

Recruitment, Race and Transnational Resistance: Prewar developments and BBC Radio

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This paper provides an historiographic account of how radio programming directed toward West Indies audiences in the 1930s and beyond, represented the looming crisis of WWII, and subsequently hailed the support and involvement of ‘Colonials’ troops. While original archival documents indicated a liberalist desire by BBC management to provide programming that called upon subjects to help fight the *People’s War*, these broadcasts ultimately led West Indian radio producers to use the programs as a platform for notions of black Britishness, and citizenship. These efforts often circumvented the organization’s emphasis upon Empire and colonial solidarity, and drew instead upon ethnic pride and place.

Beginning in 1939, *Calling the West Indies* featured troops on active service reading letters on air to their families back home in the Islands. Authors, servicemen, teachers and others who visited or lived in England discussed their personal experiences and views on Britishness for the benefit of island audiences, including those considering enlistment or immigration. The BBC situated these segments within programs they ultimately controlled; yet guests and producers used these sites as locations for communiqué packed with intrinsic value for hopeful citizens; citizens who developed strong transnational ties to both home countries. Each program’s live broadcast constructed individual notions of empire while highlighting discourses of belongingness, and citizenry, particularly in regard to the war effort.

Within the context of this paper, the advent of broadcasting services in the Colonies, as discussed in a 1937 report from the Colonial Office to the BBC and other governmental agencies, was intended as a useful tool for education and a reinforcement of empire. In a memo and report to E.B. Bowyer of the Colonial Office, J.B. Clark, then Director of Empire Service, provided brief biographical notes on those authoring the report; people with whom the BBC had contact ‘in relation to broadcasting in the West Indies.’ In that next year, the group completed an *Interim Report on a Committee on Broadcasting Services in the Colonies* for the Colonial Office to justify this effort. Radio programs were soon created by producers Una Marson and Moultrie Kelsall, and broadcast from production centres based in London; targeting West Indian audiences in Jamaica, Barbados, and other islands.

However, these programs went beyond the well meaning, yet paternalistic narrative of what England meant from a white Briton’s perspective, and instead provided a platform for West Indian troops to discuss life among white Britons. Beginning in the 1930s until the reappearance of BBC television after the war, the intentions, aspirations, and concerns of West Indian troops were conveyed to radio listeners. This included self-reflexive analyses of social issues such as the colour bar, in a country where one did not supposedly exist, and perspectives on life in England. While it is unlikely that these insightful, yet potentially disruptive perspectives were the intent of the corporation, and surely not Sir John Reith’s, the opinions expressed drew from a post-colonialized, yet liberalist notion of what life within the United Kingdom could, and perhaps would be. Discussions reflected those men and women of colour involved in the military during

WWII, offering their demonstrative appropriations of Britishness, while collapsing binary constructs of the colonized other and those considered true Britons: white, Christian, conservative, and the true owners of the title 'British' (Paul 1997). Communities, bound by duty, helped to reinforce the imperial presence in manner most intertextual, as West Indians Una Marson, Sir Learie Constantine, and Ulric Cross broadcast messages of commitment and involvement over BBC radio, documentary film (Webster, 2005). As suggested by Hilmes, radio clearly lent itself to an 'association with ideas of nation' and 'national identity', in this case a nation other than America (Hilmes, 1997). However, British nationality and a guarded acceptance of the wartime West Indian presence in England created a different consideration; yet, this very same measure of community allowed spaces within the author function of BBC radio programming to fill with varying ideologies and intentions not originally recognized within the traditional constructs of Britishness or, perhaps, BBC broadcast policy.

Current studies of Transnationalism highlight the importance of the contemporary information society and its global consortiums of transnational corporations, western governments, and technocrats. Surveyed are the usage of satellites, the internet, and other televisual links through international communication systems; as are policy issues that criticize the First World's mass communications monopolies. Transnationalism has surely had a huge economic and intercultural effect upon multiple audiences, and touted as an ideological site for immigrants and ethnic groups to negotiate power and agency. Through a re-examination of globalization, transnationalism encourages efforts toward the deconstruction of nationalism, and subsequent naming of citizenry. Transnationalism has also historically signaled changes in migratory efforts by varying ethnic groups. Whereas migration studies have often discussed issues of departure from the imagined homeland to the utopic Promised Land, transculturalism and Transnationalism highlight movement back and forth between social spaces; particularly through transportation sources and more contemporary telecommunication technologies.

Historically, however, this paper examines how BBC radio and its practices created transnational possibilities for West Indian audiences of these programs, and the recognition of African Caribbean voices. West Indian troops changed the foci and intention of these shows, and began to offer varied, personal perspectives on life in England and the war effort. While this portion of the study does not seek to research exhaustively the BBC's influence within the Caribbean, it does attempt to provide a framework for how broadcast policies for BBC radio at a time of crisis engaged and empowered the presence of African Caribbeans subjects.

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