Giving 'Substance to Freedom and Democracy': Black Woman Intellectual Vicki Garvin

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This paper explores labor organizer Vicki Garvin’s life and ideas as an instantiation of Black feminism and as characterized by features central to contemporary Black feminist thought. Garvin’s philosophy and practice of feminism come forth in her research and activism in workers’ rights, African Americans’ rights, and women’s rights. Garvin came of age in a post-WWII era of politics that was shaped by social movements toward liberation. As a demonstration of how to resist domination and oppression while remaining committed to the practice of democracy, Garvin’s life’s work deserves attention.

INTRODUCTION

According to Patricia Hill Collins, one distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is that there is a dialectical relationship between oppression and activism, and there is a dialogical relationship between Black women’s collective experiences of oppression and their group knowledge. Because of their unique position within the matrix of domination, defined as the social organization in which intersecting oppressions are developed, maintained, and maneuvered, African American women have a special knowledge about the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression. Therefore, they must be a part of any effective effort to critique and overcome oppression. As Collins explains, this insight was known and practiced well before contemporary feminist thinkers such as herself conceptualized Black feminist thought as a particular field of scholarship. The research and activism of labor organizer Vicki Garvin demonstrates an understanding of the specific and important role that African American women (as one of many historically marginalized/ oppressed groups) have to play within the institutional contexts that create and perpetuate their oppression. She emerges as a Black woman intellectual whose work transformed consciousness and cultivated resistance. Garvin wrote a Master’s thesis that problematized labor unions as institutional contexts that privileged the liberal pro-capitalist perspectives of white males over the needs and views of the diverse labor force. While serving as a national staff member of a labor union organization, she used her position and the platform it provided to give voice to the experiences and needs of African American laborers who had been silenced within or excluded from labor union decision making processes. In furthering this effort, she similarly used her position as a writer at the Freedom newspaper to bring attention to the specific circumstance of African American women workers. Finally, as a founding member and leader of the National Negro Labor Council, Garvin developed a philosophy and institutional structure for a labor organization that would put the experiences and needs of African American women at its center.

This paper explores Garvin’s development as a labor union organizer as an instantiation of Black feminism that would later be conceptualized as distinguishing features of Black feminist thought. Garvin was born in 1915 as Victoria Holmes in Richmond, Virginia. Her childhood was shaped by several experiences of education, activism, and leadership. In 1926, she migrated to Harlem, NYC, the artistic and political hub for progressive African American thinkers, which provided the space for her political activism to take root. Attendance at street conversations in Harlem, leadership in an African American history club in high school, participation in youth programs at her church, and experiencing her own family’s painful economic struggle formed a lens for seeing the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and labor. In addition to these experiences, her education at Hunter College and Smith College allowed her to refine her research skills. In 1942 and during WWII, after finishing her Master’s degree and thesis, Garvin moved back to New York City and immediately threw herself into trade union work with the National War Labor Board as a wage rate analyst. She simultaneously held a position with the National Negro Congress. She began working for the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA) in 1945 and two years later joined the Communist Party.

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twenty-first century at the cost of the labor constituents. She did this by exposing the conflict of interest at stake in the quiet but close relationship between national labor union leadership and the dominant organization representing broad interests. Conflict of interest was morally problematic because it undermined the very commitments to workers that the labor unions proclaimed as a fundamental matter of principle and praxis.

Garvin’s investigation of these two organizations is one that sheds light on the power dynamics that exist within labor unions. filo's theories that were not grounded in many individual workers' realities. Speaking of the constituent labor unions, she research, "special interests and other actions taken abroad. As a union organizer, her concern for the worker is paramount, and the study therefore reveals multiple ways in which various political and economic institutions exploit workers. In this respect, Garvin’s research foreshadows transnational and international relationships of power, which become a focus later on in her life in Ghana and China.

While making a powerful critique of corporate-military-government relations that undermine worker protections, Garvin also draws attention to problems faced by women in particular. Garvin was a delegate at the annual Convention of UOPWA, which took into account the needs for food, living, clothing, rent, house operations, furnishings, and income and payroll taxes, to conclude that a white collar family of four cannot survive with the rising prices and non-comparable rising wages. At the seventh annual Convention of UOPWA, Garvin critiques the budget for the coming year noting that it does not reflect the needs of the female workers. She questions the political and economic ties that drive U.S. government decisions and connects them to corporate interests and other actions taken abroad. As a union organizer, her concern for the worker is paramount, and the study therefore reveals multiple ways in which various political and economic institutions exploit workers. In this respect, Garvin’s research foreshadows transnational and international relationships of power, which become a focus later on in her life in Ghana and China.

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Garvin’s early research offers a window into her developing political philosophy and analysis of difference as an activist and intellectual. She continued to use her position within union organizations to voice the needs of not only women, but also African Americans.

**GARVIN GIVES VOICE TO EXCLUDED AFRICAN AMERICANS**

At the 1949 CIO Constitutional Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, Garvin used her national staff position to support Resolution no. 16, which addressed the obstacles faced by minority workers. She pushed the Convention to be even more expansive in acknowledging and addressing such obstacles. She began by expressing her pride in being a part of the CIO, but went on to convey her disappointment that the organization had not addressed the rights of African Americans. This was partly because CIO leadership feared it would alienate whites in the South who might be a part of the KKK. She therefore pushed the CIO to be more diverse and to encourage black workers to challenge the status quo. Garvin’s actions reflected the tension between the CIO’s mandate to represent all workers and its broader goal of creating a unified labor movement.

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Eventually, in 1949, the UOPWA was eliminated from the CIO, which corresponded to other efforts that used Cold War legislation to dismantle movements for racial equality. Like the eleven other organizations that were removed from CIO, the UPWA was also eliminated, which reflected the increasing danger that organizations like the UPWA faced.

Activism within unions is how African American women created the space and momentum to organize for their rights. In an article in Freedom newspaper, Garvin praised the work of black women in the New Deal’s public works programs, noting that they were the first to be fired during a slack season in the national economy, have the worst jobs, and are absolutely the “co-breadwinners” due to “white men [having] virtual control of the space and momentum to organize for their rights.”

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Garvin’s push for organizations to be more diverse was a direct challenge to the demographic should control policy or decision-making processes. She understood that decisions were not being made in favor of black workers because they did not know the policies in the South. This event symbolizes what concerns were legitimate came from homogenous perspectives and standpoints. She critiques the elitist perspective within the AFL in her thesis, and again as she challenges Resolution no. 6 in not doing enough for the conditions of diverse workers. Through the assertion of her voice, Garvin articulated the connections between the African American movement’s more radical politics amidst a hostile economy, have the worst jobs, and are absolutely institutionalizing African American women’s voices.

Given the non-responsiveness of unions to the needs of African American workers, Garvin continued to work for Freedom newspaper while organizing the National Negro Labor Committee (NNLC) throughout which she understood was necessary under Cold War political repression in the U.S. Connections to the Communist Party (CP) posed threats to liberal capital that could account for and respond to the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and region. It was this community that was possible for Garvin to make. Strict loyalty to an organizations’ values and the U.S.’s broader pro-capitalist culture created an atmosphere of intimidation made labor unions hypersensitive to criticism, which was driven by their fear of exclusion from vital organizational networks and resources. The semblance of unity, especially that it was intended to support within the policy-making process.

The Red Scare and McCarthyism shaped the way bureaucratic organizations practiced unity and loyalty. The fear of communism changing the ideology of a liberal capitalist democracy, which was held together through the strong ties Garvin exposed, sparked legislation such as the Truman Doctrine of 1947 and McCarran Act of 1950. The McCarran Act, FBI surveillance, and intimidation made labor unions unite against communism, which was driven by their fear of exclusion from vital union organizations and resources. The semblance of unity, especially that it was intended to support within the policy-making process.

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addressed the rights of African Americans. This was partly because CIO leadership feared it would alienate whites in the South who might be a part of the KKK. She therefore proposed the need for more mobilization of African Americans in all jobs. Another delegate responded by dismissing her and asserting that she did not know the policies in the South. This event symbolizes Garvin’s challenges to the white male power structure that dominated the CIO and the structure’s ability to dismiss Garvin’s challenges to the white male power structure as one of two unions with the highest percentage of African American women in leadership. Garvin’s perspective within the AFL in her thesis, and again as she challenges Resolution no. 6 in not doing enough for the conditions of diverse workers. Through the assertion of her voice, Garvin articulated the connections between the African American movement’s more radical politics amidst a hostile political climate. Given the non-responsiveness of unions to the needs of African American workers, Garvin continued to work for Freedom newspaper while organizing the National Negro Labor Committee (NNLC) throughout which she understood was necessary under Cold War political repression in the U.S. Connections to the Communist Party (CP) posed threats to liberal capital that could account for and respond to the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and region. It was this community that was possible for Garvin to make. Strict loyalty to an organizations’ values and the U.S.’s broader pro-capitalist culture created an atmosphere of intimidation made labor unions hypersensitive to criticism, which was driven by their fear of exclusion from vital organizational networks and resources. The semblance of unity, especially that it was intended to support within the policy-making process.

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While bringing attention to the fact that African American men and women were relegated to unskilled labor and tasks, Garvin also emphasizes that unorganized African American women were especially subject to control by their employers. Thus, turning to solutions, she writes, “It is a matter of record that where given the opportunity to enter industry and become a part of the trade union movement, Negroes demonstrated their loyalty and ability to fight for the best interests of all workers. Despite tremendous handicaps, Negro women have fought their way into unions.” For Garvin, it is African American women who “give substance to freedom and democracy.” She calls for permanent jobs for African American women in industry, the provision of opportunities for training, up-grading and employment in all categories of work, elimination of wage differentials, and an extension of coverage of social welfare legislation to industries and occupations not yet included. Garvin also wanted to see the promotion of African American women in leadership positions at all levels of trade union activity.

When Garvin and her collaborators, such as Ferdinand Smoot, Ewart Guinier, and Pearl Laws, created the NNLC, they created a space in which they could work together to struggle and fight for the diverse needs of a diverse labor force. The NNLC was a “movement” in the words of Garvin at its founding convention, which took place in a Cincinnati community that was doing its best to keep them out. Specifically, the Cincinnati City Council passed a resolution disapproving of the convention events, and the FBI was worked to be paid close attention to them. When African Americans first arrived, they were refused by hotels, so convention participants turned to local families who were willing to host them. Because the hotels finally yielded, Garvin’s convention speech emphasized the importance of the NNLC convention as part of an underlying movement to end the mistreatment of American women who had similar goals and visions of justice. The broader movement, Negro women have demonstrated their loyalty and ability to fight for the best interests of all workers.

Coming from positions of intersecting oppressions, African American workers, and especially African American women workers, were appropriate leaders for this movement. Perspectives that NNLC convention participants presented were progressive, complex, and challenged accepted meanings of freedom. Speakers acknowledged that freedom abroad cannot happen without freedom at home. The foreign policy of "freedom-building" was exposed as hypocrisy. The group discussed the deep ties of the military to corporations that make money off of the rhetoric used to incite war. The organization finally had the space to investigate and openly theorize about the interconnected injustices around the world and their relation to the injustice each worker experienced. This played a crucial role in the convention’s development of a liberating vision of inclusive freedom and allowed for an intersectional agenda. Included in their goals were establishing and protecting the rights of Puerto Ricans, Mexican workers, and other minority groups, engaging in peace negotiations with Korea, and pushing for the development of housing programs.21

As the NNLC’s second annual convention approached, it had secured jobs for African American women in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Milwaukee, New York, Chicago, and Flint, and job training in Cleveland. It had developed ordinances to end Jim Crow education in New York, Chicago, and Flint, and job training in Cleveland. It had developed ordinances to end Jim Crow education in New York, Chicago, and Flint, and job training in Cleveland.

The composition of the convention was diverse, drawing whites as well as African Americans, and Garvin knew that finding unity at the intersection of these differences would provide the strength to overcome the power of the “coalition of bosses, bankers and Klux politicians.”19 Uniting across race was thus an important part of the NNLC. When the organization was dedicated to having African Americans lead this movement, whites were welcomed.

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By gathering diverse thinkers, the NNLC was able to establish connections between oppressions and exhume the intersections of class, race, and in some cases sex.22 The composition of the convention was diverse, drawing whites as well as African Americans, and Garvin knew that finding unity at the intersection of these differences would provide the strength to overcome the power of the ‘coalition of bosses, bankers and Klu Klux politicians.’18 Unity across race was thus an important part of the NNLC. While the organization was dedicated to helping African Americans lead this movement, whites were welcomed.

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By refraining from exclusionary politics, Garvin and the NNLC were furthering the Black feminist mission. “Black women intellectuals are central in the production of Black feminist thought because [they] alone can foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions with other groups… Although Black feminist thought originated within Black working-class traditions, it has since flourished isolated from the experiences and ideas of other women;”23 Garvin, acting as one of the Black feminist intellectuals of this time, skillfully used her position once again. In the past, Garvin spoke up as an African American woman to demand recognition of a difference in labor. Within this movement, she went a step further, creatively using this difference to build coalitions with other groups that similarly faced oppression or worked for justice.

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In reaction, the NNLC emerged with a commitment to hearing the voices of many, rather than succumb to the practice of allowing one voice to dictate and dominate discussions about how to conceive of and address problems. For Garvin, freedom and democracy were and should continue to be a struggle. Garvin helped create the NNLC as a place where people could argue ideologically and, in this, have friendship and comradery. It was coming together from a place of solidarity and equality to find justice, especially in argument and debate, that foments effective democracy.

After five years of work, the NNLC dissolved in 1956 under political pressure from the U.S. government. This powerful movement, with many of its leaders sharing membership in the CP, was deemed unrepresentative of American ideals. Attorney General Brownell made the call to request that the NNLC be reviewed by the Subversive Activities Control Board. Ultimately, the NNLC decided to disband rather than be found guilty for fighting for freedom. In 1972, Garvin commented that the goals of NNLC were carried forth by Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party. She said she could see the work coming to fruition in the coalitions forming the Women’s Liberation and the Anti-War movements, for which the NNLC had planted the seeds.

CONCLUSION
Garvin’s intellectualism and activism problematized and sought to address many of the same concerns that drive contemporary intersectional theory. Her early work focused on the class-based dynamics that corrupt corporate capitalism and the labor organizations that must find a way to operate within those political-economic dynamics. She furthered an understanding of these complex dynamics by introducing the failure of labor unions to take the voice of African American laborers into consideration. Her final project to centralize the voices emerging from the special circumstances faced by African American working women in particular fully reveals an early modern thinker who understood the interlocking nature of race, class, and gender that has become central to contemporary intersectional thinking. Vicki Garvin continued to uproot the interconnected oppression of people and groups in her years spent living in Nigeria, Ghana, and China. Her life’s work, as well as the work of countless Black women throughout history, provides a gateway to true practices of democracy and freedom.

MIXED MEDIA

THE LIFE WITHIN SELF
Idalys Torres

As the Executive Secretary of the Greater New York chapter of the NNLC and the National Vice President of NNLC, Garvin understood that the unity required for the organization’s work was nothing like a repressive, forced loyalty to institutions serving powerful interests.

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