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ARSC 3206- Week 3: Black Women Leadership in Marcus Garvey Movement

This week’s readings focused on the contribution of women in the Marcus Garvey movement. Similar to other activist movements, Black women who suffered under the structures of misogyny and anti-Blackness did not have a clear place in addressing these harms. Black women were traditionally viewed as a “problem” (Ford-Smith 74) to racial equality movements because of their argument that Black women and men experience racism differently. However, Black women were also viewed as divisive to the mainstream feminist movement—led by white women—for arguing for racial inequality as well. While the Garvey movement attempted to address Black women’s needs—particularly because of the involvement of Garvey’s wife—misgynoir was still prominent in the organizing.

Traditionally, women were seen as best placed in the home to nurture children and preserve the realm of domesticity. Women were only seen as valuable in the labor force if men were absence (such as during war); moreover, women were valued as a cheap labor force because they were seen as biologically inferior and less reliable for labor (Ford-Smith 75). Garvey tried to subvert this ideology by praising Black women, honoring them as the “Goddess of Africa” among other things. However, in his attempt to honor Black women, Garvey used tropes of femininity such as Black women being better nurturers and better suited to care for children. The misogynistic placement of women as caretakers goes against the historical fact that women of color and Black women played a crucial role in anti-colonial movements (Ford-Smith 73). Garvey still understood Black women as vehicles for Black men’s liberation, not understanding the complex intersection that Black women occupy.

This week’s readings also highlighted the perspective of Black women and who they thought was responsible for their subjugation. In “Women As Leaders Nationally and Racially,” Amy Garvey discusses the need for women, namely Black women, to be involved in their own liberation. A point of contention for me in the article is how Amy Garvey understands where that inequality comes from. Garvey makes the comparison that white women are able to participate in movements for their liberation because “Black men are less appreciative of their women than white men” (Garvey 11).

However, I disagree with Garvey’s understanding of why Black women are “confined” to certain roles in liberation. For one, Garvey sets up this argument that white men are more considerate because of her contrived understanding of their treatment to white women. However, Garvey misunderstands that oppression of Black women doesn’t only come from men. White women, through the vehicle of white supremacy, suppress Black women by shaming them for bringing race into the paradigm of gender inequality. Many of the same movements that Garvey praised have argued for race not to be included to preserve the perceived gains of white women. Moreover, similar to the accusation that Garvey makes towards Black men—that they use the labor of Black women to advance their own gain—white women do that exact thing. “Activists” like Susan B. Anthony relied on contributors like Ida B. Wells to reach new multi-racial audiences and spread the work of their campaign. Whilst contributing to that, Anthony shamed Wells for choices she made such as marriage and having children, things that are not equally accessible to Black and white women. Hence, Garvey is too lenient to white women because of their somewhat shared understanding of gender oppression.