

“If You Believe the Negro Has a Soul”: “Back to Africa” with Marcus Garvey

Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey recognized that his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) would find its most enthusiastic audience in the United States, despite the organization’s professed worldwide mission. After fighting World War I, ostensibly to defend democracy and self-determination, thousands of African-American soldiers returned home to find intensified discrimination, segregation, racial violence, and hostile relations with white Americans. Sensing growing frustration, Garvey used his considerable charisma to attract thousands of disillusioned black working-class and lower middle-class followers and became the most popular black leader in America in the early 1920s. The UNIA, committed to notions of racial purity and separatism, insisted that salvation for African Americans meant building an autonomous, black-led nation in Africa. To this end, the movement offered in its “Back to Africa” campaign a powerful message of black pride and economic self-sufficiency. In Garvey’s 1921 speech, “If You Believe the Negro Has a Soul,” he emphasized the inevitability of racial antagonism and the hopelessness of interracial coexistence.

Fellow citizens of Africa, I greet you in the name of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League of the World. You may ask, “what organization is that?” It is for me to inform you that the Universal Negro Improvement Association is an organization that seeks to unite, into one solid body, the four hundred million Negroes in the world. To link up the fifty million Negroes in the United States of America, with the twenty million Negroes of the West Indies, the forty million Negroes of South and Central America, with the two hundred and eighty million Negroes of Africa, for the purpose of bettering our industrial, commercial, educational, social, and political conditions. As you are aware, the world in which we live today is divided into separate race groups and distinct nationalities. Each race and each nationality is endeavoring to work out its own destiny, to the exclusion of other races and other nationalities. We hear the cry of “England for the Englishman,” of “France for the Frenchman,” of “Germany for the German,” of “Ireland for the Irish,” of “Palestine for the Jew,” of “Japan for the Japanese,” of “China for the Chinese.”

We of the Universal Negro Improvement Association are raising the cry of “Africa for the Africans,” those at home and those abroad. There are 400 million Africans in the world who have Negro blood coursing through their veins, and we believe that the time has come to unite these 400 million people toward the one common purpose of bettering their condition. The great problem of the Negro for the last 500 years has been that of disunity. No one or no organization ever succeeded in uniting the Negro race. But within the last four years, the Universal Negro Improvement Association has worked wonders. It is bringing together in one fold four million organized Negroes who are scattered in all parts of the world. Here in the 48 States of the American Union, all the West Indies islands, and the countries of South and Central America and Africa. These four million people are working to convert the rest of the four hundred million that are all over the world, and it is for this purpose, that we are asking you to join our land and to do the best you can to help us to bring about an emancipated race.

If anything stateworthy is to be done, it must be done through unity, and it is for that reason that the Universal Negro Improvement Association calls upon every Negro in the United States to rally to this standard.

We want to unite the Negro race in this country. We want every Negro to work for one common object, that of building a nation of his own on the great continent of Africa. That all Negroes all over the world are working for the establishment of a government in Africa, means that it will be realized in another few years. We want the moral and financial support of every Negro to make this dream a possibility. Our race, this organization, has established itself in Nigeria, West Africa, and it endeavors to do all possible to develop that Negro country to become a great industrial and commercial commonwealth. Pioneers have been sent by this organization to Nigeria, and they are now laying the foundations upon which the four hundred million Negroes of the world will build. If you believe that the Negro has a soul, if you believe that the Negro is a man, if you believe the Negro was endowed with the senses commonly given to other men by the Creator, then you must acknowledge that what other men have done, Negroes can do. We want to build up cities, nations, governments, industries of our own in Africa, so that we will be able to have a chance to rise from the lowest to the highest position in the African Commonwealth.