



More than Auxiliary: Caribbean Women and Social Organizations in the Interwar Period

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Abstract: The interwar period witnessed the formation of a large number of Caribbean American benevolent associations and mutual aid societies, which served as forums to discuss Caribbean American affairs, hosted cultural activities, helped members find employment and provided charity assistance. Through an examination of female participation in these organizations, this article challenges the historiography of Caribbean immigration that tends to normalize the male experience. These associations empowered Caribbean women to become involved in political activism and served as training grounds for female leaders. Through relief efforts, charity work and collaboration with Caribbean organizations, female members created diasporic networks that kept them abreast of events in the islands and connected to their West Indian identities. This article reveals that an examination of Caribbean women's involvement in social organizations is essential in shaping complex and diverse immigrant narratives, which place women at the centre of diasporic formation and highlight their role as indispensable agents in forging transnational connections.

Keywords: Caribbean women, mutual aid societies, immigration, transnational networks

How to cite

Maddox, Tyasha. 2018. "More than Auxiliary: Caribbean Women and Social Organizations in the Interwar Period." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, issue 12: 67-94

Following a female-led chain of migration typical of Caribbean immigrants in the twentieth century, Elizabeth Hendrickson immigrated to New York City at the age of 12 to live with her aunt, Rosaline Fredricks. Hendrickson was born on December 13, 1884, in Frederiksted, St. Croix, in the Danish Virgin Islands (now the U.S. Virgin Islands).¹ At the age of 24, she moved out of her aunt's Harlem home and into a boarding house, where she lived with several other young immigrants from the Caribbean (Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910).² Throughout her life, Hendricks was actively involved with Caribbean immigrant mutual aid societies and benevolent associations.

In 1915, Hendrickson along with several other Virgin Island women founded the American West Indian Ladies Aid Society (AWILAS) to establish camaraderie among Caribbean American women, as well as to address their concerns as immigrant and minority women. Hendrickson served as president of the AWILAS from 1923-1928 and in various other executive-board positions throughout her life. Hendrickson's involvement with social organizations in New York did not end with the AWILAS. She also served as the secretary of both the Virgin Islands Congressional Council and the Virgin Island Catholic Relief Committee. She helped to establish the Benevolent Societies of the American Virgin Islands, the Virgin Islands Protective League, and the Harlem Tenants' League, which advocated on behalf of Harlem tenants against oppressive rent hikes and unsanitary conditions.³ Hendrickson was also an active member of the Communist Party of the United States of America, which was enthusiastically recruiting both Caribbean and African American women in the 1920s and 1930s (Boyce Davies 2007; McDuffie 2011; Stevens 2017).

Hendrickson became well-known as a passionate street corner speaker in Harlem and quickly made a name for herself among the black community in New York City. As a result, she was frequently asked to speak at organizational meetings and banquets for the New York Colored Democratic Association, the National Joint Conference Committee and many other groups. Through her involvement with Caribbean immigrant social organizations, such as the AWILAS, Hendrickson collaborated with numerous influential black leaders and regularly

used her platform to advocate for women's issues. Caribbean and African American women's rights were a major priority for her and she frequently encouraged black women to become involved in political and social justice movements to ensure that their voices were heard and concerns addressed.⁴

At the turn of the twentieth century, there were not many spaces in which women, especially black foreign women, could hold leadership positions and voice their political beliefs. American women could not take part in elective politics at the federal level, and although not prohibited by the United States Constitution, few women held public office. It was not until the passage and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that women were granted the right to vote. Hendrickson's story demonstrates the role that Caribbean immigrant benevolent associations and mutual aid societies played in allowing Caribbean women to take on leadership roles that they might not have normally. These social organizations opened a door for Caribbean women and became rare training grounds for female leadership.

The early twentieth century witnessed the formation of a large number of Caribbean American benevolent associations and mutual aid societies. These social organizations, much like the AWILAS, served as forums to discuss Caribbean American affairs, hosted cultural activities, helped members find employment and provided charity and welfare assistance, especially for newly-arrived immigrants. This article examines the 52 West Indian mutual aid societies and benevolent associations that were founded in New York City between 1884 and 1940, arguing that these prevalent early twentieth-century social organizations and their predominantly female membership challenge the historiography of Caribbean immigration that tends to normalize the male experience of immigrants: frameworks which emphasize "the mobility of masculine subjects as the primary agents of diasporic formation and perpetuate a more general masculinism in the conceptualization of diasporic community" (Campt and Thomas 2008, 2). Illustrated through their leadership roles in immigrant social organizations is the fact that Caribbean women were active and influential participants in the immigration experience, not just passive

bystanders. As this article reveals, the examination of Caribbean women's involvement in social organizations is essential in shaping complex and diverse immigrant narratives, which place women in the centre of diasporic formation and highlight their role as indispensable agents in forging transnational connections.

This article analyzes the ways in which mutual aid societies and benevolent associations helped immigrant women in New York to create formal and informal networks. In examining the proliferation of these organizations, their membership and the functions they served, this article demonstrates that these associations not only heightened a sense of West Indian ethnic identity among islanders in the United States, but also strengthened kinship networks among immigrants both in the United States and back home in the Caribbean. The formation of Caribbean social organizations was a direct result of Caribbean immigrants' desire to form social connections and kinship networks. Particularly important to this process were Caribbean women, who I argue were the key proponents of Caribbean culture in the United States and played an important role in the formation of ethnically distinct Caribbean communities.

Through relief efforts, charity work and collaboration with organizations in the Caribbean, female members of immigrant social organizations in New York created transnational networks that helped to keep them abreast of events occurring in the Caribbean. Caribbean women, through their membership in mutual aid societies and benevolent associations, demonstrated a strong interest in staying connected to their communities' back home by providing aid to Caribbean islands hit with natural disasters and founding various scholarships to sponsor students in the region. They created new communities for themselves and their families within the larger American community, while remaining closely connected to their West Indian identities. They utilized these associations to honour their ethnic identities in the United States through programming that celebrated their heritage. In this way, Caribbean women's roles in associations were vital in the formation of a Caribbean American transnational identity.

Further, this article posits that Caribbean women's involvement with these social organizations demonstrated their belief that their own fate was closely intertwined with the social, economic and political welfare of the international black community. Association members launched various initiatives to help people of African descent globally, demonstrating their deep concern for black peoples throughout the world. This article suggests that an examination of Caribbean immigrant women's roles in mutual aid societies and benevolent associations provides a more nuanced understanding of the way in which Caribbean immigrants were able to conceptualize their multiple identities as people of colour in the United States, as "West Indians," and as a transnational group connected to other people of African descent across the world. Examining women's roles in immigrant societies provides an important voice to an often-neglected aspect of the Caribbean immigrant experience and highlights the inextricable links between notions of gender, race and class in shaping the lived experiences of newcomers in interwar New York. Thus, by employing a gendered analysis, we can better understand how diasporic communities are made and how diasporic politics emerge.

Historiography

The historiography of Caribbean immigration to the United States features a significant amount of literature on immigration post-1965. Historians of Caribbean immigration tend to focus on the period after World War II because the largest wave of Caribbean immigrants came to the United States during that period. In comparison, there are only a few historians, such as Irma Watkins-Owens, Winston James and Lara Putnam, who examine Caribbean migration to the US in the early twentieth century, prior to World War I (Watkins-Owens 1996; James 1998; Putnam 2013). Moreover, there are even fewer works that examine Anglophone Caribbean social organizations in detail, despite the large number of organizations that emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, there is only a small body of literature that discusses African American social and cultural organizations as a whole (see Mjagkij 2001; Dunbar 2012;

Beito 2000; Summers 2004). This is surprising given the fact that in the early twentieth century participation in voluntary associations was at an all-time high, with one in every three Americans participating in a secret society, sick and funeral benefit society or life insurance society (Beito 2000, 1-2). Nevertheless, the historians who do examine African American social organizations in the early twentieth century rarely discuss the Caribbean immigrants who were members and often held leadership positions. Such is the case with Nina Baym's encyclopedic work *Organizing Black America* (2001), which provides a detailed look at over five hundred historical and contemporary African American organizations, yet does not include a single Caribbean association, with the exception of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

To date, scholars of early Caribbean immigration to the United States have only given passing attention to the proliferation of Caribbean social organizations in this period, often making brief reference to Marcus Garvey's UNIA. Very few scholars thoroughly examine the significance of these organizations to the immigrant experience (see De Reid 1939). While the UNIA was unarguably the largest and one of the most successful organizations of Caribbean immigrants in the United States, I contend that historians of Caribbean immigration often focus on the UNIA to the detriment of comparatively smaller associations that also held significance. By highlighting these smaller organizations, it is possible to draw attention to grassroots participation in Caribbean immigrant groups and to illuminate women's involvement in these overlooked organizations.

Irma Watkins-Owens, in her influential book *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930*, has a chapter dedicated to immigrant participation in social organizations. She argues that benevolent associations were significant because they gave women opportunities to hold leadership positions, served as a training ground for potential leaders and provided the basic skills needed for community building (Watkins-Owens 1996, 68, 70, 73-74). This article expands on Watkins-Owens' groundbreaking scholarship by highlighting the process in which Caribbean immigrants developed a pan-Caribbean identity through immigrant social organizations.

One of the ways in which these organizations achieved this pan-Caribbean identity was through cross-cooperation with other associations from different islands in the late 1920s and 1930s. An important goal of many of these organizations in this period was fostering collaboration and unity among Caribbean immigrants as a whole, with female members often leading the charge. As a result, we see the founding of pan-Caribbean associations like the Sons and Daughters of the West Indies and the United Brothers and Sisters of the United Islands.

Scholars such as Watkins-Owens and James tend to define Caribbean immigrants as a cohesive group in their examinations, missing the opportunity to explore the process it took for immigrants to develop this shared identity. Alternatively, I contend that Caribbean immigrants did not arrive in the United States as a unified group; instead social organizations were instrumental in helping newcomers create kinship networks and ultimately communities. By investigating the unique experience of Caribbean immigrant women within immigrant social organizations, this article adds dimension and complexity to the historiography on American immigration and seeks to change our understanding of politics, identity and the role of women in the immigration process.

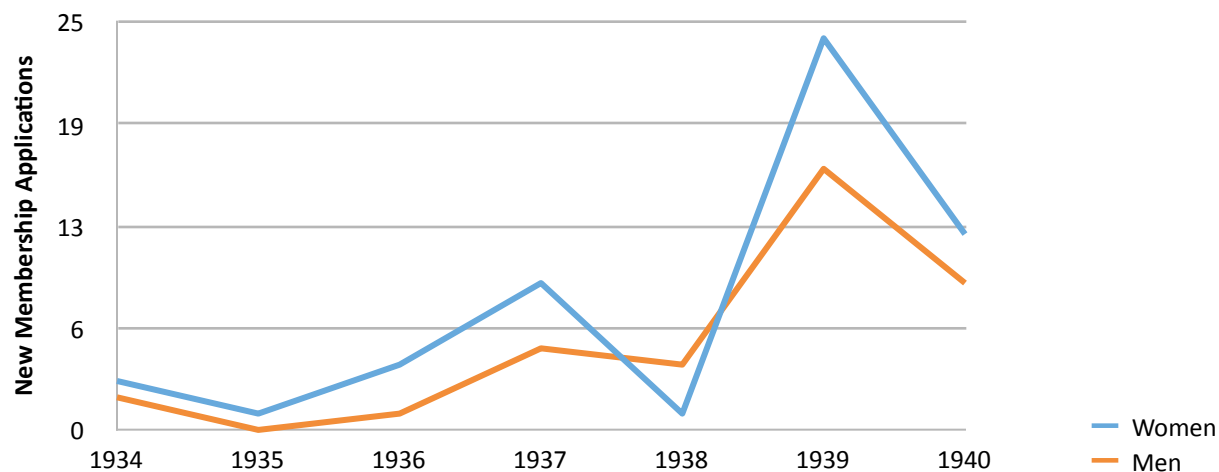
Mutual Aid Societies and Benevolent Associations: Origins and Membership

Caribbean immigrants poured into New York City at the turn of the century looking for ways in which to provide support to each other, as the United States government had very few programmes set up for immigrant groups, least of all for those who were non-white and English-speaking.⁵ Having arrived in an unfamiliar city, often with very few networks, islanders relied on the familiar structure of Caribbean friendly societies to provide kinship and mutual aid. Caribbean immigrants took the basic principles of the Caribbean friendly society and applied them to their new realities in the United States. These associations helped immigrants to become acclimated to their new

environments by supplying members with ready-made social networks, teaching them the ways of the city and “how to be good Americans,” as well as providing them with a way to stay connected to their cultural identities.⁶

Between 1884 and 1940, 52 mutual aid societies and benevolent associations were established in New York City alone. These organizations represented the entire spectrum of the Anglophone Caribbean from the smallest islands to the largest. Membership in Caribbean mutual aid societies varied greatly with some associations, like the Bermuda Benevolent Association (BBA), having as many as three hundred members in the 1940s and less than twenty in 1998. It is hard to establish definitive membership figures for each society, as the organizations did not leave behind logs with their annual membership numbers. However, organizations such as the AWILAS and the Antigua Progressive Society (APS) did keep annual records of new applicants. The pattern of new membership applications presented in Table 1 can be taken as representative of membership applications as a whole. This table is helpful for two reasons. First, while we do not know the total number of members in the organization at the time, we do know how many members were joining the group during this period. The table also highlights the fact that women joined associations at higher rates than male immigrants in many cases. In fact, more women applied to join the APS than men every year, with the exception of 1938.

Table 1. Antigua Progressive Society New Membership Applicants, 1934-1940



Source: Antigua Progressive Society Membership Records, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division (MARBD), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC).

By examining the membership records of mutual aid societies and benevolent associations, we are allowed a microscopic look into the types of people who were involved in immigrant social organizations during the interwar period. For instance, the membership records of the AWILAS show that the society's applicants ranged in age from 18 years old to 46 years old. However, most potential members were in their late twenties and thirties. In terms of socio-economic standing, associations had a variety of members from all class levels coming together to form social networks. Examining fourteen AWILAS membership applications from the 1920s, half of the potential applicants held occupations as domestics, two were housewives, one was a student and one applicant was a self-employed hairdresser. More than half of the women were married and five were unmarried.⁷ While the membership records of the AWILAS are just a tiny cross-section of all potential members of Caribbean social organizations, they do provide an important sampling of the makeup of benevolent associations and demonstrate that membership in mutual aid societies and benevolent associations appealed to islanders from various socio-economic backgrounds. Associations did not have criteria in terms of income

requirements or job specifications for membership. Instead, they envisioned the organizations to be places in which all Caribbean immigrants, regardless of social standing, could come together in fellowship.

Originally founded for adult immigrants, mutual aid societies and benevolent associations eventually expanded their functions to adapt to the growing needs of their members. As the twentieth century progressed, Caribbean immigrants began to reunite with their families and start new families in the United States and social organizations saw the need to create auxiliary groups for minors. In 1923, nine years after the founding of the original association, the MPS formed a juvenile group called the Montserrat Progressive Society Juvenile. The youth group was supervised by three members of the MPS parent body. Two of these members regularly attended MPS juvenile monthly meetings and reported back to the parent body. Juvenile members were allowed to attend at least one meeting of the parent body each quarter.⁸ By having junior members attend parent body meetings, the MPS parent group was essentially preparing younger members for transition into the parent association when they turned 18 years old.

Juvenile auxiliary groups were important because they provided a model for immigrant youth, as well as the second generation of Caribbean immigrants, to continue the tradition of mutual aid societies and benevolent associations in the United States. Additionally, they served as a way to teach children about their West Indian heritage. Children born in the United States could connect to a West Indian identity through the different programmes hosted for youth. Transnational identities could be fostered even if children had never visited the Caribbean. Through social organizations, the children of Caribbean immigrants cultivated kinship networks that were essential to the survival of islanders in the United States.

Functions

Caribbean immigrant benevolent associations and mutual aid societies served many purposes for islanders living in New York City. The most common of those functions were sick and death benefits. Almost every immigrant association provided some form of death benefits for its members. When a MPS financial member of one full year or more passed away, the society paid the member's beneficiary the sum of one hundred and twenty-five dollars. In addition, the association provided a funeral wreath and members were expected to attend the funeral service.⁹ Death benefits served as a form of insurance to association members and their families. They also provided association members with a network of emotional and spiritual support.

The benefit, however, that members most regularly took advantage of were sick benefits. Once members became ill and could no longer work, they were entitled to a weekly stipend. Associations made sick visits to their members and provided them with financial support. In the MPS, members were given six dollars a week for five weeks and then four dollars a week for five additional weeks if they were still sick and unable to work.¹⁰ The West Indian Benevolent Association of New York City established a visiting committee in order to make hospital and home visits to check in on members who fell ill. Additionally, during this period association members took up a voluntary collection at meetings for sick members.¹¹

Sick and death benefits were highly valued by association members and they regularly took advantage of this financial assistance. This is evidenced by the large number of thank you cards and letters found in each association's records. In one letter to the AWILAS, dated September 12, 1933, member Rose Thomas writes how grateful she was to the association for having given her a sick benefit:

Through this medium, I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your kind and sympathetic letter also your generous gift of \$20.00... I wish therefore to express my sincere gratitude for this assistance given

me during my time of distress. I appreciate your noble act of kindness and wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart, and to add with few feeble words the grateful appreciation of my entire family. Your assistance has been a source of cheer to us; it has given us courage and hope in the midst of our troubles and difficulties.¹²

Thomas' letter is one of many similar letters from members thanking their organizations for making home visits, sending flowers and providing monetary gifts. This practice of financial assistance provided immigrants with a sense of security that they could not receive elsewhere as worker's compensation and other disability benefits did not exist at the time. It also comforted members and helped them feel less alienated, giving them a sense of community. This type of kinship was very important and powerful for an immigrant who might have lived alone in New York City. Associations in many ways became families to their members.

Associations also offered their members educational workshops and forums, supplying them with information on a wide array of subjects including: child rearing, job placement, the naturalization process and even how to use voting machines. These forums aimed to be informative and educational by providing assistance to members in obtaining United States citizenship and helping members resolve immigration problems.¹³ Social organizations wanted their members to be active participants in their new communities and they believed hosting educational forums would help them to achieve that objective.

Charitable causes were also of great concern for association members. The most common were scholarship funds set up for members' children.¹⁴ However, charitable efforts were not limited only to members. Associations often donated to local organizations, such as public schools, churches, hospitals and organizations for the disabled. Education was very important to these associations, as can be witnessed by the numerous academic scholarship funds they established. The Virgin Islands Alliance held various fundraisers in order to raise capital to provide scholarships to students. They also held an annual Christmas drive for students at Hampton University, a historically black university,

Figure 1. Bermuda Benevolent Association House Committee



Source: Bermuda Benevolent Association Records, 1898-1969. MARBD, SCRBC.

to which groups like the AWILAS donated.¹⁵ Associations' charitable efforts also extended to schools within the Caribbean. The British Virgin Islands Benevolent Society, for example, donated money and books to various local schools in Tortola.¹⁶

Another significant function of Caribbean immigrant mutual aid societies and benevolent associations was financial investment. Separate from their monthly association dues, some groups such as the Jamaican Associates offered their members rotating lines of credit, or *susus*, which worked as a collective savings plan in which a group of people could pool their money and distribute it among themselves periodically. *Susus* were utilized to start businesses, to put a down payment on a new home, or even to provide passage for a relative to the United States. Additionally, groups like the BBA offered a bond fund, where members paid money to a bond and were promised a four or five per cent return on their investment, which at the time was more than what was offered in a standard savings account. This bond allowed both members and the association a chance to profit.¹⁷

Figure 2. Bermuda Benevolent Association Ways and Means Committee



Source: Bermuda Benevolent Association Records, 1898-1969. MARBD, SCRBC.

Caribbean immigrant women played a vital role as the founders and participants of mutual aid societies and benevolent associations in the twentieth century. Although not reflected as much in the leadership of some Caribbean social organizations, women made up a large percentage of the general membership. Caribbean women's participation in immigrant social organizations was oftentimes equal to or surpassed that of male membership. As is illustrated in Table 1, many groups like the APS had higher female membership enrollment numbers on a yearly basis. Pictures of the BBA's various committees in the 1920s and 1930s also highlight this fact. In a photograph of the association's House Committee (Fig. 1), there are seventeen members pictured and more than half of them are women. Similarly, a photograph of the BBA's Ways and Means Committee (Fig. 2) shows that 75 per cent of committee members pictured are women. "Women were always there, especially unmarried women. They [women] were always more active in these groups," states former Jamaican Associates President Dr. Doreen Wilkinson.¹⁸ Women were the backbone of many Caribbean immigrant social and cultural organizations. They made up a disproportionate number of associations'

planning and organizing committees, responsible for the daily operations of the associations.

In addition, women were an integral part of the founding of many twentieth-century Caribbean social organizations. For instance, Ernestine McNeil-Rogers was one of the two original founders of the Jamaican Associates, Inc. of Boston established in 1934.¹⁹ Approximately half of the original members of the APS in 1934 were women.²⁰ In organizations not founded by women, male founders were often cognizant of including women in the language of their organization's constitution, a progressive move given the time period. The authors of the 1911 constitution of the British Virgin Islands Benevolent Association (BVIBA) made it clear that although the language of the association's bylaws used male pronouns, the association openly welcomed women to join, "the masculine term used in this constitution and by-laws applies to both sexes."²¹ The MPS's constitution and bylaws also explicitly stated that one of their goals as a society was to unite "our brothers and sisters," highlighting the desire of these immigrant organizations to include female membership.²² This desire for female inclusion was also reflected in the policies that mutual aid societies and benevolent associations enacted. The APS, for example, formed a special committee appointed by the Antiguan government for the improvement of conditions on the island. They made sure to advocate for Antiguan women's rights, including a minimum wage for women employed in agricultural or manual labour in the government or public service.²³

There are several explanations for the large rate of female participation in Caribbean mutual aid societies and benevolent associations. Statistically, there were simply more female Caribbean immigrants in the United States than male immigrants in the early twentieth century.²⁴ The sheer number of female Caribbean immigrants present in the United States during the early twentieth century is certainly one of the reasons that their participation in social organizations was high. However, this was not the only factor. Significantly, Caribbean women were largely responsible for creating chains of migration that brought groups of new immigrants from the islands, especially other women, to

the United States. They often set up housing arrangements or boarded other immigrants and introduced them to their social networks. These social networks generally included participation in social organizations.

In an interview with Ivy Simons, former president of the BBA, she states that she had two aunts who immigrated to New York for a better life. The two women lived together on 116th Street in Harlem; one worked as a midwife and the other as a domestic servant. Simons states that her aunts were indispensable when she first arrived in New York in the 1930s. They helped her establish herself in the city and found her housing. More importantly, they introduced her to the BBA and their networks of other Caribbean immigrants in New York. "I joined the BBA soon after I came here [New York] because that was just automatic; you had to be in the association. My aunts and uncles were all members...."²⁵ Simons credits her membership in the BBA with helping her establish herself in New York. "It was hard to get adjusted from Bermudian life to American life," she states, but her membership in a benevolent association gave her a built-in social network of other Caribbean immigrants, many of whom had been in the United States for varying years. These organizations connected more established immigrants, who had already been in the United States for several years with newly arrived immigrants, allowing them the opportunity to exchange information about their experiences and advice for navigating their new city. This type of social networking effectively created a sense of community for Caribbean immigrants in New York. Social organizations appealed to Caribbean women like Simons because they were one of the few spaces in which they could address the issues they faced as black female immigrants.

American West Indian Ladies Aid Society

In heavily male-dominated associations, women frequently organized their own auxiliary groups; they took on important executive positions and ran their own programmes, ensuring that their views and interests were addressed (The West Indian Social Club, Inc. 2011). In this capacity, women were able to wield full

control and take on positions that they might not have otherwise. However, in addition to joining auxiliary and integrated groups, Caribbean women formed their own social organizations that catered specifically to their needs as immigrant women. One of the most successful women's organizations, spanning more than half a century, was the AWILAS. Founded in 1915 and remaining active well into the 1960s, the AWILAS was a benevolent society that later served as an umbrella organization for numerous Caribbean American women's organizations. The society's purpose was to establish camaraderie among Caribbean immigrant women, offering its members sick and death benefits, mutual assistance and a meeting place in which to discuss their opinions and find their way in their new country. The association organized various social events such as teas, dances and bid whist parties and it also offered programmes on child rearing and the naturalization process. Most importantly, the AWILAS served as a home away from home for Caribbean women, where they could discuss issues that arose being both immigrant and minority women in an unfamiliar city.

The AWILAS served as a resourceful tool for Caribbean women to navigate their new environment in New York. It functioned as an important community for its members, connecting a wide array of Caribbean women. As was mentioned previously, a sampling of the organization's membership records demonstrates that women of various ages and socio-economic standing participated in the association, reflecting the organization's widespread appeal and relevance. Through their membership in the AWILAS, Caribbean women formed very close relationships with one another and created intimate kinship networks. Many early Caribbean women immigrants travelled to the United States by themselves, leaving behind their support system of family and friends. Once in the United States, they usually had one relative or close family friend who served as their guide and helped them settle into their new homes, similar to the experiences of Ivy Simons and Elizabeth Hendrickson.

The AWILAS also served as a gateway for its members to connect with other associations, both Caribbean and African American. In the records of the

AWILAS, there is a significant amount of correspondence between the association and other groups like the United Brothers and Sisters of the United Islands and the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters and its Ladies Auxiliary. These organizations sought to work with Caribbean immigrant women both socially and politically. They invited Caribbean women to their organizational meetings as well as social activities.²⁶ This kind of collaboration among Caribbean women's groups was very common. African American women's groups also worked extensively with the AWILAS and other Caribbean women's social organizations. Groups like the Eton Benevolence Society and the Saint Benedict Ladies' Auxiliary No. 204 sought out the AWILAS in order to forge connections between the different groups of black women. For instance, in 1933, the Eton Benevolence Society wrote to the women of the AWILAS stating: "[We are] seeking to establish a bond of unity and friendship between your organisation and ours, [Through this medium we] ask your permission to send a representative at your next meeting, who will make the request and as we hope establish soon."²⁷ Letters like these illustrate the value African American women saw in working with Caribbean women's associations, with immigrant associations serving as a point of connection between the two groups of black women.

Establishing Networks

Mutual aid societies and benevolent associations were essential in creating vital kinship networks among Caribbean immigrants in the United States and they provided many benefits to their members. However, at their core they were social organizations, with an emphasis on fellowship. Thus associations held various social events for their members, which served as spaces in which immigrants could network with people from their home islands and all over the Caribbean. Dances, holiday parties and group trips were just some of the events associations sponsored for their members. Organizations like the BVIBA and the APS had dedicated entertainment committees responsible for planning and coordinating events. The BBA had a community social and recreation club that

held events such as Bermuda Week, which celebrated the history and culture of the island.²⁸

In an effort to expand their social networks and create larger ties to the Caribbean immigrant community in the United States, social organizations frequently collaborated with one another. The AWILAS, for instance, held receptions and dances open to other Caribbean organizations. Associations regularly sent invitations to attend each other's meetings, workshops and social events, such as in 1934 when the BVIBA invited members of the AWILAS to attend their eighth anniversary church service in "the spirit of cooperation and unity... among our sister Benevolence organizations."²⁹ Associations also sent monetary and material donations to one another and frequently took out paid advertisements in other groups' programme booklets.³⁰

However, relations among West Indian social organizations were not perfect, nor without dissent over how groups could achieve their goals. In the records of the AWILAS, Ashely L. Totten writes that he and members of the Virgin Islands Civic and Industrial Association had been accused repeatedly of being unwilling to work with other Virgin Island leaders. He states that "Nothing is farther from the truth than that." He goes on to say:

We want to be helpful to our native people... We do not feel that it is fair to be accused of blocking the cooperation or unification of the natives when we are and have always been ready and willing to cooperate. If unity of action is the solution to the masses of unorganized Virgin Islanders, then we are prepared to do the logical thing—a meeting of minds of all leaders.³¹

Totten's letter highlights that although his organization may have had the intention of collaborating with other immigrant groups, tensions among the leadership still existed. This letter illustrates that cooperation among Caribbean immigrant groups was not a given, nor was it an easy process.

The emphasis that Caribbean associations placed on cooperation among groups in the 1920s and 1930s marked a shift from previous organizational

practices. In the late nineteenth century, Caribbean social organizations generally did not have island-specific requirements for where their members originated. Their only stipulation was that association members had to hail from the Caribbean. The relatively small number of Caribbean immigrants in the United States in this period may have been one reason for these early pan-Caribbean associations. During the early decades of the twentieth century, however, there was a substantial increase in the number of Caribbean immigrants in the United States. Consequently, many of the already established immigrant social organizations began to cater to people from specific islands and implemented strict membership requirements, requiring that potential members be from the island associated with the organization.

In the decade following 1924, there was a huge decline in Caribbean immigration to the United States due to the passage of the restrictive Johnson-Reed Act. The Johnson-Reed Act set a national quota of two per cent of immigrants from the total of any nation's residents in the United States, drastically limiting the number of Caribbean immigrants during this period. As a result, many mutual aid societies and benevolent associations began to see forming a community with other Caribbean immigrant groups as an important objective. Island affiliation and strict membership requirements became less important as the number of arriving immigrants dwindled. Many societies changed their objectives to become more inclusive. Building fully transnational communities concerned with the welfare of those in the Caribbean became another important goal. Consequently, groups like the Jamaica Unity Club, Incorporated, which allowed any person, regardless of nationality, to apply for membership became more prevalent.

As Caribbean immigrant social organizations became more established in the United States, their objectives shifted to adapt to the concerns of their members, which now leaned toward keeping intimate connections with other West Indians in the United States as well as back home. Subsequently, many associations began to allow any person aligned with their objectives, regardless of island origin, to apply for membership. They also endeavoured to keep immigrants in

New York connected to the Caribbean by updating them on Caribbean news and informing them about social and political affairs affecting the region.

Diasporic Leanings

The welfare of people of African descent throughout the world became a clear and pressing concern for Caribbean mutual aid societies and benevolent associations during the interwar period. Often referred to as the “nadir” of American race relations, the early twentieth century witnessed the eruption of violent and deadly race riots in cities across the United States. Lynchings and Jim Crow segregation laws remained dominant in this period. Internationally, the wellbeing of people of African descent was also in constant danger. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and commenced the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, labour unrest erupted across the British Caribbean between 1934 and 1939, and anti-colonial unrest and African nationalism were expressed in strikes throughout West Africa.

Consequently, New York City became a hotbed of black radical politics with groups such as Marcus Garvey's UNIA, Hubert Harrison's Liberty League and Cyril Briggs' African Blood Brotherhood leading the call for black self-determination and political equality (Watkins-Owens 1996; James 1998; Stevens 2017). These groups undoubtedly influenced the objectives of social organizations, which began to take a more diasporic approach in response to the social injustices facing black people throughout the world. This fact is best demonstrated in the goals of organizations such as the APS, which affirmed that “we in America should help those in the islands to obtain and enjoy the same privileges which we have and enjoy here... we should fight for better conditions in the islands through the frame-work of the British Constitution.”³² The group demonstrated such a strong commitment to Antigua affairs that it was asked by the West Indies Royal Commission in 1938 to make recommendations for the improvement of conditions on the island.³³

In 1928, the APS sent a representative to the Pan-American Nations Conference in Havana, Cuba. They thought that it was vital to send representatives to this conference, as they believed “our fate is hanging in the balance, and it is most important to demonstrate our unity and strength” and to “demand for the right [to] self-determination” for black people in the circum-Caribbean.³⁴ APS members drew a strong connection between themselves and people of the African Diaspora. They believed that it was their duty to fight for the rights and freedom of all black people throughout the world. This recurring sense of diasporic concern is observed in many of the records of Caribbean immigrant mutual aid societies and benevolent associations.

Members of the BVIBA were also active in creating transnational social fields. They had representatives throughout the Caribbean including in St. Thomas, Tortola and Anegada in order to keep abreast of current events on the islands. In 1949, the BVIBA was commissioned to work in conjunction with the Commissioner of the British Virgin Islands on an Economic Sub-Committee in order to develop a reconstruction plan to alleviate the depressed economic condition of the islands (BBA Records 1949). Members of the St. Lucian United Association also forged transnational connections with Lucians throughout the world in order to provide support to their island home. They founded the Union of Overseas Associations, which served to link St. Lucian associations in Barbados, Canada, London, St. Croix, St. Lucia and the United States in order to combine their efforts to provide aid to St. Lucia.³⁵

In 1938, the BBA participated in a mass meeting hosted by the Jamaican Progressive League. The meeting was called in response to a massive workers' demonstration that ended in the brutal shooting of Jamaican protesters by the police. Four people were killed, while dozens were wounded and 103 jailed.³⁶ This event was the culmination of labour unrest taking place all over the Caribbean during the period between 1934 and 1939.³⁷ By participating in the British-Jamaican Benevolent Association's mass meeting, members of the BBA demonstrated their solidarity with the pan-West Indian movement calling for fair wages and decent working conditions in the Caribbean.

Another area of great concern in the 1930s for the BBA and many Caribbean immigrant benevolent associations and mutual aid societies was the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935. Associations joined together to host mass meetings to discuss actions they could take in support of the Ethiopian army. To do their part, the BBA was active in collecting money to purchase surgical supplies for wounded Ethiopian soldiers. Other groups sent monetary donations to support the Ethiopian army, further highlighting the very real sense of diasporic connection Caribbean immigrants felt to other communities of African descent in the interwar years.³⁸

Conclusion

Highlighting Caribbean women's roles in immigrant mutual aid societies and benevolent associations is essential in order to move beyond scholarly frameworks that normalize the male experience of immigration. As the founders and often largest participants in these associations, immigrant women like Elizabeth Hendrickson and Ivy Simons were the primary proponents of Caribbean culture in the United States. They played an important role in the formation of ethnically distinct Caribbean communities and provided immigrants with a way in which to conceptualize themselves as Caribbean. Participation in these organizations provided Caribbean women with frequent opportunities to collaborate and draw parallels in their experiences. Additionally, associations strengthened kinship networks among immigrants in the United States and those back in the Caribbean, illustrating members' deep concern with staying intimately connected to communities in the islands.

Immigrant women also established collectives through these associations that helped family members immigrate to the United States by raising money to pay for their passage, while also helping to care for family members back home through remittance sending. Without women's involvement in these organizations, Caribbean immigrants would not have had community and kinship networks available to them as they arrived in the United States. Through

their involvement with social organizations, Caribbean women helped pave the way for Caribbean immigration to the United States through their system of networks—both formal and informal. Immigrant women created new communities for themselves and their families within the larger American community, through these organizations, filling a void for the black immigrant population. Finally, I argue that placing women at the centre of our studies of diasporic formation during the interwar period reveals their indispensable role in forging diasporic connections and enriches the historiography on Caribbean immigration.

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¹ Hendrickson's exact year of birth is unknown. It is reported between 1883-1886 in multiple U.S. Census Records.

² "New Harlem Tenants League to Sponsor Great Mass Meeting," *New York Age*, March 20, 1943.

³ "Plan Preventions to Increase Rents," *Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1925; A. Elizabeth Hendrickson, "The Man in the Street," *New York Amsterdam News*, Jan. 8, 1930.

⁴ "Working Women Asked to Attend Celebration," *New York Age*, April 7, 1928.

⁵ File# 27671/17681, "Revision of Suggestions for Americanization Work among Foreign Born Women"; File# 27671/4720, "The Woman Citizen," Record Group 85—Entry 30 Box 187. National Archives at College Park, MD. In the 1920s, the United States began setting up "Americanization" programmes for female immigrants. They believed that women were the key to having productive and successful immigrant groups. Many of the programmes centred on preparing women for U.S. citizenship, however none of the programmes were for English-speaking immigrants, which effectively shut out Anglophone Caribbean immigrants and dismissed their needs as an immigrant group.

⁶ "How to be a Good American Booklet," Beach-Thomas Family Records, 1888-1973, Box 1, Folder 14. Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division (MARBD), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC), New York, NY.

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⁸ Montserrat Progressive Society of New York, Inc., Constitution and By-Laws. 1952. Irma Watkins Owens' private collection, 25-26.

⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 3, 20.

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¹⁶ "Letter dated—September 5, 1938," BVIBA Records, 1926-1989, Box 9, Folder 1. MARBD, SCRBC, New York, NY.

¹⁷ "Letter dated—September 1, 1936 BBA Joint Committee," BBA Records, 1898-1969, Box 8. MARBD, SCRBC, New York, NY.

¹⁸ Dr. Doreen Wilkinson, interview by author, April 1, 2016.

¹⁹ 80th Anniversary of the Jamaican Associates, Inc., 2014 programme booklet, donated by member and former president Dr. Doreen Wilkinson.

²⁰ ABPS Membership Records, Antigua and Barbuda Progressive Society Records, 1934-1984, Box 8, Folder 1. MARBD, SCRBC, New York, NY.

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²³ "Pamphlet—December 12, 1938," Admin Correspondence Political Concerns, ABPS Records, 1934-1984. MARBD, SCRBC, New York, NY.

²⁴ Between 1915 and 1919, Caribbean women made up 17.6 per cent of arriving immigrants with Caribbean men making up 16.8 per cent. Between 1920 and 1924, Caribbean women made up 29 per cent of arriving immigrants with Caribbean men making up 23.1 per cent. In 1925, Caribbean women were 7.8 per cent of arriving immigrants with Caribbean men making up 6.6 per cent. Data taken from the US Census of Population, 1930 and 17th Census of the United States, 1950 Population Volume IV Special Reports.

²⁵ Ivy Simons, interview by author, September 2014.

²⁶ "November 27, 1934," Minutes AWILAS and Related Correspondence, 1928-1936, AWILAS Records 1915-1965, Box 1, Folder 1. MARBD, SCRBC, New York, NY.

²⁷ "Letter dated—December 10, 1933," AWILAS General Correspondence 1933-1935, AWILAS Records 1915-1965, Box 1, Folder 4. MARBD, SCRBC, New York, NY.

²⁸ "Letter dated—1947," BBA Records, 1898-1969; Box 8. MARBD, SCRBC, New York, NY.

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