Tracing Dutch Caribbean Migrants in Black Radical Encounters

Microhistories in Transnational Conjunctures, 1920-1940

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Abstract

In the 1920s and 1930s, port cities in the Caribbean and the Americas were home to well-organized networks of Black radical activism. Dutch Caribbean people must have been involved in these movements and circuits, though only minor references are known. In this article, I bring together the historiography of these shifting worlds with a range of microhistories in their larger context. I argue that the history of Dutch Caribbean activists in transatlantic political Black movements is not merely an addition to or a small circuit in this larger frame. Intersectionalities in these histories testify to a blending of communities beyond imperial and linguistic fault lines, shaping for those hailing from the Dutch Caribbean new opportunities of being in the world and new configurations of belonging.

In the 1920s and 1930s, port cities in the Caribbean and the Americas were brimming with Black anti-capitalistic, anti-colonial, and anti-racist thought and action. Supported by an expanding network of shipping lines and intense labor migration movements, well-organized networks of Black social and political activism arose that were transnational at heart and thus had a strong impact on Dutch geopolitical and economic interests in the Western Hemisphere.

Far away from home, Dutch Caribbean migrant laborers mixed in these communities and networks. They must have been involved in these movements, but so far, except for the Surinamese Otto Huiswoud,

only minor references are known about this engagement.[1] The implications of this understudied history are not only of interest to historians but also hold deeper meaning for Dutch Caribbean societies today. For the ancestors of colonial systems of oppression, having little or no record of resistance or criticism sustains the stereotypical image of Dutch Caribbean populations being docile, uncritical, or predominantly loyal colonial subjects. The object of my research is to bring details of these migrant labourers systematically together to uncover silenced and unrecorded stories that are often interconnected and that add up to substantially new narratives.

In historiography, one of the seminal studies about radical Black movements and their connections to the Caribbean is *Radical Moves. Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (2013). In this work, Lara Putnam profoundly studies British Caribbean labor migrant experiences in the larger realm of decolonization and Black internationalist breakthroughs. Putnam argues that the circum-Caribbean Black political activism of the interwar period – as studied also by scholars such as Winston James, Susan Pennybacker, and Minkah Makalani[2] – are never separate worlds, but rather interconnected circuits. Thus, as Putnam sets out, "no one regional vantage point is complete."[3]

This research represents the first attempt to identify and map experiences of people hailing from the Dutch Caribbean within the interconnected circuits that Putnam outlines. It is limited to the involvement in the Universal Negro Improvement Association, UNIA, founded by Marcus Garvey (1887-1940). From 1920 until well into the 1930s, UNIA was the largest of all transatlantic Black

1 For references on Huiswoud, see further in this article. Most notable for St. Maarten is: Lasana M. Sekou (ed.), *National symbols of St. Martin. A primer* (St. Martin 2017). Aart G. Broek refers to contemporary writers influenced by Marcus Garvey, such as Manuel Fray in his novel *Yu di pueblo*, and to Medardo de Marchena, who is discussed in this article. Personal email between author and Aart G. Broek, 20 November 2022, and Aart G. Broek, Medardo de Marchena: *Staatsgevaarlijk in koloniaal Curaçao* (Haarlem 2021); Rose Mary Allen records for Cuba that people would in the long run always encounter radicalism through syndicalism and labor unrest. Rose Mary Allen, *Ta Cuba mi k*e *bai. Testimoniohan di trahadónan ku a emigrá for di Kòrsou bai Cuba na kuminsamentu di siglo XX* (Curaçao 2001) 133-134.

2 Winston James, *Holding aloft the banner of Ethiopia. Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth-century America* (New York 1999); Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich. Race and political culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton (NJ) 2009); Minkah Makalani, *In the cause of freedom. Radical black internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill (NC) 2011).

3 Lara Putnam, *Radical moves. Caribbean migrants and the politics of race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill (NC) 2013) 7.

political movements, claiming at its height six million members. The organization had chapters in all major port cities and migrant labor towns frequented by Dutch Caribbeans. To study their traces, full access was needed to primary sources such as Black newspapers, journal collections, and Robert A. Hill's robust collections of scattered archival material on the UNIA, not available on the Dutch Caribbean islands.[4] Support of the Fulbright Program enabled me to do this research while in New York, giving me access to this and other valuable material at the Schomburg Center for Black Studies.[5]

In this article, I bring together two storylines. In the first paragraph, I present the shifting worlds of the 1920s and 1930s, and how people with a Dutch Caribbean background came to participate in an increasingly transnational and anticolonial dynamic of labor mobility and migration. This part of the research is predominantly based on existing literature. In the second paragraph, I present new microhistories found in the archives and newspapers. In this, I distinguish three types of involvement: published voices, people serving communities, and those who claimed spaces for themselves. By bringing these stories together, I explore the historical and contemporary circumstances that defined the space in which support of Black radicalism occurred, and through this work revisit and reclaim their place in Caribbean historiography.

With this study, I argue that the history of Dutch Caribbean activists in transatlantic political Black movements is not merely an addition to or a small circuit in the larger frame, nor an additional regional vantage point. Intersectionalities in these histories testify to a blending of communities beyond imperial and linguistic fault lines, shaping for those hailing from the Dutch Caribbean new opportunities of being in the world and new configurations of belonging.[6]

4 Robert A. Hill (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and universal negro improvement association papers*, I-XI (Oakland (CA) 1983); Idem (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and universal negro improvement association papers,* XII: *The Caribbean diaspora, 1921* (Durham (NC) 2014); Idem (ed.), *The Marcus Garvey and universal negro improvement association papers,* XIII: *The Caribbean diaspora, 1921-1922* (Durham (NC) 2016), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374282.

5 Working from a small Caribbean island comes with challenges and impacts of academic inequalities, including restrictions in gaining access to major sources concerning our own history. In this context, I am deeply grateful to the Fulbright Program for allowing me to undertake this research as a side project during my Fulbright Scholar-in-Residency at CUNY City College, New York.

6 I want to express my deep gratitude to the anonymous peer reviewers who generously and profoundly shared reflections and comments.

Shifting worlds and the transnational Dutch Caribbean

Mobility between the islands and coastal areas of the region is central to Caribbean history. It impacted the lived experience of all Afro-Caribbean populations from the six Antillean islands Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, St. Eustatius, Saba, and St. Maarten, and on the mainland from Suriname in the Guyanas. The Leeward Islands Bonaire and Curaçao, along with the Windward island St. Eustatius, in particular, have long and important histories in seafaring.[7] This involved maritime marronage, but also Black working classes who provided labor on ships during and after slavery.[8] These first-class sailors became well reputed in the Caribbean and would remain so for centuries to come.[9] Not only were merchant ships staffed with Black crew members, whaling ships also became known for working with Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean crews.[10] St. Eustatius had supported the industry of Yankee whalers with food supplies since the late eighteenth century, and after the abolition of slavery, it became a serious option for young men from this and surrounding islands to join the crews.[11] As a result, substantial communities of families with origins in St. Eustatius are still found in former whaling towns such as New Bedford, Massachusetts.[12]

A similar catalyzing development of tilting mobility occurred in the Dutch Leeward Islands with the growth of shipping needs for oil drilling in Maracaibo, Venezuela, and for sugar industries in Santo Domingo around 1910. Just as with the whalers, the story of these labor migrants leaving for seasonal work is often narrated as the story of single men or

7 Rose Mary Allen, '"Learning to be a man": Afro-Caribbean seamen and maritime workers from Curaçao in the beginning of the twentieth century', *Caribbean Studies* 39:1/2 (2011) 43-64.

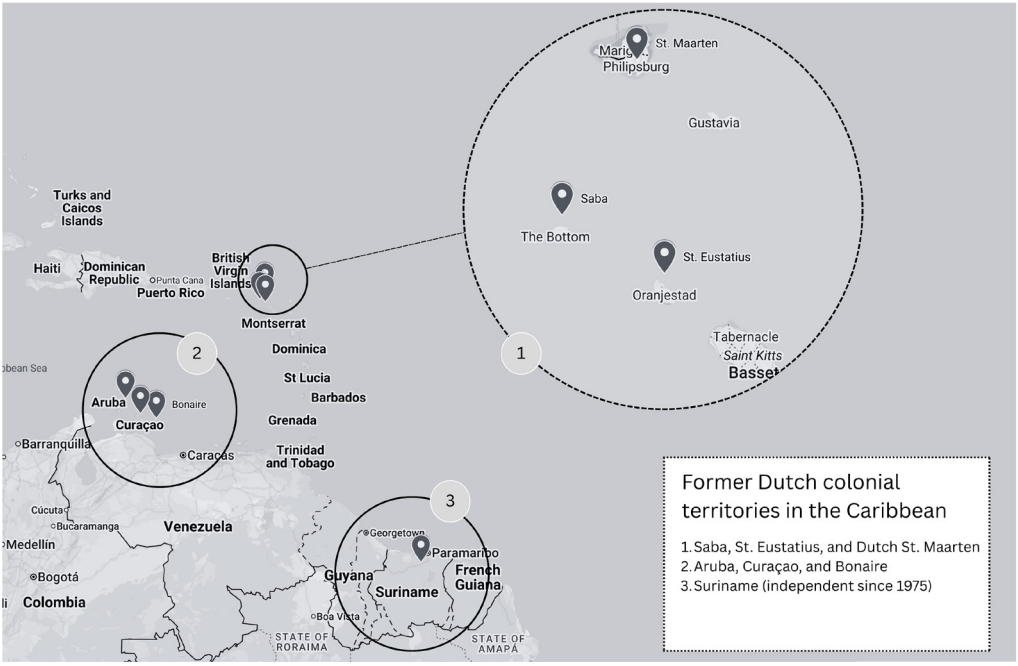
8 Linda M. Rupert, *Roots of our future. A commercial history of Curaçao* (Curaçao 1999).

9 Julius S. Scott, *The common wind. Afro-American currents in the age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York 2020); Jeffrey W. Bolster, *Black Jacks. African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge (Mass.) 1997); Allen, "Learning to be a man".

10 Pat McKissack and Fredrick McKissack, *Black hands, white sails. The story of African-American whalers* (New York 1999).

11 Randall R. Reeves et al., 'Historical occurrence and distribution of humpback whales in the eastern and southern Caribbean Sea, based on data from American whaling logbooks', *Journal of Cetacean Research and Management* 3:2 (2001) 2, https://doi.org/10.47536/jcrm.v3i2.884; Niall Finneran, 'Slaves to sailors: The archaeology of traditional Caribbean shore whaling c.1850-2000. A case study from Barbados and Bequia (St Vincent Grenadines)', *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 45:2 (2016) 388-405, https://doi.org/10.1111/1095-9270.12184.

12 Interview by the author with Ruby Sprott, April 28, 2023, New York City. J. Marlena Edwards, 'An unintended modality. American whaling, labor, and race-making in New Bedford Massachusetts, 1870-1930', paper presented at Association of Caribbean Historians, Santa Marta, Colombia, May 2024.

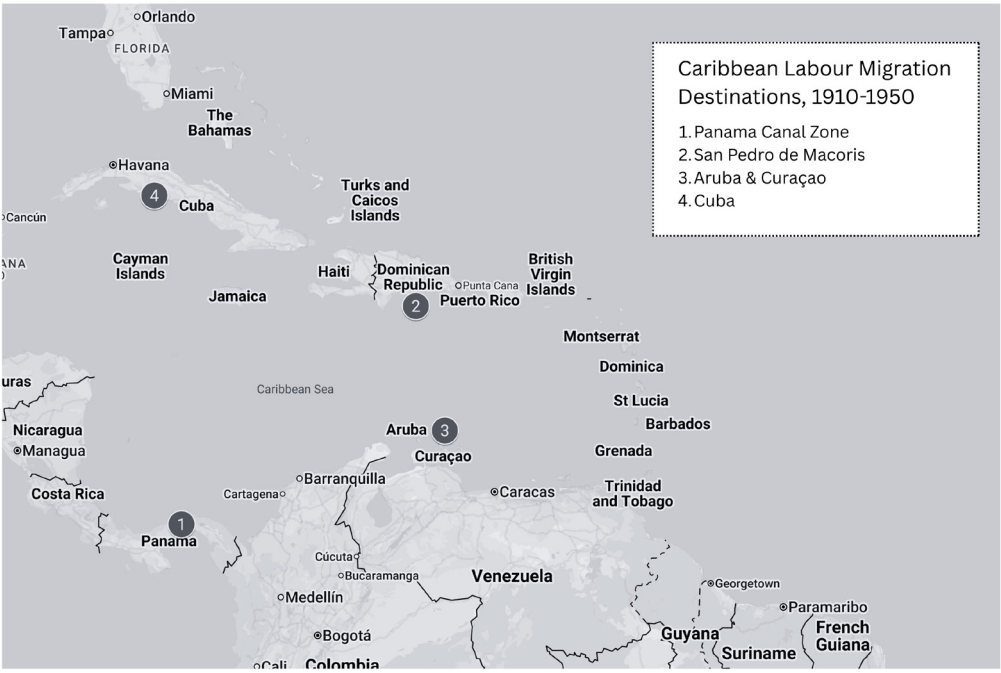


Map 1 Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean Islands (by author)

family heads who approached the opportunity to earn money abroad as a temporary project. After long periods of unemployment, they embarked on a trip to the Panama Canal works or to the sugar fields of Cuba or the Dominican Republic, keen to return home some months or years later, experienced and carrying a pocket full of money. In practice, however, these temporary projects easily morphed into a permanent relocation. Elements of finding community played a role in many cases: a new sense of home and belonging with like-minded persons.[13]

In this fast-changing world, thousands of Black Dutch colonial subjects moved – as merchants, shipping crew, or labor migrants. By comparison with the British, Spanish, and French Caribbean, the number of Dutch Caribbean migrants was always small. Yet they claimed specific spaces in Caribbean communities and made waves in movements that shaped and transformed ideologies relative to class, race, and colonialism. As such, they took part in what would be known as the Black radical tradition, fighting systems through their

13 Allen, *Ta Cuba mi ke bai*, 125.



Map 2 Caribbean Labor Migration Destinations, 1910-1950 (by author)

response to calls for action and organization as members of the Black diaspora. The movements they encountered are a patchwork of often interlinked ideologies. Black nationalism was the ideology behind the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded by Marcus Garvey in Jamaica in 1913 and headquartered in Harlem since 1916. The ideology was an influential element also of the wide network of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches and would be the main inspiration of Malcolm X (1925-1965). These movements focused on bringing together Black independent organizations in solidarity of action. Their answer to racist societies was not to fight within the existing structures, but to build new ones. Next to this focal point, many Black radicals believed in making international connections, binding together the African Diaspora in politics to fight for the improvement of labor, class, and race. This Marxist-inspired ideology is known as Black internationalism.

Culturally, New York City in particular has been a cradle for – and symbol of – the new migrant Black Caribbean communities. The Black Puerto Rican scholar-librarian Arturo Schomburg was instrumental

Illustration 1 Marcus Garvey, 1887-1940, photo from George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress), 1924

(source: https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003653533/)

in documenting the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century formation of Black culture, with the Harlem public library now named after him as a center for study and discussion.[14] This new Black culture – celebrated as the Harlem Renaissance – was a product of many Black (sub)cultures, predominantly Caribbean. The movement developed from networks of revolutionaries who had settled in New York in earlier years, such as the Cuban Jose Martí. They played crucial roles in the awakening of political and social activism relative to race and class intersectionally. As Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof points out, Schomburg's own life story served for many "as a way to explore the porous boundaries between these communities, and to reimagine both the frictions and potential intersections in their experiences of race."[15]

Putnam acknowledges how Caribbean migrants of the 1920s and 1930s faced similar challenges resulting from new political winds, encountering "existentialist paradigms of collective identity at their most exclusionary."[16] This is how politicization became unavoidable: "migrants recognized both the fictitiousness of race and its very real weight in the modern world."[17] At the same time, they were acutely aware of a "fundamental redefinition of the relation of people to government" playing out in most Western imperial spheres.[18]

Though the promise of citizenship lingered for some – for instance, by way of naturalization in the US – still many of these migrants carried letters proclaiming their colonial subjectivity and faithfulness to some king or queen in a country, such as the Netherlands. Not only was this country far away from their reality, in the case of the Dutch Caribbean a language was spoken in the metropole that the majority of them could not or hardly understand. The linguistic situation of the Dutch Caribbean is significantly different from the Spanish, French, and British Caribbean. In Suriname only, Dutch is a well-established language, but on all islands, it has always been a minority vernacular. The Windward islands Saba, St. Eustatius, and the Dutch part of St. Maarten are primarily Anglophone. In the Leeward islands of the ABC islands, the dominant vernacular is the language known in English

14 Vanessa K. Valdés, *Diasporic blackness. The life and times of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg* (Albany (NY) 2017).

15 Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *Racial migrations. New York City and the revolutionary politics of the Spanish Caribbean, 1850-1902* (Princeton (NJ) 2019) 273.

16 Putnam, *Radical moves*, 5.

17 Ibid., 5.

18 Ibid., 3.

as Papiamento, with many people here culturally connected to the Spanish-speaking region.

Religion further segregated the Dutch Caribbean in a complicated way. In 1865, just two years after the abolition of slavery, Dutch law regulated that in Suriname, the overall responsibility for education and welfare of the emancipated Afro-Surinamese community was mandated to the Moravian Church. For the islands, the position of the Catholic mission already active on the islands was now formalized and fully financed, not only to provide education and welfare but to grow a network of churches that in particular on the Leeward islands would develop as the de facto authoritative figures for the Afro-Caribbean lower class. On the Anglophone Windward islands, Protestant churches such as the Methodists remained important for the population.[19] In the 1920s and 1930s, when law and order became a top priority to protect the oil industry of Aruba and Curaçao, the oppressive influence of the Catholic missionary church was a welcome instrument, furthering church-state relations and hampering processes of democratization.[20] In this stifling climate – difficult in particular for the relatively large group of Afro-Curaçaoans – the opportunity to travel and work elsewhere became a welcome alternative.

Moving from their small rural communities to urban and industrial environments was often a life-changing event for Afro-Caribbean migrants, almost literally opening eyes and minds to new realities. New environments confronted them with new ideas about racial identities and their consequences. The Barbadian migrant's observation that George Lamming records in his *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) must have been familiar for many: "I didn't know it till I reach the States. My people, or better, my race. 'Twus in the States I find it, an' I'm gonner keep it till thy kingdom come."[21] For the Dutch Caribbean, unfortunately, documented voices like this are rare, as are critical voices of Black laborers on these islands talking back to racism and oppression.[22]

19 'Wet op de Staatsinrichting voor Suriname en Curaçao, 1865'.

20 Margo Groenewoud, 'Social exclusion and the entanglement of state, religion and civil society in mid-twentieth century Curaçao', *Journal of Caribbean History* 56:1 (2022) 81-95, https://doi.org/10.1353/jch.2022.0003.

21 George Lamming, *In the castle of my skin* (Ann Arbor (MI) 1970) 295. Quoted in; Putnam, *Radical moves*, 233.

22 Other than Medardo de Marchena, early examples are José Anthonia, *Tragedia di nos rasa i su resurekshon* (Curaçao 2003); A.P. Nita, *De sociale wensdromen van het landskind in de gelijke delen van het nieuwe koninkrijk* (Willemstad 1952).

Years before the arrival of the oil industry, shipping brought social and economic transformation throughout the Caribbean. After decades of financial struggles, the turn towards economic opportunity in the early 1910s was grasped with fervor and discipline by the Dutch colonial government. When the earliest recorded harbor strike hit Curaçao in 1913, the colonial officials responded quickly. All laborers involved in the strike were fired on the spot and quickly replaced by migrant laborers from Venezuela and St. Thomas who accepted low wages without complaint.[23] This strong and unbending response would be repeated in the Curaçao harbor in 1922 and 1936.[24] Here, just as was the case in Suriname and the other Dutch Caribbean islands, none of the protests resulted in success for the local laborers.[25] Throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, migrant laborers and shipping crews coming from the Dutch Caribbean into the Panama Canal Zone, the sugar fields of Cuba and Santo Domingo, or the harbors of New York and the US at large thus all bore within them the echoes of colonial societies marked by silenced compliance.

Silence is still in essence the sound of this history for the Dutch Caribbean. Of people renowned for their international political activism, one name stands out: Otto Huiswoud (1893-1961). Though not on the radar of Dutch historians until well into the twentieth century, he is the only transnational radical of Dutch Caribbean origin who left behind a significant collection of archival traces and publications. Leaving Paramaribo at the young age of sixteen, destined for Amsterdam, Otto disembarked on Ellis Island, driven to find new opportunities in New York City. He would eventually rise to fame as one of the founders of the American Communist Party, committed to the interests of Black workers. His actions became noted in 1918, when he led a massive strike at the Fall River Line to protest discriminatory payment.[26] A year later, Otto Huiswoud published an article in the *Messenger*, entitled "Dutch Guiana: A Study in Colonial Exploitation", in which he claimed: "Dutch Guiana is under the iron heel of Holland, and is governed in a most absolute manner. The political system is very

23 Jaap J. van Soest, *Olie als water. De Curaçaose economie in de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw* (Zuthpen 1977) 153.

24 Van Soest, *Olie als water*, 220, 246.

25 The situation was somewhat different on Aruba, with an American refinery on Dutch colonial territory, leading to complaint dynamics involving the Dutch government protecting Dutch employees, see: Chelsea Schields, *Offshore attachments. Oil and intimacy in the Caribbean* (Oakland (CA) 2023) 58.

26 Makalani, *In the cause of freedom*, 74; Maria van Enckevort, *The life and work of Otto Huiswoud.: Professional revolutionary and internationalist (1893-1961)* (Mona, Jamaica 2001) 19.

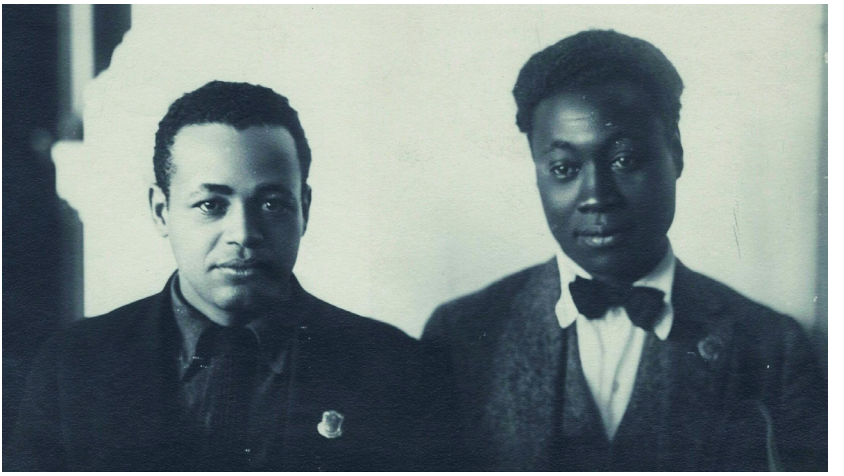


Illustration 2 Otto Huiswoud and Claude McKay in attendance of the 4th World Congress of the Communist International, 1923
(source: Wikimedia, public domain)

autocratic and backward."[27] It was the only article Huiswoud published in the years preceding his naturalization in the United States in 1923.[28] In the article, he expressed his concern for capitalism in a colonial context: "The most important and at the same time the saddest phase of the economic conditions of Dutch Guiana is the labor problem [...] There are no labor unions or any working-class movements to speak of. Exploitation is naturally at its highest under such conditions."[29]

For Huiswoud, socialism and anti-colonialism were closely intertwined. Throughout his impressive career, he would continue to strive for what we would nowadays term an intersectional approach of oppression and exploitation relative to class, race, and colonialism. Though never explicitly concerned with the Caribbean, in a 1927 report for the Pan-African Congress, Huiswoud argued for launching national liberation movements here, aimed at the formation – eventually – of a West-Indian Federation.[30] This claim was repeated on a larger stage at the 1929 conference of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) in Brussels, all adding up to the keen attention of Dutch government in The Hague. Huiswoud travelled extensively and became chairman of

27 Van Enckevort, *The life and work of Otto Huiswoud*, 13.

28 Ibid., 25.

29 *The Messenger* 2:11 (December 1919) 22-23. Cited in Van Enckevort, *The life and work of Otto Huiswoud*, 26.

30 Makalani, *In the cause of freedom*, 145-147.

the International Trade Union Committee for Negro Workers (ITUC-NW). While in Moscow, he submitted a report on the West Indies to the Eastern Secretariat of the Profintern, written jointly with George Padmore. The 1931 report addressed the situation in Curaçao in detail. This by now was of substantial geopolitical and economic interest due to the refinery and considered a perfect place for communist activities because of "a distinct city proletariat."[31]

From 1928 until 1937, Huiswoud was editor-in-chief of the trade union newspaper *The Negro Worker*. In these years, several organizations assisted in the distribution by smuggling issues aboard ships en route to Africa, the West Indies, and Latin America.[32] Through intervention of Huiswoud, whom he met in the 1930s in Europe, the Surinamese anti-colonial writer Anton de Kom published his article "Starvation, misery and terror in Dutch Guyana" in *The Negro Worker* in 1934.[33] The political climate of the late 1930s made working in Europe increasingly difficult. Because of his health also, Otto decided to move to his native Suriname in 1940, where he was soon arrested by order of Governor Johannes Kielstra and imprisoned as a communist propagandist. On 25 September 1942, he was released due to poor health. After World War Two, Otto and his wife Hermina permanently settled in Amsterdam.

Traces of radical involvement

The history of Dutch Caribbean people involved in radical Black movements of the 1920s through 1930s is scattered and hidden in many sources, some lost or irretrievable. It is a highly transnational story, disclosing the experience of people from all walks of life. In this paragraph, I uncover, present, and connect stories of this involvement in three parts. First, I delve into published voices: looking at publications and authors linked to the Dutch Caribbean. Next, I will present the cases of people serving the UNIA. In the last paragraph, I share stories

31 Van Enckevort, *The life and work of Otto Huiswoud*, 105. As Van Enckevort states: "Since 1928 a communist cell under the name of 'Sociedad 28 de Octobre' existed on the island, organized by Gustavo Machado, a Venezuelan revolutionary who on June 8, 1929, together with his compatriot Rafael Simón Urbina had raided the military arsenal and kidnapped the Governor of Curaçao and his wife." At Radboud University, Thomas van Gaalen is currently doing PhD research on such networks.

32 Van Enckevort, *The life and work of Otto Huiswoud*, 126.

33 Ibid., 121 note 76; Anton de Kom, 'Starvation, misery and terror in Dutch Guyana', *The Negro Worker* June (1934).

of people who claimed space for themselves and their families in these transnational fields of action, making the invisible known and count, regardless of their political or legal realities.

Published voices in a transnational realm

In 1919, the St. Maarten-born pastor Philip van Putten founded the local UNIA chapter of San Pedro de Macoris, about 70 kilometers east of the capital city of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. The port city was the center of the Dominican sugar industry. Rev. Van Putten was based here as pastor of the Independent Episcopal Church.[34] References to his background are scarce and incoherent. Most records state that he was born in the Dutch part of St. Maarten, some refer to Marigot on the French side. Some claim his first language was English, others Spanish.[35] Precisely these somewhat confusing elements, transgressing borders of language and nation, make him an embodiment of transnational identity central to all these stories.

In addition to his role as UNIA chair in San Pedro de Macoris, Van Putten was a well-known figure in the NYC headquarters of the UNIA. In August 1920, he attended the UNIA international convention where he was speaking on behalf of 75,000 Blacks in the Dominican Republic, mostly West Indians, "who are now uniting for their own salvation [...] preparing themselves, silently, yet surely, for the time when their services will be needed for the reclamation and redemption of Africa for the Africans."[36]

In 1916, the U.S. Navy had taken control of the Dominican Republic to guarantee stability and protect major American financial interests in the booming sugar industry. At that time, labor in this industry was performed by thousands of temporary migrants, including many Afro-Caribbean men, in a culture that became legendary as the *Cocolos* community. An estimated 13 percent of these factory and field workers hailed from the Anglophone Dutch Windward islands of St. Maarten, Saba, and St. Eustatius, and to a small part from one of the other Dutch

34 April J. Mayes, *The mulatto republic. Class, race, and Dominican national identity* (Gainesville (FL) 2014); Humberto García Muñiz, 'Garveyismo y racismo en el Caribe. El caso de la población Cocola en la República Dominicana', transl. Jorge L. Giovannetti, *Caribbean Studies* 31:1 (2003) 139-211.

35 Between writing the first draft of this paper for the 2024 conference of the Association of Caribbean Historians and this article, more records are made available through portals such as ancestry.com, not all of which I have been able to study yet in detail.

36 UNIA Convention Report, New York, August 3, 1920, Delegates Report Conditions, Dominican Republic. *The Marcus Garvey Papers,* Vol. XII, 19.

islands.[37] The English language and the Protestant religion easily bound these men and their growing families into a close-knit community. Here as elsewhere, the 'West Indians' were soon reputed – either good or bad – for their eloquence, level of education, work ethic, and overall sense of self-worth.[38] Their high level of organization resulted in the successful establishment of churches, Masonic lodges, sports, and music – all elements of the *Cocolos* culture.[39]

When U.S. Marines supported by local police raided the UNIA meeting here on 3 September 1921, the community was infuriated. Their response to the raid focused on one person: the British vice-consul Rev. Archibald Beer. In addition to being a vice-consul, Rev. Beer was also an influential figure in town as pastor of the Anglican Church and known for his derogatory racist statements. After the police raid, an angry crowd awaited Rev. Beer as he prepared to lead his church. For the protesters, the discrimination and violence they encountered, and which culminated in the raid, were more than local incidents; they were prime examples of the excesses of imperialism, which they were ready to expose and fight. To the astonishment of local authorities, the Union Jack was held upside down, "insulted, trampled and spit upon."[40] Van Putten reported events for *The Negro World*, the widely distributed newspaper of the UNIA, emphasizing the turning of the flag as a significant incident, showing how the transnational community united in the quest for emancipation as Black people: "In the world today it is not a matter of nationality but of race, white for white, against the Black, despite his nationality."[41]

The contagiousness of rage was a risk relevant for all imperial authorities in the Caribbean, including the Dutch. After their arrest, many were jailed awaiting deportation or trying to escape deportation, as Sekou records based on oral sources.[42] Among those arrested were

37 García Muñiz and Giovannetti, *Garveyismo y racismo en el Caribe.El caso de la población cocola en la República Dominicana* (Santo Domingo 2022), 57.

38 Muñiz and Giovannetti, *Garveyismo y racismo en el Caribe*, 15.

39 Orlando Inoa, *Los cocolos en la sociedad dominicana* (Zurich 2005); Nadal Walcot, *Los cocolos* (Santo Domingo 1998); Muñiz and Giovannetti, *Garveyismo y racismo en el Caribe*.

40 National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Washington DC, Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (RG 38), Box 1, Commanding General to the Military Government of Santo Domingo, 30 September 1921.

41 Philip van Putten, 'How the negro fares in Santo Domingo', *The Negro World* 29 October (1921). Transcript in Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and universal negro improvement association papers,* Vol. XIII, 101-103.

42 Sekou, *National symbols of St. Martin*.

prominent members of Dutch Caribbean origin: James and Alice Cooks, Abram and Martha Labega, and Thomas Duoro. Being deported would implicate that these enlightened and enraged souls with all their readiness to protest would return to the Dutch islands – a situation as far as archival sources implicate was never taken into consideration by the Dutch colonial government to act upon.[43] Indeed, though, one of them would remain active, now closer to home. Thomas Duoro from St. Maarten moved to Aruba to find employment in the American oil refinery operated here since 1926 with a large contingent of Black workers. Of the UNIA chapter founded here by Duoro, unfortunately little archival traces are left.[44]

In the early 1920s, another voice was heard through a letter entitled "Autocracy in the Dutch West Indies" published in *The Negro World*, signed by a French-Caribbean writer: Filogenes Maillard. The letter to the editors in New York was sent from Havana, Cuba a week before publication in April 1921.[45] With its large readership, it must have stressed out the Dutch colonial authorities, keen to protect the economic miracle of oil refining on the island.[46]

The tone of the letter is harsh, and its content is bold. The title claims to cover all Dutch Antillean islands, but the text focuses almost exclusively on Curaçao, with its significant presence of the Catholic missionary church and its influential leadership. The observations of the situation in the Dutch Caribbean presented to *The Negro World* readership clearly come from a very well-informed source. The article revolves around two elements: staunch criticism of the role of the Catholic Church in the Leeward Islands and critical attention to the unused power of the Afro-Caribbean masses in protesting it.

> It is painful to state that this population is absolutely ruled by a half dozen Dutch people who are ignorant of the needs of the people. The inhabitants of these colonies, the Negroes especially, have entirely nothing to do with the government of their respective birthplaces. But it is their fault, as they also simply pass their lives "fooling" with the bible.[47]

43 NARA, Washington DC, RG 38, Box 1 shows a very low-key response. No traces are found in the reports filed in the National Archive of Curacao or The Hague.

44 Records of activities are found in newspapers from the 1950s in *Coleccion Aruba*, n.d., accessed 5 May 2025, https://coleccion.aw/pages/pa/home/.

45 Filogenes Maillard, 'Autocracy in the Dutch West Indies', *The Negro World* 23 April (1921).

46 Schields, *Offshore attachments*.

47 Maillard, 'Autocracy in the Dutch West Indies'.

Exactly these two arguments – I presume not by coincidence – are central to the work of Curaçao's most outspoken anti-colonial voice of his generation: Pedro Pablo Medardo de Marchena (1899-1968). He published his first pamphlet entitled *Ignorance, or to educate a people* in 1929, followed by a series of published lectures and a second pamphlet about the role of women in modern society.[48] Most of his writing was in Papiamentu, the mother tongue of more than 85 percent of the population, for many the only language they understood and – if anything – the language of the heart.

The French-Caribbean author, identified in public records as Philogenes Maillard, was born in 1882 in the French-speaking part of St. Maarten.[49] According to a Cuban police report from the early 1930s, he was a radical socialist obsessed with civil rights worldwide, writing in French to authorities, including the Dutch Queen, to urge for universal suffrage in colonial territories. Maillard had moved from Haiti to a Cuban sugar plantation in 1908 and was reputed for his correspondence with intellectuals worldwide.[50] He wrote several short critical pieces for *The Negro World* and *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B du Bois, none of which referred to the Dutch colonial situation, only to the French West Indies.[51]

A week before this article on the Dutch West Indies was sent as a letter to the editor from Havana, Marcus Garvey himself was in Cuba, as part of his first Caribbean tour. Here he addressed a large crowd on March 31, 1921. It is far from inconceivable that De Marchena was in Cuba at the time, met Maillard here at the rally, and drafted the letter together with him.[52] Unfortunately, biographical information about De Marchena is limited. Most research on De Marchena was done by

48 P.P. Medardo de Marchena, *Ignorancia ó educando un pueblo* (Curaçao 1929); P.P. Medardo de Marchena, *Muher i bida moderna: estudio intima di muher como nos compañera den bida acompaña di algun consehos* (Tip. Nacional, 1934).

49 Birth record found in: "Archives nationales d'outre-mer" [Overseas national archives], Tabelle annuelle des naissances [Yearly table of births], Commune de Saint Martin, 1882. Available at: http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/caomec2.

50 Correspondence (1931-1932) of the Dutch Consul with Cuban authorities: The National Archives of the Netherlands, Archives of the 'Nederlands Gezantschap in Cuba (Havana)', inventory 2.05.335, file 5

51 Filogenes Maillard, 'In the French West Indies', *The Crisis. A Record of the Darker Races* January (1922).

52 Family members and Aart Broek have no recollection of references made to a visit to Cuba. I previously published about Menardo's involvement in the writing of this letter in *The Negro World* in: Margo Groenewoud, 'New York, Cuba and the birth of a subversive Dutch Caribbean writer. An introduction to P.P. Medardo de Marchena's "Women and modern-day life"(1934)', in Sruti Bala and Rose Mary Allen (eds), *The Dutch Caribbean gender studies handbook* (Boston [etc.] 2024).

Illustration 3 Medardo de Marchena 1899-1968, by Bert Kienjet, 2021 (source: collection artist, used with permission)

Aart G. Broek based on relatively little available archival material, using basic public records, police and governmental files concerning conflicts with authorities, some oral history interviews with family and friends, and a critical reading of all his publications.[53] Much remains open for reconstruction, contextualization, and interpretation, including his whereabouts in the early 1920s.

53 Aart G. Broek, *The rise of a Caribbean island's literature. The case of Curaçao and its writing in Papiamentu* (PhD dissertation VU Amsterdam 1990); Idem, *De geschiedenis van de politie op de Nederlands-Caribische eilanden, 1839-2010. Geboeid door macht en onmacht* (Amsterdam 2011); Idem, 'Meer aandacht voor Medardo de Marchena', *Antilliaans Dagblad* 15 May (2018); Idem, *Medardo de Marchena*.

Medardo's father was Benjamin de Marchena, a Sephardic Jewish merchant not married to his mother, the Afro-Curaçaoan Delphina Wiel. Medardo and his siblings grew up with Delphina in an environment where colour, religious conformity, and social status defined chances in life. Due to his father's influence, he received some education and could land a job in the family business. As part of this job, Medardo sailed to New York City in the summer of 1919. As clearly shown from his later publications, traveling to the United States had a huge impact on De Marchena, opening his eyes to the impacts of what he considered 'modernity'.[54] The Ellis Island customs registered that he planned to stay for two months, and this period is probably when he met his future wife, who was living in Brooklyn at the time.[55] However, we do not have records of his activities here or his return trip from New York back to Curaçao. The first thing we know from the records is that he married Vivan Beatrice Pfaffhauser in September 1921 in Curaçao. Considering that shipping lines frequently travelled between the American South, Cuba, and Curaçao, it is plausible that Medardo did not travel back directly from New York to Curaçao, but through Havana and stayed with his father for a while. Perhaps he took a trip with his fiancée to introduce her to his father. All could have enabled him to attend the Marcus Garvey rally on 31 March 1921, in Havana.

Serving transnational communities

Far below the radar, anti-racist or anti-colonial movements have been supported on a massive scale by people serving organizations and communities. This is, for instance, the case of Charles Arnold. Aged only 17, he boarded the whaling ship *Woodruff* on his birth island St. Eustatius, destined for Rhode Island in 1917. After a short whaling trip, he landed in New Bedford, where he moved in with one of his older brothers. In the long interview with him in the late 1970s, published by Julia Crane,[56] Charles Arnold describes in detail the demographic and economic layout of his new hometown as well as the social and political movements of interest to young labor migrants. Whaling was by that time coming to an end, and many West Indians, including many Statians, found employment in the textile mill there. Their experience

54 Groenewoud, 'New York, Cuba and the birth of a subversive Dutch Caribbean writer'.

55 All genealogical and logistical registers are found in Ancestry.com and through the Ancestry Library Edition.

56 Julia G. Crane, *Statia silhouettes* (New York 1999) 1-80.

soon became marked by a new influence: that of trade unions, socialism, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

The smooth integration of Statians into these West Indian movements is not unsurprising: they shared the experience of being racialized as Black combined with similar West Indian linguistic and spiritual practices that shaped parts of their identities. Charles Arnold vividly describes how he and most of his fellow labor migrants – many of them from the Dutch Windward Islands – became involved in the local chapter of the UNIA in New Bedford. After finding employment with the Fall River Line in 1921, much changed, including his relationship with the movement. Arnold gained a position sailing to New York City every other day. Though never considering himself a radical of any sort, he became a regular in the UNIA's massive Liberty Hall in New York and started distributing stacks of copies of the UNIA newspaper *The Negro World,* to his community in New Bedford, Mass.[57]

Illustration 4 Depot for the Fall River Line, North River Pier 14, New York
(Source: New York Public Library Digital Library, Public Domain)

57 Ibid., 54-55.

The UNIA organization soon proved extremely successful in mobilizing support and financial engagement. One of their entry points in New Bedford was the Methodist Church, a denomination historically interlinking the English-speaking Caribbean throughout the Americas. This apparent bond between West Indians of various imperial backgrounds was meaningful in many ways. On a pragmatic level, the connection was easy. In the context of the UNIA, though, it was in particular the experience of being Caribbean in the United States that further catalyzed a process of bonding. In line with observations by scholars such as Winston James and Joyce Moore Turner, there was in these years, as Arnold recollects, "a general unfriendliness between the American Blacks and the Caribbean Blacks", fed by elements of ignorance and perceived differences relative to social and educational success.[58] Here, clearly, being Caribbean in a Black English-speaking environment bonded people, not specifically their nationality or island of birth.

Arnold's story testifies to the strong currents – pulls and pushes – bringing together Caribbeans of all backgrounds in the epicenter of Black radicalism. Harlem had, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, become home to men and women originally hailing from the Caribbean, some residing there temporarily, as businessmen or seamen, others to pursue a new life here. Until 1924, access to the US was relatively easy, including for Black Caribbean travellers and migrants. Quite often, the United States was not the first stop in their journey. In the decades preceding 1924, the Panama Canal Zone and sugar and tobacco industries of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and some smaller islands had pulled and pushed waves of labor migrants from one place to another. Through this lived experience, they learned about social injustice, communism, socialism, and Pan-Africanism. Leaving home as colonial subjects without any rights, here in these communities they became aware that they were in a position to act.

On 1 August 1920, the first major UNIA Convention started in Madison Square Garden in Manhattan. A milestone in this first convention was the completion of the "UNIA Declaration of Rights", printed in *The Negro World* of 13 August 1920, and formalized at the notary two days later. This declaration was signed by approximately 120 "duly elected representatives of the Negro people of the World",

58 Ibid., 52-53; Joyce Moore Turner and W. Burghardt Turner, *Caribbean crusaders and the Harlem Renaissance* (Urbana (IL) 2005) 37-39; James, *Holding aloft the banner of Ethiopia*.

Illustration 5 UNIA parade in Harlem, August 2, 1920, Collection James van der Zee (source: Wikimedia, public domain)

including two attendees with an apparent Dutch Caribbean background: Philip van Putten, and someone from Suriname named E.E. Nelom.[59]

Emanuel Elias Nelom was born in Paramaribo on 24 March 1893. It is unknown how Nelom entered the US, but it is recorded that he reported for military service in New York in June 1917, an obligation also for non-naturalized persons.[60] He is then 24 years old, his status is 'alien', a foreigner, and his profession is 'porter'; he was probably a porter on docking ships near his home in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Nelom must have been ambitious. More than a year later, he moved to the Upper West Side and was working as 'Minister of the Lord' at the Harbinger of New York Church on West 99th Street, a church that unfortunately, like its archival material, has not stood the test of time. There is no evidence that Nelom played an active role in the UNIA, but he was there and signed the UNIA Declaration of Rights as a "duly elected" representative of the African diaspora in the Dutch colonies – quite a feat for a humble man in his mid-twenties.

Claiming spaces

James Cooks was a Dutch Caribbean UNIA member residing in San Pedro de Macoris and present at the 1921 rally here when it was raided by police forces. James and his wife Alice Cooks were among those arrested. Contrary to the minister Van Putten, Cooks did file a complaint after his

59 Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and universal negro improvement association papers*, I-XI. Vol. XII, 32-39

60 All genealogical references are found on Ancestry.com and through the Ancestry Library Edition.

arrest and wrote a letter to the Dutch consul in Santo Domingo, Fernando Escobar, with a support request.[61] In it, he outlined who he was: living in the Dominican Republic for over 27 years and a successful entrepreneur as a carpenter. He underlined that success by indicating that he owned several properties in the city and possessed a large sum of money. He was a member of the UNIA because he valued being among like-minded people, something that could not possibly be considered an offense when done in peace. Using these arguments, Escobar made a formal attempt with the US officials to protect Cooks from deportation, even suggesting he was willing to "claim for this Dutch subject the protection he is entitled to", but to no avail. Quite interestingly, the file containing correspondence about the arrest and planned deportation shows a lot of confusion about the nationalities and backgrounds of the arrested. In the end, neither the socioeconomic status nor the nationality mattered. All were deported, for the simple fact that they were Black.[62]

Residency and citizenship in the US for many years was a wide-open door drawing in a variety of people aspiring for a new life. In his interview, Charles Arnold tells us another remarkable story about a man named Adrian Richardson, whom we also find referred to in the UNIA papers on a short list of members from the early years of the organization.[63] Arnold vividly describes how Richardson gained a questionable type of fame when, as a young captain employed by the UNIAs Black Star Line, his ship hit the rocks en route to Cuba. According to sources from the US,[64] but not found in Dutch repositories, this Richardson was supposedly born in Philipsburg, St. Maarten in 1892 and naturalized in the US in 1918. According to the testimony he gave in 1918 for the officials requesting US citizenship, he was still a child when he ended up as an orphan in the United States and was taken in by a sea captain in Boston. It all seems a highly questionable story, fabricated perhaps by an ambitious young light-skinned man who seems to have had only one dream: to become a renowned captain.

Charles Arnold vividly recalls the day when Richardson burst into Liberty Hall, the UNIA's grand auditorium in Harlem, with bravado.[65] His entrance alone earned him thunderous applause. Several African American newspapers had reported on Richardson's accident that sank

61 NARA, Washington DC, RG 38, Box 1, Letter of James Cook to Fernando Escobar, 12 September 1921.

62 NARA, Washington DC, RG 38, Box 1, various correspondence relative to arrests of 1921.

63 Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and universal negro improvement association papers*, Vol XI, 792

64 See note 54

65 Crane, *Statia silhouettes*, 43.

the Black Star Line ship, first after it had occurred and again when Marcus Garvey was in court and questioned about Captain Richardson's behavior.

The whole incident did not damage Adrian Richardson's reputation. He continued his career at sea and was again widely praised as one of the first Black American captains, particularly as a superb US Marine who saved the lives of many in Europe during World War II.[66] Richardson died in a New York hospital in 1945, a war hero and a Black hero. He was honored with an obituary printed in African American newspapers throughout the US.[67] In these and all other newspaper clippings found about him, his birthplace Philipsburg is mentioned explicitly.

Just as with most other migrants who made their name abroad by smaller and bigger acts of protest, there is hardly a trace of Richardson or his legacy in the Netherlands or the Dutch Caribbean. The fact that the Statian Charles Arnold remembers him so clearly is significant, precisely because there was so little 'Dutch' about Richardson, other than the place of his birth and earliest youth. Yet he was remembered as a remarkable Windwarder; Richardson was 'one of us' abroad.

Of all other Dutch people making an appearance in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, Carlos S. Cooks perhaps is the most historical 'claim to fame', practically unknown until today in the Dutch Caribbean, though exemplary in the context of these microhistories. His life captured the Black experience and how Black radical political consciousness traversed through transnational, translingual, and transcultural dimensions. This son of UNIA activists James and Alice Cooks was born in San Pedro de Macoris. As a young Dominican multilingual and transcultural adult in New York, Carlos S. Cooks became an important supporting figure for Marcus Garvey.[68] Between Garvey's death in 1940 and the rise of Malcolm X in Harlem in 1954, he was considered the de facto leader of the Black nationalist movement in the United States. In 1941, he founded the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement and, clearly, Cooks here is still not forgotten. A few years ago, a street in Manhattan was named after him.[69] And in 2022-2023, he featured prominently in an exhibition

66 For instance recorded in: 'Negro captain to pilot SS Douglass, new cargo ship', *Sunday Chicago Bee* (Chicago) 30 May (1943); 'Torpedo sinks libert ship', *The People's Voice* (New York), 9 October (1943); 'Douglas torpedoed. North Atlantic nightmare!', *LA Tribune* (Los Angeles) 25 October (1943).

67 'Rites held for Capt. Richardson', *Afro-American* 8 December (1945).

68 Robert Harris, *Carlos Cooks and black nationalism from Garvey to Malcolm* (Dover (Mass) 1992).

69 'Carlos Cooks', National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed 2 May 2025, https://nmaahc.si.edu/latinx/carlos-cooks.

of documentary photography by artist and fellow activist Kwame Brathwaite at the New-York Historical Society: 'Black is Beautiful'.[70]

In conclusion

Although relatively little is known – or traceable – about interactions of Dutch Caribbean migrants in Black transnational radical movements of the 1920s and 1930s, these existed and must have been numerous. The stories of those identified by name have in common that they provide insight into the impacts of Dutch colonialism in the Western hemisphere in the early twentieth century, through the lived experience outside imperial border. They share concerns about what being Dutch and being Black meant for the average Dutch Afro-Caribbean migrant worker. The article shows that Black Dutch Caribbean migrants must have been integral parts of movements that forged a transnational Black political consciousness, their experience often embodying the transnationality of Black radicalism and political activism.

In the transnational Caribbean and American context of these decades, there often was not much 'Dutch' about this group of migrants. Language played a major role in this regard, with the people from the Dutch Windward islands easily blending into Anglophone communities and those from the Dutch Leeward islands and Suriname often multilingual and able to merge into Spanish- or English-speaking societies. In a long tradition of interisland communication and mobility, these Afro-Dutch Caribbean people seemed to have left silently – as if through the back door – on their way to a new future elsewhere. Adapting transcultural and translingual identities, many blended smoothly into transnational migrant communities.

Much more study should be conducted about this group of Dutch Caribbean migrants and 'dreamers', about their awakening of a longing for new horizons, how they left home to encounter new ideologies and ways of life impacting the relation to their place of birth for good. They entered "porous communities" (Hoffnung-Garskof), encountering new "paradigms of collective identity" while becoming aware of both the promise and limitations of citizenship (Putnam). Those who would take part in radical movements would do so by active participation and

70 'Black is beautiful: The photography of Kwame Brathwaite'. *The New York Historical*, accessed 2 May 2025, https://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/Black-is-beautiful-the-photography-of-kwame-brathwaite.

voicing criticism, by serving their community or by claiming spaces. In their process of place-making, opening up to serve their communities and fight for their kin, they inhabited spaces unknown in Dutch Caribbean historiography, yet unmistakable part of Caribbean and imperial Dutch history.

About the author

Residing in Curaçao, **Margo Groenewoud** is an independent scholar working with partners in the Caribbean, the United States, and the Netherlands. She is a cultural and social historian interested in new narratives about Caribbean transnationality, mobility, modernity, and radicalism. Groenewoud wrote a dissertation on the entanglement of state, commerce, religion, and civil society in mid-twentieth-century Curaçao. She has published articles in international journals such as *Small Axe*, the *Journal of Caribbean History*, the *New West Indian Guide*, and a range of edited volumes, and is editor for *Caribbean Conjunctures: The Caribbean Studies Association* (*CSA*) *Journal* and guest editor for *Archipelagos Journal*. Her historical research was supported by the Fulbright Program, CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the University of Curaçao (UoC), the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), and the Erasmus Program. Groenewoud has been a (guest) lecturer at the UoC and a range of international universities and is affiliated researcher at Radboud University in Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
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