Garvey’s actions and UNIA operations. By 1922, the UNIA’s commercial steamship endeavour, the Black Star Line (BSL), had also collapsed. And in 1924 the Liberian government suddenly ceased

24 Aggrey Brown, *Color, Class, and Politics in Jamaica* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1979), 147.

25 Essien Udosen Essien-Udom and Amy Jacques Garvey, eds., ‘Delivered by Marcus Garvey on the Steps of Ward Theatre, Kingston, Jamaica,’ in *More Philosophies and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Cass, 1977), 184.

26 Hill, ‘General Introduction,’ in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 1:xxxvi.

27 This number is probably over-estimated. It is possible that the membership never reached into the millions. See Hill, ‘Constitution and Book of Laws,’ in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 1:266.

negotiations with the UNIA, their plans for re-colonization halting abruptly. Some Garveyites became disillusioned, prompting the closure of several UNIA divisions.

The years between 1925 and 1927 'symbolically ended the militant phase of the New Negro era'<sup>28</sup> and ushered in the movement's final chapter, one characterized by an insistence on patriotism to one's own country. This chapter began on 2 December 1927 when, at the command of President Coolidge, Garvey was forever expelled from the United States and forced to return to Jamaica. There, Garvey, who declared himself a proud 'citizen of Jamaica' and 'a subject of the great British Empire' (Jamaica was a British-ruled Crown colony until 1962), urged his compatriots to help 'develop the natural resources of [Jamaica] for the good of all.' He invited Jamaicans to be obedient and gracious British subjects, and to demand their rights 'not by revolution but by constitutional methods of appeal to Parliament.'<sup>29</sup> Garveyites were encouraged not to 'discard and throw away opportunities that may be beneficial to them locally; to the contrary, we say to all Negroes in America, the West Indies and elsewhere, seize all opportunities that come to you.'<sup>30</sup> For the first time, UNIA divisions began playing the English national anthem before their own 'Universal Ethiopia Anthem' at meetings. To amplify this new campaign for co-operation among the races, Garvey began to downplay his former views on separatism and racial purity by drawing support from the 'brown' middle class – a group who had previously been excluded from his definition of 'Negro.'<sup>31</sup>

However, Garvey's rebellious spirit had not died. At the sixth UNIA Convention in Kingston in August 1929, Garvey officially abandoned the American-based UNIA. He declared a reorganization of the UNIA under the new name, 'UNIA, August 1929, of the World' with its new headquarters in Jamaica.<sup>32</sup> While some divisions remained loyal to the original UNIA operating out of Harlem, many more, including the Canadian divisions, followed the new Garvey faction.

28 Hill, 'Introduction,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 6:xxxv.

29 Essien-Udom and Garvey, 'Speech,' 174, 185.

30 Marcus Garvey, 'Only Freedom and Nationhood Can Bring Peace to Negroes,' *Negro World*, 20 Feb. 1932.

31 Hill, 'Introduction,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 7:xxxix.

32 Hill, 'Report by UNIA Secretary General Henrietta Vinton Davis in the *Negro World*,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 7:403–4.

CANADA'S BLACK GROUPS AND THE RISE OF THE UNIA

The Canadian divisions likely remained loyal to the Jamaican faction because they were dominated by West Indian immigrants. Fewer African American immigrants had joined the movement, mainly in western Canada and along the US-Canada border. By contrast, Black Canadians remained significantly under-represented in the UNIA. What factors accounted for these different levels of UNIA participation?

Although this question merits more research, several hypotheses may help explain the under-representation of Black Canadians in the UNIA. For one, Black Canadians' low numbers may have made it difficult to fight racism as a group. In 1921, only 0.2 per cent of the Canadian population was considered 'Negro.'<sup>33</sup> This is exacerbated by the sheer size of Canada itself; its vast area may have made it difficult for widely spaced black communities to meet, especially in rural areas.

It is also possible that integration into white society affected Black Canadian participation in the UNIA. Black Canadians commonly lived and worked among whites; few Canadian cities had large black ghettos like those found in American cities, and some Black Canadians even intermarried with whites.<sup>34</sup> According to Joseph Mensah, class affects one's political affiliations and ways of resisting. Generally, higher classes 'tend to seek the acceptance of the dominant white group,' while lower classes are 'more radical.'<sup>35</sup> In effect, racial tolerance and intermixing was more common among middle-class blacks. A brief comparison between the working-class UNIA and the middle-class Canadian League for the Advancement of Colored People (CLACP) highlights this point. The CLACP, modelled on America's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, improved the economic, social, spiritual, and industrial conditions of black peoples through co-operation with whites. Moreover, members of the CLACP vehemently disagreed with Garvey's philosophy of an 'Africa for the Africans,' arguing that 'Africa is the home of our foreparents, but Canada is our own home. And so, it is just as natural for [blacks] to be filled with patriotism for Canada as it is for any other class of

33 The 1921 census shows that the total black population of Canada was 18,291, of which Black Canadians comprised around thirteen thousand. These numbers changed little between 1921 and 1941. Joseph Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social Conditions* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2002), 53.

34 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 465. On page 495 Winks claims that in 1921, 7.1 per cent of Black Canadians intermarried with whites, mostly of 'British stock.'

35 Mensah, *Black Canadians*, 39.

citizens.<sup>36</sup> Presumably, then, Garvey's 'insistence on racial purity' and racial separatism would have been unappealing and even impractical for middle-class Black Canadians.<sup>37</sup>

By contrast, several traits unique to West Indian immigrants in Canada may account for their over-representation in the UNIA. Although blacks in the Caribbean had belonged to the lowest class, most of them were literate and many had received a good education in their homeland, at least compared to African Americans and Black Canadians. The first generation out of slavery had stressed to their children the importance of education for 'upward social mobility.'<sup>38</sup> This need to educate black youths heightened with the fall of the sugar economy and the monopolization of the banana trade, which had 'significantly contributed to the raising of the price of land beyond the reach of the peasantry.'<sup>39</sup> In response, many West Indians acquired the education to land decent jobs – commonly as skilled workers or in white-collar positions – and earn enough money to purchase their own homes in the Caribbean.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, Eleanor Hayes, the daughter of West Indian parents, was of the view that 'if you're a Canadian-born child of a West Indian family, you could never reach the heights of the West Indians left back home' because they were so 'highly educated.'<sup>41</sup>

High literacy rates meant that West Indians could engage with (that is, read and contribute to) UNIA publications, which placed Garveyism in a broader global context. So the West Indians appear to have been more well-informed on the movement than many of their Canadian and American counterparts. Furthermore, West Indian immigrants who had been skilled workers in their homeland also gained valuable experience in political organizing as members of labour unions.

36 Editorial, 'Canadian National League,' *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 16 Aug. 1924; and Editorial, 'Canadian Citizens,' *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 28 Aug. 1926. Unlike the UNIA, the CLACP and NAACP welcomed white members.

37 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 415.

38 James, *Holding Aloft*, 78. In 1911, 62.3 per cent of West Indians were literate. See James, 24.

39 Ibid., 19. The Boston Fruit Company, and later the United Fruit Company, monopolized the banana trade in the nineteenth century, causing the cost of land to inflate. James also argues that a lack of jobs and consistent natural disasters, including floods, hurricanes, and droughts, plagued the islands at the turn of the century. These were important push factors for emigration. See James, *Holding Aloft*, 32–8.

40 Dorothy W. Williams, *Blacks in Montreal 1628–1986: An Urban Demography* (Cowansville: Les Éditions Yvon Blais, 1989), 36.

41 Brand, 'Esther Hayes and Eleanor Hayes,' in *No Burden to Carry*, 210.

Therefore, these 'literate, skilled, confident, ambitious, energetic' West Indians were potentially more inclined to assume leadership in the UNIA.<sup>42</sup>

The UNIA had plenty of leadership roles to offer to its members. A UNIA division with 300 members or more required sixteen executive officers – the highest official was president – to manage its affairs.<sup>43</sup> Most divisions had a separate Ladies' Division, which gave women the chance to hold an executive position. Leadership roles were also available in the numerous auxiliary groups offered by the UNIA, including the Black Cross Nurses (BCN), the Universal African Legion (UAL), the Universal African Legion's Band (UALB), the Universal African Motor Corps (UAMC), the UNIA Choir, and the Juvenile Branch. According to Bertley, the auxiliaries represented the UNIA's doctrine of self-sufficiency and provided the 'avenues' for black peoples to 'build up their self-esteem and morale.'<sup>44</sup> And the official titles granted to auxiliary leaders and executive officers – such as 'president,' 'captain,' or 'superintendent' – helped the West Indian immigrants to bolster their self-worth.

But planning UNIA social events and programs also required regular members to lead. One such member was Violet Blackman, who was born in the West Indies and eventually settled in Toronto in the 1920s. She raised money for the purchase of Toronto's UNIA Hall, sang in the UNIA Choir, never missed a Sunday Mass Meeting, ran the children's program on Sunday afternoons, and founded the division's Ladies Committee for which she was chairwoman. As chairwoman, Blackman says, 'I worked hands and heart. Most of the [social events were] planned at my place; [other members] would come there, and we all would share equally, and we got along nicely, wonderful. I miss all those things – the UNIA was my heart and my soul and my life.'<sup>45</sup> Blackman's sentiments confirm that the UNIA was not only an outlet to strengthen one's sense of purpose, but it was also a community-building endeavour.

42 James, *Holding Aloft*, 78–89.

43 The positions were: president, first vice-president, second vice-president, third vice-president, president of the Ladies' Division, first ladies' vice-president, second ladies' vice-president, third ladies' vice-president, executive secretary, general secretary, associate secretary, general secretary of Ladies' Division, associate ladies' secretary, treasurer, assistant treasurer, and chaplain. There was also a Board of Trustees and an Advisory Board of twenty-five persons. Hill, 'Constitution and Book of Laws,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 1:269.

44 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 269.

45 Brand, 'Violet Blackman,' in *No Burden to Carry*, 41.

Blackman's story also attests to the great level of organization involved in the UNIA. Winston James contends that West Indians were brilliant organizers in the UNIA because they had extensive experience in political and group activism. As a majority in the Caribbean, West Indians had had the support base to rebel against an oppressive white aristocracy at various points in their history, whether through slave revolts, trade unions, or political organizations like the UNIA.<sup>46</sup>

However, when the West Indians arrived in Canada they became, for the first time, a minority. Thus, prior organizing experience and 'the migrants' unavoidable everyday interaction with white people – often tinged with racism – disposed some of them to radical political activity.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, considering their new minority status, it is likely that the West Indians in Canada joined the UNIA to reconnect with their compatriots and to generate a support network like the one they had had in the Caribbean. For instance, West Indians on Cape Breton Island were denied entry into white establishments, so they set up UNIA halls 'to maintain their distinct cultural identity' and offer the West Indian community a safe gathering place. Gwen Johnston, whose mother belonged to the Toronto Division, recalls that 'when we were growing up, the UNIA was a wonderful place, sort of a second home for us,' and 'it was either at the [UNIA] hall that you met people or at the church.'<sup>48</sup>

A strong pan-African consciousness fuelled the West Indians' motivation for community in Canada and abroad. According to James, 'Wide travel contributed, as well, to the radicalization of Caribbeans before their arrival in the United States,' and I would add, Canada. James explains that before relocating to the United States (and Canada), West Indians – especially skilled workers – 'worked on the Panama Canal, some on banana plantations elsewhere in Central America, and still others on sugar plantations in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.' Some even travelled internationally to Europe and Asia. In the process, they developed a 'pan-Africanist perspective through interacting with black people from different countries and through observing the common oppressed condition of black humanity around the world.'<sup>49</sup>

As a result, the Black Canadians and West Indians did not always see eye to eye. The West Indians accused Black Canadians of being

46 James, *Holding Aloft*, 50–6.

47 Ibid., 50.

48 Weeks, *African Nova Scotians*, 37; and Brand, 'Gwen Johnston,' in *No Burden to Carry*, 169–71.

49 James, *Holding Aloft*, 70–2.

subservient to the white population because they were 'lazy, unambitious, and timid.' In fact, both the African Americans and the West Indians in Montreal felt that the 'uneducated and gauche' Black Canadians did little to improve the lives of blacks in the city. By contrast, the Black Canadians called West Indians 'monkey chasers,' mocked their accent, and ridiculed their 'outlandish clothes.' They also derided West Indians as being 'loud and aggressive.'<sup>50</sup>

These cultural divides help explain how and why ethnic identities are formed and practised in Canada. Victor Satzewich and Nikolaos Liodakis maintain that ethnicity is defined by a group's shared ancestry, place of birth, and culture, known as the diachronic dimension, and by the way this group is perceived by others, or the synchronic dimension. Ethnicity, then, is not a static concept, but is rather 'a reciprocal process that varies according to time and place' because 'its diachronic, core dimensions must be reproduced over time in any given place and are contingent on the synchronic social construction of ethnic identity by ethnic outsiders.'<sup>51</sup> Jamaicans, for instance, may have had an ethnic identity in their homeland different from theirs in Canada because the relationship between their diachronic and synchronic dimensions varied significantly in each location. In Canada, immigrants from the Caribbean forged a new West Indian ethnic identity based on shared experiences and histories as migrants from a common region. This West Indian identity was validated by other ethnic groups, including African Americans and Black Canadians, who acknowledged the West Indians as 'different' from themselves.

Ethnic distinctions can exist because, according to James W. St G. Walker, Canada has always adhered to a policy of cultural pluralism, which implies 'mutual toleration for a multiplicity of identities coexisting within our society.' Historically, immigrants 'often settled in self-contained communities where a distinctive life-style could be fostered.' A West Indian immigrant, then, would almost certainly settle among other West Indians in small, tightly knit ethnic enclaves. In these insular ethnic communities, immigrants spent much of their time with people of the same ethnicity, thus allowing them to 'retain distinct cultural characteristics.'<sup>52</sup> It is possible, then, that West Indian immigrants were able to develop an ethno-racial identity in Canada and exhibit the unique traits that made them more likely to

50 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 154-5.

51 Victor Satzewich and Nikolaos Liodakis, *'Race' and Ethnicity in Canada: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 112.

52 James W. St G. Walker, *The West Indians in Canada*, no. 6 of *Canada's Ethnic Groups* (Saint John: Keystone, 1984), 17.



join the UNIA. Predictably, the divisions in Montreal, Toronto, and parts of Nova Scotia – areas that had the highest concentration of West Indians in Canada – were the largest and most successful. Still, African American immigrants, a limited constituency in Canada, also contributed to the rise of Garveyism in the western provinces and in border cities.

#### CANADA'S UNIA DIVISIONS

Between 1919 and 1922, UNIA divisions were established in thirty-two Canadian cities and towns. This 'strong and rapid' growth of the UNIA was doubtlessly a reaction to the tense race relations in Canada in the postwar years. Constance Backhouse asserts that whites led violent and destructive attacks against black Nova Scotians, while 'blacks in Ontario and Saskatchewan withstood increasing concerted intimidation from the hateful Ku Klux Klan.' In addition, segregated black schools, which offered a sub-standard curriculum taught by inadequately trained teachers, were permissible by law in many parts of the country until 1964. Blacks were also excluded from churches, restaurants, beaches, theatres, hotels, and certain occupations well into the 1940s.<sup>53</sup> To combat this racial oppression, Canada's black peoples, especially West Indians, joined the UNIA.

It must be noted that very little direct data on membership figures exist for Canada's UNIA divisions. For one, the UNIA was notorious for keeping incomplete records. Moreover, the UNIA had two types of members, active and regular. Active members were those who paid annual membership dues and were registered in UNIA ledgers. By contrast, regular members, who comprised a larger proportion of UNIA membership, were defined as any member of the black race who supported the work of the UNIA; regular members are typically unrecorded. Therefore, it is impossible to know with certainty the exact number of UNIA members in any given division. Because the divisions in Toronto, Montreal, and Cape Breton Island are the most thoroughly documented, most of my data are derived from their primary records and other secondary sources. Consequently, my evidence is sometimes suggestive and correlative for divisions with fewer records. However, it seems that the most successful UNIA divisions

53 Constance Backhouse, "“Bitterly Disappointed” at the Spread of “Colour-Bar Tactics”: Viola Desmond’s Challenge to Racial Segregation, Nova Scotia, 1946,” in *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 250–1.

were located where West Indian immigrants settled in significant numbers.

Nevertheless, African American immigrants likely played a major role in the small divisions in western Canada and along the us-Canada border. This may be because African Americans were more populous in these areas – at least in the Prairies – than the West Indians. The 1911 census lists a total of 979 blacks in Alberta, 336 in Saskatchewan, and 200 in Manitoba, while Vancouver claimed 530 ‘Negroes’ by 1931.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, British Columbia and the Prairie Provinces had a *combined* total of 451 West Indians.<sup>55</sup> R.B. Shepard writes that at the turn of the century, between a thousand and fifteen hundred African Americans, mainly farmers from Oklahoma, migrated to western Canada hoping to find a ‘law-abiding country, with plenty of free land for settlers.’ Many settlers lived and laboured on the farms dotting the Prairies, often supplementing their income by working on the railroads.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, UNIA divisions sprouted up in the very same communities in which these African American immigrants settled.<sup>57</sup>

African Americans appear to have been quite populous in Ontario’s border cities as well. From as early as 1870, but especially during the Great Migration (roughly 1915 to 1930), southern African Americans moved in sizeable numbers to northern cities like Detroit, Buffalo, and Boston. Canadian border cities like Windsor, St Catharines, and Niagara Falls experienced a similar, but smaller, population increase of African Americans who continued travelling north.<sup>58</sup> These immigrants may have established UNIA divisions in these border cities to emulate their larger American counterparts. Admittedly, little is known about the border city and western divisions; however, their relative absence from UNIA records may suggest that they were small, somewhat inactive, and short-lived. External factors certainly reduced the number of African Americans in these areas, thereby affecting

54 James W. St G. Walker, ‘African Canadians,’ in *The Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples*, ed. P. Magocsi, 147 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); and Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 272–87, 302–6.

55 Walker, *West Indians in Canada*, 16.

56 R. Bruce Shepard, *Deemed Unsuitable: Blacks from Oklahoma Move to the Canadian Prairies in Search of Equality in the Early 20th Century Only to Find Racism in Their New Home* (Toronto: Umbrella, 1997), 64–5.

57 There were UNIA divisions in Vancouver, Victoria, Prince George, and Burnaby, BC; Saskatoon, North Battlefield, and Milleton, SK; Edmonton, Calgary, Keystone, Donatville, and Junkins, AB; and Winnipeg, MB. See Bertley, ‘The UNIA of Montreal,’ 38–9.

58 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 300.

their UNIA divisions. For instance, after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1910, the Canadian government thwarted African American immigration to Canada under the racist pretence that 'Negroes' were undesirable citizens. The repeal of prohibition and the promises of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal may have also beckoned some African American sojourners home in the 1930s.

Undoubtedly, the most active and enduring divisions were those almost wholly sponsored by West Indians, who comprised an estimated five thousand of the total black population of Canada – around twenty thousand between 1921 and 1941. A sizable number of West Indians settled in Canada between 1910 and 1919.<sup>59</sup> During this period, Caribbean natives immigrated to Nova Scotia to work in steel mills, coal mines, or as domestic servants (the most common occupation for West Indian women).<sup>60</sup> They settled mainly near the port towns like Sydney where they first arrived, or in larger urban centres like Toronto and Montreal where job opportunities were more abundant. And all of these cities experienced Garveyism on a far greater level than the divisions located in western Canada and in Canadian border cities, which had a significantly lower West Indian population than Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic Provinces (Appendix 1).

Nova Scotia was Atlantic Canada's hot spot for UNIA activity; by 1922 Nova Scotia had the most UNIA divisions of any Canadian province with twelve.<sup>61</sup> This high number of UNIA divisions is perhaps a reflection of the level of racism plaguing the province. 'An increasingly widespread pattern of white racism,' Backhouse notes, 'exploded with particular virulence across Canada during and immediately following the First World War.' In fact, in places like New Glasgow and Truro, white mobs 'terrorized the Blacks' and destroyed their property.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Africville, a small black community on the outskirts of Halifax, resembled the types of African American ghettos in the United States. Africville housed an overwhelming black majority and was perhaps the poorest and most blighted area of the province.<sup>63</sup> At the 1920 UNIA International Convention, the UNIA high commis-

59 Walker, *West Indians in Canada*, 8–10. Between 1910 and 1919, 1,113 West Indians immigrated to Canada.

60 Mensah, *Black Canadians*, 69.

61 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 38–9; and Hill, *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 7:997.

62 Backhouse, "'Bitterly Disappointed,'" 250.

63 James W. St G. Walker, 'Allegories and Orientations in African-Canadian Historiography: The Spirit of Africville,' *Dalhousie Review* 77, no. 2 (1997): 154–77.

sioner of Canada, George D. Creese, described the racial conditions of Nova Scotia:

We have many [black] skilled mechanics, printers, carpenters, masons, photographers, engineers, riveters, but they cannot get employment at their trades. Hence they have to seek work in the steel plants as labourers, as bricklayers, and as firemen ... A system exists there of collecting a poll tax, everyone being required to pay \$10 for police protection, good streets, etc. If the tax is not paid, the police call at the house and take the individual to jail. This practice applies only to the colored people ... Housing conditions, too, are deplorable in Eastern Canada and in Nova Scotia. Rents are excessively high.<sup>64</sup>

The tense racial atmosphere of postwar Nova Scotia motivated many of its black residents to launch UNIA divisions in their own towns, including Halifax, Tracadie, Dartmouth, Yarmouth, Truro, Amherst, Africville, Preston, New Glasgow, and New Waterford.<sup>65</sup> However, these divisions were considerably smaller and less active than the province's two largest divisions on Cape Breton Island in New Aberdeen (Glace Bay) and Sydney.

In 1919, Albert Francis, a native of Barbados, founded Division 35 in New Aberdeen in the town of Glace Bay for the 'vibrant black community' of West Indians who worked at the No. 2 Colliery. Because this division did not employ a complete panel of executive officers, membership was surely fewer than three hundred. However, the *Negro World* reported that 'in Glace Bay every Negro is a member of the U.N.I.A.,' some even joining the BCN and the UAL. Elmena Vaughn, former bookkeeper for this division, remembers a tightly knit community centred in the UNIA Hall: 'There was a lot of visiting [in the neighbourhood] ... When they used to have a social, everybody used to chip in and send things down [to the Hall] to help out.' Moreover, it seems that the UNIA Hall was an outlet for the West Indians to express their culture. On Founders Day, Vaughn recalls that Francis and his wife 'cooked the meals ... all West Indian food.' The UNIA Hall also had a general store in the basement that was supported by

64 Hill, 'Reports of the Convention,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 2:535.

65 The 1921 census reveals that only fifty-eight 'African Nova Scotians' (at least twenty-nine of them West Indians) lived in New Waterford. Their UNIA division admitted to having a 'small amount of members in our locality,' and few executive officers. See Weeks, *African Nova Scotians*, 13, and 'The U.N.I.A. in New Waterford, Can., Elects Officers Nov. 20, 1922,' *Negro World*, 2 Dec. 1922.

its members.<sup>66</sup> Glace Bay Garveyites proudly boast that their UNIA Hall on Jessome Street is the oldest one in Canada still operating; it now houses the UNIA Cultural Museum.<sup>67</sup>

However, the division in Sydney was the largest in eastern Canada. Because Sydney was, and still is, one of Canada's key ocean ports, it acted as the landing spot for numerous West Indian immigrants in the early twentieth century. By 1910, a 'culturally distinct' population of at least 600 West Indians had settled in the separate neighbourhood of Whitney Pier called 'Coke Ovens' on the outskirts of Sydney. In 1919, the Sydney Division opened on Lingan Road to a membership of about 250.<sup>68</sup> The *Negro World* reported that 'down in Sydney more than half the Negro population' claims membership to the UNIA and they 'labor with the most indefatigable determination to see the realization of the highest hopes – a free and redeemed Negro race.'<sup>69</sup>

The Sydney Division served as the meeting point for the divisions of Cape Breton Island. In August 1925, members from New Aberdeen and New Waterford held a parade and mass meeting together with the Sydney Division. These divisions met again in 1933 for a private convention 'with a view to our securing closer unity with the organization and to show the world a united front for the cause of "Africa for the Africans" at home and abroad.'<sup>70</sup> The Sydney Division also operated a night school for adults, likely West Indian immigrants, in 1921 under the direction of Creese. The school served 'to instruct and teach those who came under its influence, and so recall to memory the youthful days spent at school when we were boys and girls, which have somewhat remained dormant *since coming to this dull country* of "work," "work," "work"' (emphasis added).<sup>71</sup>

These acts of unity demonstrate the impressive organizational and community-building skills of the West Indians and their drive to improve their social standing through the UNIA. Yet external factors could not keep Sydney and her neighbouring divisions from faltering.

66 Joan Weeks, 'Voices from the Community,' in *African Nova Scotians*, 55–8.

67 Weeks, *African Nova Scotians*, 12, 38; 'New Aberdeen Division Organizes Black Cross Nurses,' *Negro World*, 2 Apr. 1921; and Vernal Williams, 'Canadian Divisions U.N.I.A. Making Preparations for August Convention,' *Negro World*, 25 June 1921.

68 Walker, 'African Canadians,' in *Encyclopedia*, 147, and Weeks, *African Nova Scotians*, 13, 37.

69 Williams, 'Canadian Divisions.'

70 'Sydney, Nova Scotia,' *Negro World*, 3 Oct. 1925, and 'New Aberdeen Cape Breton, Can.,' *Negro World*, 3 June, 1933.

71 'Sydney Division Opens "Night School,"' *Negro World*, 25 June, 1921.

As early as the mid-1920s, economic hardship forced many blacks out of the Maritime Provinces and into larger cities like Montreal and Toronto in search of jobs. Subsequently, the UNIA in Nova Scotia waned significantly after 1940.

Canada's two most populous cities, Toronto and Montreal, maintained the country's largest UNIA divisions and West Indian population. They had moved to Toronto and Montreal from the Caribbean and from Nova Scotia for economic opportunities. While exact numbers are unknown, one source reveals that by 1920 Montreal's black neighbourhood, le Quartier St Antoine, had a 'solidly packed population of some 2,000 blacks,' of whom 'at least 95 percent' were West Indians. Similarly, Walker calculates 1,200 West Indians in Toronto by 1921.<sup>72</sup>

It is unclear exactly how many members joined the Toronto Division. However, given the city's substantial West Indian population, membership was likely comparable to that of the Montreal Division, which had registered 700 members by 1922.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the Toronto Division, which was officially inaugurated as Division 21 in 1919, consistently held weekly Sunday Mass Meetings and boasted several active auxiliaries including the BCN, UNIA Choir, and Juvenile Branch. Former Toronto Garveyite Esther Hayes states that the UNIA was a place to educate the next generation of Garveyites 'about their own community' and to instill in them the tools to improve their lives as blacks in Canada. She admits, 'You can see in those faces [of the UNIA's youths] every mother hoping that her child would make it.'<sup>74</sup>

As in other parts of the country, the UNIA Hall was also the place where Toronto Garveyites came together. They had hosted their earliest meetings at Occidental Hall,<sup>75</sup> but by 1925 the Toronto Division had pooled enough money to purchase their UNIA Hall at 355 Queen Street West. Violet Blackman testifies that the UNIA Hall was a place of refuge for 'coloured' peoples, a place where racism and prejudice could not penetrate the front door. It was *the* meeting place for Toronto's black peoples; 'every day of the week there was something going on up in the UNIA,' from recitals to dances, from dinners to socials. Toronto Garveyites also rented out the UNIA Hall to other black groups when white landlords refused the use of their facilities. The division filled their UNIA Hall to capacity for social events and meet-

72 Hill, 'Special Agent Frank C. Higgins to Special Agent Robert S. Sharp,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 3:104; and Walker, *West Indians in Canada*, 8.

73 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 95.

74 Brand, 'Esther Hayes and Eleanor Hayes,' in *No Burden to Carry*, 204, 196-7.

75 Hill, 'British Military Intelligence Report,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 2:205.

ings, news that they proudly reported with frequency to the *Negro World*. Indeed, the UNIA Hall fostered an intimate community and social network among the West Indians. Marjorie Lewsey, the daughter of West Indian parents and devoted Garveyites, recalls that 'we had to go' to the UNIA Hall every Sunday. In fact, 'If you were missing you got a phone call: where were you? I missed you at the meeting last Sunday. So there was a lot of caring and a lot of sharing that I witnessed as a child.'<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps the Toronto Division's proudest achievement occurred in 1936, and again in 1937 and 1938, when it was chosen as the site of two UNIA Regional Conferences and an International Convention. Since President Coolidge had deported Garvey from the United States in 1927, Bertley argues that Canada, and particularly Toronto, served as the gateway to North American Garveyites in the 1930s. Thus, 'it is difficult to underestimate the importance of Canada ... to the survival of the UNIA.'<sup>77</sup> In fact, the three events drew in more attendees than those conferences held in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1929 and 1934<sup>78</sup> – a testimony to the leadership and organizational skills of Toronto Garveyites. Nevertheless, the Toronto Division's privileged position was only temporary; after Garvey's death in 1940 the division steadily declined until its official closing in 1982. The closing of the UNIA Hall was devastating to its members. Blackman remembers, 'When the UNIA was sold I took sick, because that was one building where I felt within myself that, even if I'm gone from here, my young children that was twenty up could open that door, and no one could tell them that they can't come in.'<sup>79</sup>

Members of Division 5 in Montreal opened the doors of their Liberty Hall on 9 June 1919.<sup>80</sup> Located in the Canadian Pacific Railway Building on St Antoine Street, Montreal's Liberty Hall was centred in the heart of the city's poorest – and 'blackest' – neighbourhood, le Quartier St Antoine. Only 10 per cent of Montreal's black population was Black Canadian, while African Americans and West Indians each

76 Brand, 'Violet Blackman,' and 'Marjorie Lewsey,' in *No Burden to Carry*, 39–41, and 239.

77 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 353.

78 The 1929 convention was attended by eighty-seven delegates, while only twenty-two went in 1934. However, the attendance in 1936, 1937, and 1937 was 144, 148, and 116, respectively. See Hill, 'UNIA Convention Delegates by Gender,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 7:971.

79 Brand, 'Violet Blackman,' in *No Burden to Carry*, 45–6.

80 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 10. The Liberty Hall later moved to Guy Street from February 1920 to March 1922, then to 134 Chatham Street between May 1922 and May 1931, and finally to Georges Vanier Boulevard until 1943. See Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 47.

comprised between 40 and 50 per cent. African Americans tended to use Montreal as a seasonal or temporary residence, whereas the West Indians considered it their permanent home. Thus, 'it was the West Indians who brought and created stable social organization within the Black community' through the foundation of various organizations, including the UNIA.<sup>81</sup>

The West Indians were active organizers in Montreal because of their frustrating economic situation. One observer noted that most West Indians held low-paying jobs as 'employees of the Canadian Pacific and other Canadian railroads, with a strong sprinkling of negro stewards and sailors, also West Indians, from cargo and passenger vessels operating from St Lawrence ports.'<sup>82</sup> Low-income West Indians were forced to rent tiny apartments in the overcrowded Quartier St Antoine. As in Sydney and Toronto, West Indians in Montreal became passionate about the UNIA and used it as an outlet to overcome these frustrations. The Montreal Division boasted the highest, and perhaps most active, membership of any Canadian UNIA division. Within its first year, a very successful membership drive had inspired 400 Montrealers to join,<sup>83</sup> and they maintained at least 300 registered members between 1920 and 1922. These loyal Garveyites launched every auxiliary under the UNIA's banner during the 1920s, not to mention a very successful Literary Club for the UNIA teenagers and young adults. The Montreal Division also held regular social events like picnics and excursions 'to supply popular and innocent amusement for the Colored community' and 'other unceasing activities in trying to ameliorate conditions to the benefit of the down-trodden race.'<sup>84</sup> Montreal is also the only division to send at least one (although in most cases several) delegate to each UNIA Convention, save the one in 1934 when no Canadians attended (Appendix 2); they also helped organize the three conventions in Toronto in the 1930s. Perhaps most impressively, the Montreal Division remains active to this day.

#### THE DECLINE OF GARVEYISM IN CANADA

As he had done in the Caribbean, Garvey preached a new patriotic strategy to Canadians in the 1930s to keep the UNIA afloat. In 1937 Garvey encouraged both black and white citizens to extend 'to the

81 Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 30-6.

82 Hill, 'Special Agent Frank C. Higgins to Special Agent Robert S. Sharp,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 3:104.

83 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 93.

84 Hill, 'Article in the *Dawn of Tomorrow*,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 5:435.



Canadian Government its grateful appreciation and respect, and pray that the Prime Minister and the Good Government may continue toward the successful future.' He urged blacks in Canada to take every available opportunity to help themselves and their nation, for 'so long as Canada is Canada and the Negro lives here, he will be a good citizen.'<sup>85</sup>

Unfortunately, Garvey's strategies had come too late; the Great Depression had left many blacks penniless and unable to support the UNIA financially. And after the death of Garvey in 1940, the UNIA became a shadow of its former self, its ultimate goal of re-colonization never having been achieved. Bertley admits that 'one is almost tempted to write that it was a pity for the organization that its President General had not' altered his strategies sooner for 'had he done so, the history of the UNIA might have been quite different.'<sup>86</sup> Perhaps if Garvey had not originally pushed for separatism, the UNIA might have appealed to the many blacks in Canada who did not wish to go 'back to Africa' but preferred to stay in their homeland 'to enjoy the fruits of the[ir] sacrifices and of the[ir] labors.'<sup>87</sup>

Likewise, youth interest had waned significantly during the 1930s. Bertley contends, 'The juveniles of the 1920's and 1930's did not give any appreciable support to the UNIA in the 1940's, 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's' because of the 'growing power of the integrationist movement' in Canada. Bertley explains that 'during the 1950's and 1960's, integration became the key word' while 'the UNIA, with its undisguised and militant philosophy of the primacy of race was, at best, considered an embarrassment by the integrationists who were in the ascendant.'<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the UNIA had instilled in Canada's black youths the importance of black pride and civil rights activism. In the words of Esther Hayes, 'The main thing I got from [Garvey] was it was possible you could do something, not necessarily the way he did it because that wasn't the way I wanted to do it . . . but he gave me the impression that with all my study of Negro history I can do something.'<sup>89</sup>

85 The quotations in the order they appear in this paragraph: Hill, 'Official Minutes of the Second Regional Conference of the UNIA,' in *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 7:775; 'Editorial by Marcus Garvey in the *Black Man*,' 7:711; and 'Speech by Marcus Garvey,' 7:790.

86 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 367.

87 Editorial, 'To Africa—Why Not?' *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 1 May 1926.

88 Bertley, 'The UNIA of Montreal,' 297, 110.

89 Brand, 'Esther Hayes and Eleanor Hayes,' in *No Burden to Carry*, 214.

## CONCLUSION

Exploring the history of the UNIA in Canada sheds light on the ethnic differences of Canada's black peoples while illustrating the relevance of G.E. Clarke's theory of 'African Canadianité' to the study of Garveyism. Too often scholars have opted for a racial explanation of the UNIA in Canada. However, in the case of a global movement like Garveyism, race and ethnicity must be studied in tandem. If we do not do so, we are bound to overlook the distinctive ethno-racial identity of West Indians and how it fuelled their active and successful organizing of Canadian UNIA divisions.

West Indians in Canada, who were well educated and literate, had the skills to become engaged participants and leaders in the Garvey movement and to understand its global purpose. Moreover, their experiences as international migrants helped them to develop a pan-African consciousness and the desire to forge strong ethno-racial communities in Canada, often centred in UNIA Halls. Finally, the West Indians' history of political activism and labour unionism, bolstered in part by their majority status in the Caribbean, granted them the organizational skills to maintain UNIA divisions across Canada, but especially in Sydney, Toronto, and Montreal.

However, UNIA support had dwindled throughout the late 1920s and 1930s despite Garvey's introduction of a new diplomatic policy of state cooperation and patriotism. Garvey's imprisonment, the Great Depression, and his sudden death in 1940 devastated the UNIA and its members. By the 1940s, the UNIA's goal of separatism had grown unpopular among integrationists in Canada, and perhaps even for the children of West Indian immigrants who could not identify with the UNIA's mantra of an 'Africa for the Africans.'

Despite the decline of the UNIA after 1940, we cannot deny that for many blacks in Canada Garveyism was central to their lives. In 1928, J.F. Jenkins, editor of the CLACP's newspaper *Dawn of Tomorrow*, accurately predicted, 'Future historians will give Garvey the credit of being the first Negro to awaken in the breast of the common class of his race, the spirit of race consciousness.'<sup>90</sup> The UNIA was the first secular civil rights organization in Canada, and an outlet for community building and cultural expression. For these reasons, Garveyism is integral to the study of the African diaspora and to the story of black Canada.

90 Editorial, 'Again, Marcus Garvey,' *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 30 Nov. 1928.

## APPENDIX 1

## Distribution of people of West Indian Origin in Canada

Year	Atlantic Provinces (%)	Quebec (%)	Ontario (%)	Prairies (%)	BC (%)	Territories (%)
1911	417 (22.3)	203 (10.8)	804 (42.8)	236 (12.6)	215 (11.5)	3 (-)
1921	862 (20.2)	997 (23.4)	1,778 (41.6)	372 (8.8)	257 (6.0)	2 (-)
1931	673 (15.3)	1,362 (30.0)	1,906 (42.0)	313 (6.9)	279 (6.2)	4 (-)
1941	590 (14.3)	1,199 (29.0)	1,833 (44.3)	210 (5.1)	293 (7.1)	5 (0.1)

Source: James W. St G. Walker, *The West Indians in Canada*, no. 6 of *Canada's Ethnic Groups* (Saint John: Keystone, 1984), 16.

## APPENDIX 2

## Canadian delegates to UNIA Conventions, 1920-1938

1920 D.D. Lewis, Montreal Georgiana O'Brien, Montreal George D. Creese, New Aberdeen Richard Edward Riley, New Aberdeen Abraham B. Thomas, Toronto	1921 George D. Creese, New Aberdeen Richard E. Riley, New Aberdeen Georgiana O'Brien, Montreal Alfred Potter, Montreal	1922 George D. Creese, New Aberdeen Herbert Julian, Montreal W.J. McIntosh, Montreal Georgiana O'Brien, Montreal
1924 E. Alleyne, Toronto Georgiana O'Brien, Montreal	1926 Clara De Shields, Montreal	1929 Alfred Potter, Montreal
1934 None	1936 E.J. Tucker, Montreal	1937 E.J. Tucker, Montreal B.J. Spencer-Pitt, Toronto G.L. Mercury, Toronto
1938 B.J. Spencer-Pitt, Toronto E.J. Tucker, Montreal		

Sources: Robert A. Hill, ed. *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983-2006); Leo W. Bertley, 'The Universal Negro Improvement Association of Montreal, 1917-1979' (PhD diss., Concordia University, 1983).

APPENDIX 3

Canadian UNIA divisions, 1919–1940

---

NOVA SCOTIA

Africville	New Waterford
Amherst	Preston
Dartmouth	Sydney
Halifax	Tracadie
New Aberdeen / Glace Bay	Truro
New Glasgow	Yarmouth

NEW BRUNSWICK

Saint John

QUEBEC

Montreal

ONTARIO

Hamilton	Toronto
Niagara Falls	Windsor
St Catharines	

MANITOBA

Winnipeg

SASKATCHEWAN

Milleton  
North Battleford  
Saskatoon

ALBERTA

Calgary	Junkins
Donatville	Keystone
Edmonton	

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Burnaby	Vancouver
Prince George	Victoria

---

*Sources:* Leo W. Bertley, 'The Universal Negro Improvement Association of Montreal, 1917–1979' (PhD diss., Concordia University, 1983), 38–9; and Robert A. Hill, Appendix X, 'Locations of UNIA Divisions and Chapters,' in *The Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 7:997.