

Calling the West Indies: the BBC World Service and Caribbean Voices

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This paper provides an historical account of radio programs developed by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) resulting in part from West Indian immigration to England during the 1940s and 1950s. It examines various ways in which the organization addressed issues of integration through special radio *talks* planned by the Home and World Services. Beginning in 1939, the program *Calling the West Indies* featured West Indians troops on active service reading letters on air to their families back home in the Islands. The program later became *Caribbean Voices* (1943-1958) and highlighted West Indian writers who read and discussed literary works on the World Service. *The Colour Bar* (1943) examined the impact of prejudice upon immigrants; notably West Indians and Africans relocating to urban areas in England. Ultimately portions of these shows shifted focus and began to offer an intrinsic view of the Afro-Caribbean experience in the UK. During the programming segments *We See Britain* (1949) and *West Indian Diary* (1949), servicemen, teachers and others who visited or lived in England discussed their personal experiences for the benefit of those considering immigration. These programs offered rare opportunities for West Indians to discuss their perspectives on life among white Britons and subsequent social issues.

BBC Radio and early programming

The British Broadcasting Corporation began serving the public with an intention to acculturate audiences on every subject deemed acceptable. In the spring of 1922, Her Majesty's Post Office authorized two small, experimental stations to begin intermittent broadcasting from Writtle near Chelsford, England and from London.¹ That November daily broadcasts began in the urban centers of Birmingham and Manchester, as well. As the transmitter network spread across the country, British citizens eager to embrace this new technology could hear wireless in nearly every city by 1925². As radio garnered more attention, a public service agenda became an essential part of BBC programs and their production. The BBC's effort to mold the social consciousness of a nation eventually moved beyond the shores of the British Isles to, in the case of this study, the Caribbean. By November of 1932, over 5,000,000 license holders had tuned in to variety programming produced by a host of artists, by and by 1938 98 percent of the populace could listen to BBC programs at their convenience.³

The importance of the BBC reached a level of international attention by December 1932 when its Empire Service began. To commemorate the occasion, King George V gave the first royal broadcast to those living within England or its colonies on Christmas Day. Within a decade the BBC Empire Service began broadcasting English language programs to nearly all of the

British colonies. By the mid-1930s, listeners could hear the Empire Service in Australia, India, South Africa, West Africa and Canada with extended foreign language services beginning in 1938. This programming included broadcasts of the Arabic and Latin American Services along with foreign news bulletins in German, French and Italian. By the end of 1943, the BBC was broadcasting to various parts of war-torn Europe in over forty-five different languages and in the Caribbean Isles. When considering the World Service and its Caribbean Radio section specifically, it provided entertainment for Anglophone audiences throughout the West Indian colonies, and sometimes served as a recruitment tool ⁴ during the Second World War. The Service also attempted to address racial tensions and subsequent social issues as American, British and colonial troops intermingled on the streets of London and beyond.

The *Colour Bar* radio project

Due in part to concerns expressed by management over issues of racial prejudice, plans began in June of 1943 for the creation of a talk program addressing racial prejudice in Britain tentatively called *The Colour Bar*. The show would arrange for guests of "Negro descent" to openly address their perceptions of racism in England with well-known host Kenneth Little. The three included Aduke Alakija, a West African woman studying Social Science at Cambridge; Dr. Harold Moody, a West Indian lobbyist and member of the League of Coloured Peoples and Robert Adams, a teacher,

actor and musician from British Guiana. Of particular importance to the program's narrative were discussions by Adams and Moody about the mistreatment many West Indian immigrants received when arriving to England. All three agreed and cited difficulties encountered in getting a place to live if you happen to be a black. Also discussed were examples of how a landlady will often explain that no rooms were available "even when it's obvious that there are vacancies" or "you just received the address from [a housing] agency." Adams emphasized that "colour prejudice is fairly general in this country" because "for some reason people seem to be on the impression is because you're colored something was wrong with you." Adams reaffirmed that "any coloured person arriving here from a British colony is, of course, a British subject or at any rate a British protected subject."⁵ He explained that this occurred "in theory" because "in practice it often doesn't work out that way." New citizens of color simply did not have "the same rights as any white citizen."

After the recording was completed, Director of Talks G.R. Barnes forwarded a memo addressing the planned program and recommended an evening broadcast time. He also suggested that the program not run at the peak listening time of 9:20 for fear of exacerbating an already heated issue. He noted that the program should be considered "a conversation between friends," and the announcement proceeding the broadcast should state that the program was "not an attempt to get to the root of the matter; rather a

ventilation of widely held views." There was some trepidation of the subject in that Barnes agreed that although many West Indians would welcome an open discussion of race, "other colored People such as Chinese and Indians might resent the implications of such a discussion."⁶

However, during a weekly Colonial Office publicity meeting that followed, Mrs. Elspeth Huxley, BBC Liaison Officer explained that the Colonial Office had received an increasing amount of complaints from "coloured people" in general, "about prejudice and discrimination" in urban England. The Colonial Office hoped that the program would bring "the whole subject [of race] out into the light of day," yet G.R. Barnes, Director of Talks was concerned. He felt that a discussion of this nature "was apt to deal in generalities and abstract questions which were often beyond ordinary men and women" in England. Huxley stated that while West Indians and other immigrants may not "object to a frank and open discussion of difficulties", they might criticize the "hypocrisy which they see and our attitude of official non-discrimination and unofficial Prejudice." These immigrants felt that no matter what the "official policy was for the Crown," the natural reactions of many English people were unfavorable.⁷

Days later Barnes made a recommendation that the Home Service not broadcast the program. He explained that he "very much regretted the decision," and insisted that the speakers receive payment for their efforts. He also suggested that the script be "kept on file in case usage could be

made of it at a later date.”⁸ In 1949, J. Grenfell Williams, Head of the Colonial Service suggested that a series on the *Colour Bar* wouldn't get the Service “anywhere,” and that it would be far better to “take one great question like the problem of human relations in Africa, and thrash that out.”

⁹ Ultimately the Third Programme approved the *Colour Bar* talk, but it focused upon racism in parts of South Africa, not the experiences of West Indian immigrants in England.

Caribbean Voices and West Indian Programming

Within the British West Indies, the four most populated islands of Jamaica, Trinidad, Guiana and the Windward Islands reportedly had 93,000 radio receiver sets¹⁰ and a sizable audience of nearly three million citizens. After considering this data supplied by the United States Information Agency (USIA), the BBC World Service began broadcasting its *Caribbean Voices* radio program on the 11th of March 1943. The Service targeted the Caribbean as part of the anti-communist “Hands across the Sea” project.¹¹ The twenty-minute show recorded at the BBC studios in London and broadcast to the Caribbean Isles each Sunday via the BBC's General Overseas Service featured stories, poems and other literary works by West Indian writers. Originally produced by journalist and poet Una Marson, the program first entitled *Calling the West Indies* (1939) later became a forum where audiences could hear the works of budding Caribbean authors. The

program later expanded to one hour, and relied upon local editors in Kingston, Guiana and the Bahamas to find writers showing promise.

Irishman Henry Swanzy's takeover as producer of the program began just after the war. Often credited as the originator of *Caribbean Voices* (though Una Marson began working on the project a decade before), he had joined the BBC as News Talks Assistant for the Empire Department and Overseas Division in 1941, and later became an editor and producer. Britain had its share of Caribbean servicemen who stayed on for extended service, often to the chagrin of the Colonial Office. However, this relocation ensured an even larger audience of those eager to listen to a taste of home. The BBC had upgraded radio services in the Caribbean region technically, and the program had already established a strong following under Marson. Swanzy's prosocial agenda and enthusiasm for the program later encouraged even more aspiring writers and poets from the Caribbean to submit scripts at nearly any time. He had stated just after joining the program that the "main value of a programme like *Caribbean Voices* is to provide an outlet for writers who would otherwise be mute".¹²

The show also featured the works of established West Indian authors, notably George Lamming, Samuel Selvon and VS Naipaul (*The Middle Passage*, 1962) who also served as editor of the *Caribbean Voices* program from 1954 until 1956. Other famed writers featured on the program as guests, and sometimes hosts, included Andrew Salkey (*A Quality of*

Violence, 1959), Edgar Mittelholzer (*Children of Kaywana*, 1952), Michael Anthony (*The Games were Coming*, 1963), Edward Kamau Brathwaite (*Odale's Choice*, 1967) and producer Una Marson (*Tropic Reveries*, 1930). These same authors and many others ultimately encouraged the formation of a creative network of writers based in the Caribbean Isles and in London. Other segments targeted toward West Indian listeners included *Travelers' Tales* and *Serenade in Sepia* (BBC, 1944) featuring West Indian folk singer Edric Connor, also a guest and host on *Calling the West Indies*.

Many contributors acknowledged the role *Caribbean Voices* played in also providing a publishing outlet and critical forum for writers to discuss each other's work. The Caribbean Artists Movement established in 1966 by Brathwaite, West Indian activist John La Rose and Salkey was a direct result of the collaborations made possible by the program.¹³ Though targeted to West Indian audiences, *Caribbean Voices* came to have a marked impression upon many listeners regardless of race. Author Cyril Dabydeen (1994) wrote of the influence the program had, in that:

The poets' ethnicity did not make a marked impression on me, creolized as I was becoming, or more catholic in my taste, as I obsessively listened to our KB radio of the BBC show *Calling the Caribbean* or *Caribbean Voices* and became acquainted with the first generation of our writers who promoted the idea of seeming exile--or simply domicile--in London.¹⁴

While often patriarchal in design, BBC Caribbean broadcasts clearly owe homage to the organizational efforts of Marson and poet Louise Bennett; demonstrating the importance of Black women within these programs.

We See Britain

In a continued effort to provide more personal views about life in England, the *Calling the West Indies* program featured the segment *We See Britain* in January of 1949. Trinidadian cricketer-turned-producer Kenneth Ablack replaced the regular Thursday night broadcasts on occasion, and instead featured guests who gave everyday perspectives on life in England. One guest, playwright Anthony Brown, had the opportunity to speak about Britain's "economic, political and educational attachment to the West Indies." Brown and Ablack had previously co-produced a program about the West Indies for BBC's European Service, but for *We See Britain*, both men addressed what questions West Indian audiences *might have* about life in London.

As suggested by Ablack at the beginning of the broadcast, "it's a good they to know your neighbors and with whom you have to live in the world. We start [the series] with the people of Britain because the British are part of our life and we cannot escape that." Within the thirty minute program the three men discussed how to truly learn the country by, as Brown suggested, "Finding a guide who will really show you around, and introduces you to the

kind of people who live there now." Brown purposely avoided discussions about national monuments and tourist attractions, but instead mentioned that "a lot of statistics about British industry" wouldn't educate "West Indian listeners on the British people." Perhaps the most provocative guest on the program was West Indian author and humorist A.E.T. Henry. Henry had worked on the *Calling the Caribbean* program previously with Poet Louise Bennett. She served as the "compere" or M.C. for the series, and provided what the programming log called "recitation of Jamaican dialect rhyme".¹⁵ As an active participant in the planning of her appearances, she underscored specific examples of dialogue and poetry indigenous to the region. Producer Ablack also invited Bennett and Henry to another segment "West Indian Guest night" in 1950, and both appealed to West Indian audiences who appreciated their usage of patois and Caribbean dialect.¹⁶

Henry addressed a question from Ablack about West Indian curiosity and the British. He explained that the "average West Indian" sees the British as "so official, so stiff and so aloof. [West Indians] would like to hear what they are like when they're at home." Metcalf reminds Henry that engaging with the British has its disadvantages, in that the "average Briton is very hard to enthuse, and doesn't show love easily", and as the "old saying goes; the English take their pleasures seriously." When asked to sum up his impressions as a West Indian listener to the program, Henry responded,

Well, Ken on the assumption that I was a typical radio listener before I left the West Indies, let me try to interpret the West Indian point of view, by asking myself this question. In those aspects of life in Britain was I most interested before coming to this country? And in answering that question we have to remember that our educational system is British: the broad contour of our the political system are British; our social and cultural background is British; what might be described as our way of life is fundamentally British. Unlike India or Pakistan or Ceylon or Burma or Africa, West Indians as a people are a very mixed people racially - have never had a separate language or literature or separate traditions. These have all been borrowed from metropolitan Britain, and blended, shall we say, with tropical ingredients to form what is now emerging as a West Indian culture. ¹⁷

The program and its guests provided an intrinsic perspective the life of West Indians there, yet avoiding an essentialized notion of a singular Caribbean perspective. Three separate opinions focused upon a colonial view of the mother country, again for the benefit of those going abroad or considering immigration. There was a marked difference in this form of programming during the early 1950s as compared to broadcasts carried by the BBC long after immigration from the West Indies had increased to nearly 100,000 a year between 1950 and 1959. ¹⁸

As an example, a program entitled "Race and Colour" (1952) was broadcast over the BBC 9 November of 1952 in which an all-white panel discussed racial differences. Participants included Christopher Mayhew, Science Editor of the News Chronicle Ritchie Calder, and Dr. J.C. Trevor, M.A.; Lecturer of Physical Anthropology from Cambridge University.¹⁹ Trevor's presentation included the "skulls and other bones" of various races including those labeled as "Negri-form" and "Caucasian." When asked if there was anything in the measurement of skulls that gives indications of a racial difference in intelligence, Trevor explained that the "volume of the brain differs very much between races, but that is nothing to go by in terms of intelligence. The prehistoric European and the Eskimo have bigger cases than the average Englishman."²⁰ Following these findings were more analyses that included discussions on 'the German race and the Slav races' as compared to the British or "island" race.

Despite careful planning and research for the program, the BBC found that audiences were unimpressed with this approach to race relations, and considered the show not very useful in understanding prejudice. A Viewer Research Report of November 10, 1952 was based on 218 questionnaires completed after the program, and when compared to the Viewer Research Weekly Summary, the show had an audience of only 35% of the adult TV public. This was below an average of 46% for recent scientific talks and demonstrations. More importantly, the program fell far below the 68% to

81% calculated for twelve programs that ran under the series title "International Commentary" which was broadcast from fall 1950 to spring of 1951.

The report stated, "Overwhelmingly, the viewer's reactions to the programme were "disappointing" to the BBC." The show, which ran at a peak viewing time of 7:45-8:25 p.m., had an audience rating "below the current average (62) for [other] television discussion programmes and "chat shows." The most outstanding criticism of the show was that the scientific discussions included were far "too technical." One viewer regarded the programme as "advanced lecture on anthropology," while others attempted to find the show helpful and interesting. Viewers were interested in getting down to the facts of what they called "the real issues of the racial problem." They saw no value in as one viewer said "worrying whether a man 3,000 or 4,000 years ago had a square, a round head, or no head at all." Audiences wanted to know what was to be done about the problems resulting from immigration and race relations gone awry.²¹

Conclusion

As a producer of popular and normative culture, the BBC undertook the ideological formation of audiences throughout the United Kingdom, its colonies and the world. As a subsequent part of this construct, British nationalism was a key element in the development of cultural imperialism often codified via the cultural influences of the BBC. As West Indians began

to increase efforts to immigrate England, the BBC began to more actively produce these hopeful citizens and their culture in a fashion that would be more acceptable by white Britons. This included an attempt to educate the populace about the impact of West Indian immigration through BBC's public service onus. Special programming on race, immigration policies and other related issues followed with mixed reactions from audiences as suggested in surveys taken by the BBC after these broadcasts.

Previously these same *Colonials* participated in the war as flyers, sailors and fighters through recruitment efforts featured on radio and newsreels. After World War II had ended, those West Indians that came to England to train and fight were expected, and often demanded, to return from where they came. Economic conditions in their homelands had not improved during the war, and in some cases became worse, forcing many Afro-Caribbeans to return to England seeking work or extended military service. During the postwar era, the BBC's World Service radio created texts designed to educate these immigrants to the realities of living in England, but highlighted cultural differences.

There were attempts to address racialism by the BBC that helped to deconstruct assumptions about race, yet frustrated audiences by a lack of resolution or guidance when it came to the social implications of post-colonial immigration. However, there was a need for autonomous self-expression of these hopeful citizens, allowing for a more intrinsic self-

definition of the Afro-Caribbean experience despite constructs of British nationalism and cultural supremacy through public education and entertainment. Despite these challenges, West Indians continued to carve out fields of contestation through the narratives of *Caribbean Voices*, *Calling the West Indies* and *We See Britain*. Each program represented efforts of resistance, cultural solidarity and presence.

Acknowledgements - I would like to respectfully thank Marie Gillespie for her intellect, kindness and efforts in making this HJFRT project possible.

1 Briggs, Asa. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume 2: The Golden Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 425.

2 Crisell, Andrew. *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*. New York: Routledge, 1997, 25.

3 Briggs, 1979, 111.

4 On the BBC documentary program *Windrush* (1998), a sequence shows *Calling the West Indies* producer Una Marson calling Edric Cross to the radio microphone to discuss his role in the war effort. The audience is comprised of servicemen and women from all ranks of service.

5 From a written record of the recorded discussion between Alakija, Moody, Adams, Graham and Little, recorded 21-24 June 1942. Reference number R51/92, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

6 G.R. Barnes, Director of Talks (21 June 1943). Correspondence to the Controller of the Home Service, "Discussion on Colour Prejudice: Miss Bucknall,". Reference number R51/92, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

7 Elspeth Huxley, BBC Liaison Officer to the Controller of the Home Service (26 June 1943). Correspondence on the "Colour Prejudice Discussion,". Reference number R51/92, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

8 G.R. Barnes, Director of Talks (30 June 1943). Correspondence to Miss Bucknall, Colonial Office, "Colour Prejudice Discussion,". Reference number R51/92 BBC WAC, Reading, England.

9 J. Grenfell Williams, Head of the Colonial Service (15 March 1949). Correspondence to Controller of Talks, "Mrs. Horton's Note on "talks on the Colour Bar,". Reference number R51/92, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

10 According to a report from the United States Information Agency dated July 1, 1954 that listed radio sets for the Western Hemisphere before the war. Reference number E3/981, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

11 Richards, Yvette (1999). Gender and anticommunism in the international labor movement: the Pan-African connections of Maida Springer. *Journal of Women's History*. Volume: 11, 35-61.

12 Swanzy, H. (1949) *Caribbean voices-Prolegomena to a West Indian culture*. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 1.1:21-8.

13 In Walmsley, A. (1992) *The Caribbean artist's movement, 1966-72*. London: New Beacon Books, the author discusses collaborations among Black intellectuals throughout the 1930s and beyond. The BBC program *Caribbean Voices* is discussed as a vehicle for these and other efforts in Donnell, Alison and Lawson, Sarah, eds. *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. New York: Routledge: 1996, 215.

14 Dabydeen, Cyril (1994). *Where doth the Berbice Run*. *World Literature Today*, Volume: 68, 451-456.

15 From a script for "Calling the West Indies: We See Britain," 6th January, 1949 from 23.15-23.45 GMT. Reference number R51/92, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

16 Bennett's booking forms for the program were requested and signed by Kenneth Ablack and Henry Swanzy. The first contract on her files mentions 'West Indian Guest Night' on 24th October 1950 and the last one on 20th June 1951. The programme went out on the Overseas (regional) programme at 11.15 p.m. and finished at 11.45 p.m. Reference number RCont1, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

17 From a script for "Calling the West Indies: We See Britain," 6th January, 1949 from 23.15-23.45 GMT. Reference number R51/92, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

18 From a letter written to Director - Further Education Television Dianne Farris from Ceri Peach, The School of Geography, University of Oxford; Manfield Road, Oxford. 7 February 1966. Reference number R51/92, BBC WAC, Reading, England.

19. Draft Script for 'Race and Colour: A scientific introduction to the problem of Race Relations.', T32/209/1, BBC WAC, Reading, England..

20. Ibid.

21 From Audience Research Department. "A Viewer Research Report for 'Race and Colour: A scientific introduction to the problem of Race Relations.'" British Broadcasting Corporation, Produced by James Bredin. 26/11/52. Reference number VR/52/513. BBC WAC, Reading, England.