

**“This is London calling the West Indies:”  
Henry Swanzy, the BBC, and the development of Caribbean literature**

**Glyne Griffith**

(Do not quote or paraphrase without requisite citation)

## **Introduction**

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Let us begin near the end, that is to say the end of the BBC *Caribbean Voices* radio program. The end would eventually come in April, 1958, but there is much to be told and much to be written before we arrive at an ending. The year is 1953 and Henry Swanzy, the editor of the BBC *Caribbean Voices* literary radio program sends a letter dated November 27<sup>th</sup> from his Oxford Street office in London to his submissions agent, Gladys Lindo in Jamaica. The letter seeks Mrs. Lindo's advice on the appropriateness of editorial comments which Swanzy intends to make during the next scheduled summary of the previous six months of *Caribbean Voices* broadcasts to the Caribbean. The following extract indicates some of the concerns which Swanzy conveys to Mrs. Lindo:

...On wider details, I am thinking of referring in the next summary to the death of Seepersad Naipaul, and to the illness of Sam Selvon, and the failure to send [Derek] Walcott to Europe. The last two would be critical remarks, and perhaps you think they would not be suitable in a thing like a summary. It does seem to me that the powers-that-be ought to be made aware of the value of literary work, from the prestige point of view, and the neglect of West Indian writers is really shocking... I might also refer... to the arrest of Martin Carter in Guyana, one poet who was never a contributor [to *Caribbean Voices*].<sup>1</sup>

In her December 10<sup>th</sup> reply, Gladys Lindo agrees that these concerns and references are well-founded and Swanzy includes these comments in his next editorial summary of the program. The following year, 1954, Swanzy learns that Oxford University has received a gift of 30,000 for Colonial Studies from the Carnegie Foundation, and he writes to Margery Perham of Nuffield College, Oxford in an attempt to procure funding for *Caribbean Voices* and its writers.

...The reason for my writing is that I learned yesterday from Arthur Creech Jones who was doing a broadcast that the latest gift to Oxford has been 30,000 from Carnegie for

Colonial Studies. He also told me that you said that the authorities did not quite know what they were going to do with it.

I wonder therefore, if you would be prepared to consider doing something to help creative writers in the West Indies particularly, but to some extent in Africa as well?<sup>2</sup>

In the letter to Ms. Perham, Swanzy states that the BBC *Caribbean Voices* allowance of 1,500 per year is inadequate to help sustain, for example, promising writers from the Caribbean such as Samuel Selvon who is trying to get a London flat for himself, his wife and their child, all recently recovered from a prolonged illness. He states that this sum is too little to help young Derek Walcott who is looking to travel to England, and that it is too paltry a sum to help Eric Roach in Trinidad and Wilson Harris in Guyana. It is inadequate, he continues, to help out a young Trinidadian student named Vidia S. Naipaul who is studying at Oxford University.

I have begun this exploration of *Caribbean Voices* with a glance at its later years in order to suggest a narrative journey which is retrospective and thus takes advantage of the benefit of hindsight, but which is also squarely in the present moment of Caribbean literary achievement and consolidation. In our journey back to the beginnings of this literary radio program which had its birth on March 11, 1943 and was broadcast until April, 1958, we are simultaneously journeying through vitally important, developmental years of Caribbean literature.

Una Marson, a Jamaican writer and social activist, conceived the idea for the program, and nurtured it through its first five years of existence. However, it was Henry Swanzy who, more than any of the program's other editors, influenced its direction and development. He was the program's editor for eight of its total fifteen years of existence, having taken over after Marson's return to Jamaica, and I have begun this narrative journey with excerpts from two of Swanzy's letters because they demonstrate, *inter alia*, his commitment to Caribbean writers and their writing at a time when there was often more skepticism and disinterest than sustained support.

Thus, this story of *Caribbean Voices* is also the story of Henry Swanzy and his commitment to Caribbean literature and Caribbean writers. It is also, as we shall see, the story of friendships, collaborative efforts and steadfast faith in the promise of literary achievements to come, even in the face of discouraging and at times hostile responses to such faith. It is a story of the intertwining technologies of radio and writing and the complex ideological tensions between empire and colony, but for the most part, it is the story of the early years of anglophone Caribbean literature, its nurture and development, and its experiments in self-definition and authenticity.

Part of what I hope to delineate in this narrative is a sense of the value of *Caribbean Voices* and Henry Swanzy's contribution to the development of Caribbean writers and writing, not only in terms of their material sustenance and the "marketing" of their work via the medium of BBC radio, but also in terms of the aesthetic shape taken by the developing literature, partially as a result of Swanzy's literary perspective and editorial vision. Henry Swanzy and the BBC *Caribbean Voices* program contributed much more to the development of Caribbean literature than is generally acknowledged. Here for example, is George Lamming's acknowledgement of one aspect of Swanzy's contribution to the development of Caribbean writing:

Our sole fortune now was that it was Henry Swanzy who produced 'Caribbean Voices.' At one time or another, in one way or another, all West Indian novelists have benefited from his work and his generosity of feeling. For Swanzy was very down to earth. If you looked a little thin in the face, he would assume that there might have been a minor famine on, and without in any way offending your pride, he would make some arrangement for you to earn. Since he would not promise to 'use' anything you had written, he would arrange for you to earn by employing you to read.

No comprehensive account of writing in the British Caribbean during

the last decade [1950] could be written without considering his whole achievement and his role in the emergence of the West Indian novel.<sup>3</sup>

Lamming credits Swanzy's efforts regarding material sustenance, something that is so easily overlooked when the critical focus is primarily, if not exclusively aesthetic, and yet any artist knows that such base pre-requisites as material sustenance, a literal 'room of one's own' is absolutely critical if the imaginative and the creative is to be sustained, developed and promoted. But Lamming also goes beyond literal sustenance when he indicates that no "comprehensive account of writing in the British Caribbean during the last decade could be written without considering his [Swanzy's] whole achievement and his role in the emergence of the West Indian novel."<sup>4</sup> Thus the issue turns not only to material sustenance, but to creative and aesthetic concerns relevant to the emergence of the West Indian novel.

Indeed, Swanzy's work with the nascent Caribbean literature demonstrated his great and abiding concern with aesthetic issues, and his early call for literary contributions from the Caribbean which possessed "local color" was not indicative of a superficial, colonialist desire for the literary equivalent of tropical exotica. When Swanzy received, for example, a copy of Derek Walcott's self-published, first collection of poems entitled 25 Poems which was sent to him by Frank Collymore in Barbados, who had himself received them from Harold Simmons of St. Lucia, he wrote to Collymore in Barbados and the submissions agent, Gladys Lindo in Jamaica, praising the young Walcott's craft. Certainly some of Swanzy's comments in this letter to Mrs. Lindo ring prophetic now as a consequence of hindsight:

Dear Mrs. Lindo:

... You will know what I think of Derek Walcott from the recent broadcast – I was advised to remove the substantive "genius" but I certainly agree that he is much the most gifted of all those writing verse known to me. I am sending the volume to Roy Fuller later, perhaps for a serious criticism. Incidentally, it is inscribed to "E.L. Edmett, for use in *Caribbean Voices*" ... I gather that this misdirection was due to Harold

Simmonds, who visited this country recently but did not call on me. I am sorry, because

I would like Walcott's autograph, which I think may well become valuable later on...<sup>5</sup>

On yet another occasion, Swanzy communicates his praise to George Lamming for a recently published In the Castle of My Skin (1953).

He says:

...I think it is masterly...All in all, however hard I try, I find it difficult not to make high claims silently for this first full-length achievement of yours. The judgement runs so strong and clear.

If you go on as you have begun, I feel it is possible that you may play a part in causing people to strike many of the camps of the world and march on into a new and quite different order of experience.<sup>6</sup>

Swanzy's readings were generally critical and demanding, but when he encountered work that he believed bespoke excellence and promise, he was pleased to offer judicious praise and meaningful support. We might contrast his attempts at judiciousness and balance in critical activities with some other commentaries of the day. Here in contrast is Eric Coddling's (Eric Coddling was the pseudonym adopted by Cedric Lindo, Jamaican journalist and literary critic and husband of Gladys Lindo) response to Lamming's first novel as conveyed to Swanzy by Gladys Lindo:

...passed it on to Eric Coddling who read it through but found it tedious. In a review he has done he says that there are scores of good passages and ideas which one can quote but the whole doesn't add up to an enjoyable book – says he is fond of children but there is a limited time he is prepared to spend with them, but the author doesn't seem to be of the same mind.<sup>7</sup>

In another letter in November that same year (1953), Gladys Lindo herself says to Swanzy,

“...George Lamming's book, I see, has appeared in America. It got a very good review in Time – not that I always agree with their literary critics...<sup>8</sup>

But it was not just Lamming's early work which seemed to garner praise from a Henry Swanzy, abroad in London while eliciting much less generous commentary from an Eric Coddling at home in the Caribbean. Frank Collymore, the editor of Bim in Barbados and the nurturing "godfather" of much literary talent within and beyond the shores of his island home, lamented to Swanzy on several occasions, his concern with a local intelligentsia which seemed at best ungenerous towards the work of several Caribbean writers whom Collymore believed to be genuinely gifted and creative. This lament from Collymore was also at times a cry of threatening despair regarding the continued publication of Bim magazine. Here, for example, is Collymore commiserating with Swanzy about a lack of critical openness and generosity, as he perceived it, among several local critics:

Dear Henry,

Thank you for your very welcome and encouraging letter of January 11. I write "encouraging" because your comment on Bim 15 has been practically the only word of encouragement I have received since its publication. I cannot remember if I told you, but [Neville] Connell in the Advocate wrote such an adverse criticism of the contents that I almost began to wonder if it was worthwhile continuing. His criticism was for the most part of such a nature that it could easily be refuted, but it gives an indication nevertheless that the "intelligentsia" in Barbados are still far too conservative in their literary outlook to think that anything of remotest consequence can originate in the Caribbean.<sup>9</sup>

Among the writers included in Bim (Vol.4 No. 15) who fell victim to Connell's review were Samuel Selvon and Derek Walcott as well as George Lamming.

Regarding a Trinidadian character in one of Selvon's narrative sketches, Connell indicates that *vraisemblance* is compromised in the sketch because "no one who would listen to Chopin and be capable of propounding a metaphysical theory would... speak so ungrammatically." Commenting on Lamming's poem "Swans," Connell states that "swans are not imperturbable since they are so easily disturbed" and that "aristocratic cannot be applied to

the sky since the word is applicable only to a class of persons.” Finally here, he says of Walcott’s poem “Sambo,” that it is “unintelligible – the writer should make use of a rhyming dictionary.”<sup>10</sup> But if Connell, for example, would question Walcott’s use of rhyme, Cedric Lindo in Jamaica would wonder about the poet’s use of syntax:

There are some passages I like in this latest lot of Derek's work...  
But I am now inclined to agree with his English professor who claims that Derek does not know the meaning of words. In the poem 'The Coming Easter' he speaks of 'anger of bannaret and drum' and I am sure he believes that 'bannaret' is a kind of banner but I have not had time to straighten this out with him. Similarly in 'Choc Bay' he speaks about 'errand' tides when he must mean 'errant.' He also says that he has written you 'an exhausting letter.' I trust he means 'exhaustive' but, of course, he may really mean what he has written...<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to observe that Swanzy defends Walcott’s syntax, albeit diplomatically, in a letter to Gladys Lindo as he had earlier (and would continue to do on several other occasions) offered critical insight and well-appreciated support to Frank Collymore’s efforts with Bim. In his response to Lindo, Swanzy says:

...I did not like all the poems by Walcott, and agree with you about the loose using of words, although I must admit that I thought “banneret” meant a small flag myself, and even go so far as to think that Yeats did too!

With Banneret and Pennon,  
And the outrageous cannon'  
To bundle time away,  
Till the night come.<sup>12</sup>

These contrasts speak, *inter alia*, to the irony of the colonial situation and a cultural and social dynamic which did not always allow for particular attitudes and

sensibilities to be predictably located where one might expect to discover them. This is perhaps, given the nature of irony, as it should be. But the contrasts might also lead us to ponder the question of support, material and creative, during this critical phase of the development of anglophone Caribbean literature, and such thoughts lead, I believe, to the significant role played by Henry Swanzy and *Caribbean Voices*.

In considering the importance of Swanzy's role as editor, and the value of the fifteen-year program to the development of Caribbean literature, it is useful to look at extant literature on the subject. If, as Lamming suggests, a comprehensive account of anglophone Caribbean writing and the development of the Caribbean novel in English might benefit from an assessment of Swanzy's role and, by extension, the role of *Caribbean Voices*, what significance do comprehensive accounts of the literature attribute to the program and Swanzy's editorship. In terms of the West Indian novel, we might usefully begin by looking, for example, at Kenneth Ramchand's seminal work, The West Indian Novel and its Background. In this early critical work, first published in 1970, Ramchand alludes to Lamming's comment in The Pleasures of Exile about the response to *Caribbean Voices* broadcasts back home in the English-speaking Caribbean:

From Barbados, Trinidad, Jamaica and other islands, poems and short stories were sent to England; and from a London studio in Oxford Street, the curriculum for a serious all-night argument was being prepared. These writers had to argue among themselves and against the absent English critic. It was often repetitive since there were no people to talk with. The educated middle class had no time for them; and the dancing girls in the Diamond Horse Shoe simply didn't know what it was all about.<sup>13</sup>

The concern of these aspiring writers was thus not only one of critical context, that is to say, the idea of being assessed by the colonizer's literary standards, but of perhaps equal importance, was also a concern with audience, a concern with having one's writing taken

seriously; ironic and problematic though it was to have that critical audience present in a BBC studio in London while one huddled around a radio at 7:30 pm. on a Sunday in Port-of-Spain, or Bridgetown, or Georgetown, it was nevertheless possible then, in part because of this program, to speak of having an audience, of having one's writing taken seriously.

The *Caribbean Voices* program provided such an occasion, as Lamming might say, for 'speaking,' for being taken seriously and indeed for hearing oneself and one's fellow aspiring writers from the anglophone Caribbean. However, beyond this brief reference to Swanzy and *Caribbean Voices*, by way of Lamming's comment, The West Indian Novel and its Background does not elaborate on the connections between Caribbean writing and the radio program. In another important work on this developmental period in anglophone Caribbean literature, Critics on Caribbean Literature, there is no explicit concern with this aspect of the development of the literature and Caribbean literary history. Similarly, there is no critical discussion of the program in The Islands in Between, the collection of essays credited with being the first published collection of critical essays (1968) devoted to an assessment of literature in the English-speaking Caribbean. The same is true of several other works which aim for some degree of comprehensive assessment of the development of prose fiction in the English-speaking Caribbean.<sup>14</sup>

Such cursory acknowledgement of the program's link to the development of Caribbean literature on the part of these works is not cited here in order to suggest any fundamental oversight or limitation in the comprehensiveness of their critical assessments, particularly regarding those texts that are more concerned with the synchronic aspects of literature than with its diachronic element. Rather, it is addressed in order to gauge, on one hand, the justness of Lamming's comment that no comprehensive assessment of anglophone Caribbean writing of the 50s and 60s could be written without considering the role of Swanzy and the program, by juxtaposing his view with that of other critical observers.

On the other hand, it is also broached in order to clear some critical ground for my own occasion for speaking, to enter into a renewed assessment of the historical and critical impact of the program on those early writers and their writing.

In other words, it is not that there have been no textual references, over the years since the program's birth and demise, to *Caribbean Voices* and its major editor, Henry Swanzy. Indeed, in Anne Walmsley's excellent study of the London-based Caribbean Artists' Movement of the mid 60s and early 70s, for example, she provides a concise overview of the BBC program and its function as part of the background against which CAM developed and flourished. Rather, it is that, thus far, there has been no comprehensive analysis of this program, no extensive examination of this significant part of Caribbean literary history, no critical assessment of *Caribbean Voices* and Henry Swanzy's influence on the developing literature beyond the relative brevity of a few journal essays and cursory historical overviews in texts devoted to other aspects of anglophone Caribbean literary history. This is the inadvertent gap in anglophone Caribbean literary history that this work seeks to fill.

In order to find critical references to *Caribbean Voices* which begin to provide somewhat more than a footnote or anecdotal reference to the program's existence and relative value to a developing Caribbean literature, we need to turn to Rhonda Cobham's article, "The *Caribbean Voices* Programme and the Development of West Indian Short Fiction: 1945-1958" as well as John Figueroa's essay, "The Flaming Faith of These First Years: Caribbean Voices."<sup>15</sup> Cobham's analysis provides some assessment of the nature and impact of the program, based on her review of several of the program's scripts, whereas Figueroa's critique tends to reflect his close involvement with Swanzy and the program, as well as his vivid sense of the critical tensions between editorial policies at home in the Caribbean and those abroad in London. Taken together, these two essays begin to provide us with a sense of the nature and function of the program and of its founding editor, Henry Swanzy.

As Cobham points out, the program which would become *Caribbean Voices* as reconfigured by Swanzy, was initially conceived by Jamaican journalist and poet Una Marson.

In the early 1940s, Marson organised a feature program for the BBC overseas service entitled, *Calling the West Indies*. Through the medium of BBC radio and this program, Caribbean servicemen based in London during WW II were able to maintain contact with relatives and friends back home in the Caribbean. After a brief while, as a result of Una Marson's interest and initiative, the program also began to include literary and cultural features from the Caribbean, and the stage was thus set for what would later become *Caribbean Voices*.

When Marson returned to Jamaica in 1945 as a consequence of illness, the BBC briefly employed English writer Mary Treadgold to take over the program that she had founded. After Treadgold's short stint as organiser of the feature program, BBC Overseas Service director, John Grenfell Williams contacted Henry Swanzy and asked him if he would be interested in becoming producer and editor of the program. Swanzy expressed an interest and agreed to take over responsibility for the broadcasts.

Cobham's synopsis of the program suggests that short-story writers more so than poets, benefitted most from the program, since as she indicates, there were already established journals such as Bim in Barbados, Kyk-Over-Al in Guyana and Focus in Jamaica, providing publication outlets for poetry, while prose fiction tended to have less widespread promotion. But we might juxtapose here, Lamming's comment that no comprehensive assessment of the development of the literature could be written without considering Swanzy's role in the emergence of the anglophone Caribbean novel. Thus it would appear that, certainly from Lamming's point of view, novelists as well as short story writers benefitted from Swanzy's work. When one considers further, the role that Swanzy played in offering support to Frank Collymore and Bim, for example, and the critical and other professional support offered by Swanzy at various times to poets such as Trinidad's Harold Telemaque, St. Lucia's Derek Walcott, Barbados's Kamau Brathwaite and others, it is conceivable that poets too benefitted as much as Caribbean short-story writers and novelists.

Indeed, a mutually beneficial relationship sprung up between the aforementioned journals and *Caribbean Voices*. The journals frequently provided resource material for the

*Caribbean Voices* program and the London-based radio program increased the regional exposure of these literary journals and their various contributors as a consequence of the regular and easy "reach" of the program's broadcasts to the English-speaking Caribbean. On a number of occasions, for example, Frank Collymore asked Swanzy to consider providing reviews on *Caribbean Voices* of this or that issue of Bim in order to help the sluggish sales of the literary magazine:

Dear Henry:

...Sales are slow. Indeed I was wondering whether *Caribbean Voices* would favour us with a review on this occasion. This might perhaps get things going. Can you?<sup>16</sup>

As Cobham goes on to point out, *Caribbean Voices* did play some valuable role in the early days of a developing Caribbean literature, even given the ironic and problematic nature of the colonial context which complicated the relationship between editorial policy and critical notions in London and creative experimentation and critical sensibilities in the Caribbean. As Cobham concludes:

...[D]uring its heyday, the programme had lived up to the highest ideals set for it by its first literary producer, Henry Swanzy, not least of all because of the latter's untiring effort. As his successor Naipaul put it, "He had given the programme form, he had discovered and encouraged the talents which are today so widely known; he had taste, a quality as rare, I feel, as the genuine creative ability."<sup>17</sup>

When we turn to John Figueroa's assessment of *Caribbean Voices*, we begin to see that, at least in Figueroa's reading of the colonial ironies, the limited and limiting metropolitan literary biases were not always to be found in the metropole, nor were empathetic Caribbean sensibilities always to be found in the Caribbean of the time. Figueroa, like Rhonda Cobham, argues for the importance of *Caribbean Voices* as a kind of outlet or literary clearing-house for a fledgling anglophone Caribbean literature, but he goes further than Cobham in suggesting that

the program not only benefited short-story writers, but developing poets as well. In addition, he elaborates on some of the ironic circumstances which the program not only revealed, but was able to undermine as a result of Henry Swanzy's resolve, to the ultimate benefit of Caribbean literature. Commenting on colonialism's hegemonic influence among several Caribbean-based critics of the period, Figueroa suggests that:

One is not dealing just with a general tendency of critics, but with special complicated Caribbean 'colonial' attitudes. Nothing better illustrates this than the fact that many people in the Caribbean felt that poetry on the BBC, even Caribbean poetry, should be read by English voices... Often critics appear to be criticizing individual readers, almost to be carrying out a vendetta, but when one looks more carefully, and observes who are strongly praised as readers, one cannot help noticing that they are either English or have very 'Oxford English' voices.... The very existence of *Caribbean Voices*, and particularly its mode of operation raised the whole question of the meaning and actuality of the metropole/periphery relationship: the relationship between London and the Caribbean.<sup>18</sup>

Swanzy, on the other hand, was quick to employ readers on the program such as Samuel Selvon, Pauline Henriques, George Lamming and other London-based Caribbean writers and artists. Indeed, an important part of his early critical sense of what contributed to the Caribbean's uniqueness, at least from a literary point of view, was language and the particularities of idiomatic expression. "It is certainly true that the dialect, the accent and the turn-of-phrase, the spoken language was extremely rich; I always remembered phrases such as, 'Their eyes made four.'<sup>19</sup> However, Swanzy's sense of what contributed to the uniqueness of literary submissions to the program was much more sophisticated and nuanced than mere interest in the putative strangeness of dialect and idiom.

In 1946, his first year as editor of the program, he sent a letter to Gladys Lindo in Jamaica, explaining his reasons for rejecting a number of the submissions which she had forwarded to him:

I am gradually working my way into the stockpile of *Caribbean Voices*, and now return various manuscripts which I do not think we should like to use. As you will see, they include several classes: patriotic poems, sweetly pretty poems...and finally the occasional exiles writing about conditions which have nothing to do with the Caribbean. On the whole, I think they all have something in common, and that is a complete absence of local colour. That seems to me to be the greatest crime in this series, unless of course the writer is a genius with a universal message.<sup>20</sup>

Swanzy intends much more than the mere use of local dialect and idiom when he refers to 'local colour.' His idea of the necessity of local colour in the submissions read on the program is linked to the artistic value of the truth of representation or *vraisemblance*, and simultaneously to the notion that any possibility of 'universal truth' which might be discovered in the work of the author's imagination is itself a by-product of the work's rootedness in the local and particular. In this early letter to Gladys Lindo therefore, Swanzy is already beginning to establish important criteria for the program, and he is clarifying some of his expectations for the program's submissions. His insistence on the 'local' would on several occasions run counter to what some Caribbean writers construed as appropriate 'grist' for their creative expression, and yet Swanzy's artistic vision was sufficiently catholic that many aspiring poets and novelists who were not part of an elite coterie of writers at home had their work read and criticised on the program in London. As John Figueroa indicates:

...[O]ne of the great contributions of *Caribbean Voices* was that it offered an outlet to all and sundry, as any full list of its contributors shows. And in doing this it executed an odd twist and inversion of what would then have been considered the proper metropole/periphery relationship.<sup>21</sup>

One effect of *Caribbean Voices* therefore, as a consequence of Henry Swanzy's editorial criteria and his sensibility as a critic of the developing literature, was that it served as an unintentional foil to what some aspiring writers in the anglophone Caribbean doubtless comprehended as the elitism and bourgeois snobbery of certain literary coteries in the region.

Where some such writers might possibly have had their literary efforts frustrated because of their “outsider” status at home, they were ironically being offered a chance at “insider” status as a result of a BBC radio program broadcast from London. Let us take a closer look, then, at the birth and development of this BBC program, and give some consideration to Henry Swanzy’s own sense of what he understood *Caribbean Voices* to be attempting.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Swanzy, letter to Gladys Lindo, 27 November 1953, Henry Swanzy Archive, Birmingham University Lib., U.K.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Swanzy, letter to Margery Perham, 14 July 1954, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>3</sup> George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984) 67.

<sup>4</sup> Lamming 67.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Swanzy, letter to Gladys Lindo, 21 March 1949, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Swanzy, letter to George Lamming, 20 April 1953, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>7</sup> Gladys Lindo, letter to Henry Swanzy, 4 May 1953, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>8</sup> Gladys Lindo, letter to Henry Swanzy, 11 November 1953, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Collymore, letter to Henry Swanzy, 29 February 1952, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>10</sup> Neville Connell, “Review of *Bim* Vol.4 No.15,” *Barbados Advocate* 20 Dec. 1951,: 4.

<sup>11</sup> John Figueroa, “The Flaming Faith of These First Years:*Caribbean Voices*,” *Tibisiri:Caribbean Writers and Critics*, ed. Maggie Butcher (Denmark:Dangaroo Press, 1989) 60.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Swanzy, letter to Gladys Lindo, 21 April 1952, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983) 71.

<sup>14</sup> See Gerald Moore, *The Chosen Tongue:English Writing in the Tropical World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), Michael Gilkes, *The West Indian Novel* (Boston:Twayne Publishers, 1981), Bruce King, ed., *West Indian Literature* (Hamden,Conn.: Archon Books, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Rhonda Cobham, “The *Caribbean Voices* Programme and the Development of West Indian Short Fiction: 1945-1958,” *The Story Must Be Told:Short Narrative Prose in the New English Literatures*, ed. Peter Stummer (Bayreuth: Konigshanson & Newmann, 1986)146-60.  
Figueroa, “The Flaming Faith of These First Years:*Caribbean Voices*,” 59-80.

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Collymore, letter to Henry Swanzy, 19 January 1950, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>17</sup> Cobham, "The *Caribbean Voices* Programme and the Development of West Indian Short Fiction: 1945-1958," 158.

<sup>18</sup> Figueroa, "The Flaming Faith of These First Years:*Caribbean Voices*," 61-63.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Swanzy, personal interview, 22 October 1992.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Swanzy, letter to Gladys Lindo, 13 August 1946, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>21</sup> Figueroa, "The Flaming Faith of These First Years:*Caribbean Voices*," 72.

## Chapter 1 Contending voices: the genesis of *Caribbean Voices*

Glyne Griffith

(Do not quote or paraphrase without requisite citation)

During the close of the 1930s, decades of labor exploitation in the Caribbean had pushed disenfranchised workers in several of the English-speaking territories to the breaking point. Strikes and labor uprisings occurred in Barbados, St. Vincent, Trinidad, St. Kitts, and St. Lucia. On May 1, 1938, this region-wide tension between workers and employers came to a head at the Frome sugar factory in Westmoreland, Jamaica.

Sugar conglomerate, Tate and Lyle had announced that the Frome plant would soon be hiring a significant number of workers, but then did not follow through. Hundreds of workers who had been constructing factory buildings went on strike, demanding a dollar a day in wages as they marched to the factory offices carrying sticks, stones and lengths of pipe. Soon they were joined by crowds of working people and by the curious. In the clash that followed between the desperate crowd and the armed police force which fired into the protesters, four people were killed and hundreds injured. Una Marson, the Jamaican poet, playwright, social activist and journalist was at the scene of this tragic clash, and over the next several days she wrote reports on the confrontation and its aftermath for the *Jamaica Standard* newspaper.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of her excellent reporting for the *Standard*, and as a consequence of the acclaim which Una Marson had already garnered in her homeland, as well as in London, her editor, William Makin suggested that she travel to London to report on the work of the Moyne Commission. This commission, under the leadership of Lord Moyne, had been established by Britain, on the heels of the great social unrest in the English-speaking Caribbean, to investigate the social and economic conditions in its troubled colonies. Thus began Una Marson's second sojourn in London, and it would eventually lead her to the BBC and to the start of what would become *Caribbean Voices*.

While in London, Marson met with the 1939 winner of the "Miss Jamaica" competition, Winnie Casserley, who was visiting London as part of her prize. When the "Miss Jamaica" winner was interviewed by the BBC, Una Marson, who had accompanied her as a journalist for the *Jamaica Standard* was also plied with questions, and this led to Marson being asked to do freelance work for the BBC program "Picture Page."<sup>2</sup>

Marson developed a good professional relationship with Cecil Madden, the producer of "Picture Page," and this would eventually be fortuitous for her career with the BBC and for the genesis of *Caribbean Voices*.

As Delia Jarrett-Macauley indicates:

...Una Marson kept in frequent contact with Cecil Madden, occasionally suggesting programme alterations for West Indian broadcasts...Grateful and impressed, Madden took up a number of her suggestions, forwarding them to his colleagues. Whenever possible he aimed to increase and improve the West Indian service, he told them in December 1940...

BBC broadcasts to the Caribbean region were abysmally few.

A detailed BBC memorandum written in 1929 had exposed the lack of facilities in the West Indies and colonial Africa and the discrepancy between this and the service to other parts of the empire. No attempt was made to serve the West Indies except on special occasions such as test matches, and therefore no in-house expertise existed.

With the outbreak of war therefore, the quandary troubling senior staff at the Empire Division responsible for West Indian programming was twofold. One issue was the delicate handling of British policy towards colonies where nationalist activism had been in ascendancy during the late 1930s – a political challenge also for the Ministry of Information under whose general influence the BBC now operated. The second, lesser consideration was the staffing of this section, bearing in mind financial and other managerial constraints, such as supervision.<sup>3</sup>

I have quoted Jarrett-Macauley at length here because her observations succinctly address two significant issues. The first is the suggestion that a developing concern with increasing BBC broadcasts to the anglophone Caribbean was not entirely devoid of political interest in the burgeoning nationalism and agitation for political independence in the region. That is to say, there must have been concern over how British policy might sensitively operate in the region, to the benefit of Britain's interests, particularly during a time of escalating war in Europe. The medium of radio could conceivably serve such interests in the region. At the same time, because no true in-house expertise regarding Caribbean cultural and social affairs existed within the BBC of the day, someone such as Una Marson represented the real possibility of advancing, to some degree, the interests of Britain's colonial subjects in the Caribbean from within the organisational structure of the BBC. Thus we glimpse the complex dialectic which would be part of the *Caribbean Voices* program from its inception and which would remain with the program and repeatedly energize it until its close in April, 1958.

Una Marson's work with BBC radio and the program which would evolve into *Caribbean Voices* began less auspiciously, perhaps, with broadcasts which permitted West Indian servicemen based in England, to send greetings to relatives back home in the Caribbean. As Jarrett-Macauley states:

She was invited to broadcast morale-boosting talks on West Indians and the war effort: 'The Empire at War and the Colonies' went out on 1 April 1940 and 'West Indians' Part in War' later that month. She ended one broadcast: 'I am trying to keep the flag flying for dear old Jamaica in my own way here and I am always in a rush as I used to be over there. Special love for you, my sisters.'<sup>4</sup>

The broader issue of "morale-boosting" in the ideological interest of empire and the war effort is wonderfully juxtaposed to Marson's nationalist sentiment regarding Jamaica, and the general and particular are thrown into cohabitation when she uses the powerful 'reach' of the BBC microphone to convey a very personal sentiment to her sisters in Jamaica. This juxtaposition provides a simple example of that constructive thesis-antithesis complex which would become commonplace in *Caribbean Voices* as it developed, and which would contribute to the framing of several significant concerns for early West Indian literature.

Marson's pioneering work with the BBC spanned the five-year period, from April, 1940 to December, 1945. She often operated under significant pressure, not merely as a result of the demands of the BBC bureaucracy, but moreso as a consequence of her several detractors who seemed intent on criticizing all that she attempted. The program to which she contributed was occasionally faulted for being too narrow in focus. For example, Mr. Minsall, the Information Officer for Trinidad and Tobago complained to Cecil Madden of the BBC that the program was not particularly liked in Trinidad because there was too much focus on Jamaica. In addition, there were other West Indians who tended to blame Marson for all the perceived shortcomings of the program.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these challenges, Una Marson dutifully carried on, and she was ardently supported in her efforts by John Grenfell Williams who was, at the time, the African Service Director of the BBC. Her activities in the West Indian Service led to an invitation to contribute to the poetry magazine series, "Voice" which was edited by George Orwell. She made two 'guest' appearances on this program which had been organized by Orwell under the auspices of the Indian Service, and Marson read poetry over the BBC airwaves with T.S Eliot, William Empson and several other literary figures. It was as a result of this experience that she soon devised a similar program, which she called *Caribbean Voices*, for broadcast to the English-speaking Caribbean. As Delia Jarrett-Macauley states:

*Caribbean Voices*, twenty-five minutes long, was first broadcast on BBC's West Indian service on 11 March 1943, with June Grimble as announcer and Cameron Tudor reading a short story by R.L.C. Aarons, 'Mrs. Arroway's Joe.' The following week the late-night broadcast displayed a wider range of Caribbean authors, including Neville Guiseppe of Trinidad, John Wickham, Barbadian short-story writer and later editor of the influential literary magazine *Bim*, and Ruth Horner, a Jamaican poet. The Jamaican literary journals, Edna Manley's *Focus* and the Poetry League of Jamaica's yearbook for 1940 were used as sources. Constance Hollar, the Jamaican poet and an acquaintance of Una's, who had died earlier that year, was the subject of the third programme.<sup>6</sup>

Thus did Una Marson discover the idea and give a name to the BBC program that would have a profound impact on West Indian writers and their writing for the next 15 years. Indeed, the program's first crucial years under Marson's editorship did not showcase as diverse a Caribbean literary landscape as would be revealed later when Henry Swanzy became editor of *Caribbean Voices*, but it must be remembered that those first five years spoke of particularly lean and difficult times. The ongoing war meant that Marson had fewer human and material resources to draw upon as compared with those which would reveal themselves in later years after Swanzy redesigned the program. In addition, as a result of the 'reach' of the program, Una Marson found herself in a position which increasingly demanded that she expand her knowledge of the Caribbean beyond the literary and cultural examples of her own Jamaica. Aware of this need to expand her knowledge of the region, she left London for a five-month sojourn in the Caribbean:

I felt that somehow I must leave London and come to the West Indies. I wanted to get away from the cold and the atmosphere of war, but more than anything else I wanted to come to the West Indies to meet as many people as possible to whom I had been speaking for nearly five years. I asked for permission to come, feeling very definitely that I could not go on broadcasting to you without learning about life in other islands of the West Indies I had not visited before.<sup>7</sup>

Sadly, soon after Marson's return to London, she found herself overwhelmed by the pressure of five months' travel throughout the Caribbean, and by her sense of isolation at the BBC. In addition, she became increasingly despondent as a consequence of the depression which had haunted her for years. After a brief period in a nursing home in the English countryside, she returned to Jamaica with poet, Clare McFarlane in April, 1946. This departure brought an end to her official relationship with the BBC and with the program she had been instrumental in establishing.

After it became clear that Una Marson could no longer carry on with the program, John Grenfell Williams had English writer, Mary Treadgold, organize the broadcasts for approximately three months until Henry Swanzy was invited by Williams to take responsibility

for “Caribbean Voices.” Treadgold had become an acquaintance of Marson’s during the latter’s five years with the BBC, and the two had become close enough that Treadgold was profoundly saddened by her illness and consequent departure from the BBC.

John Grenfell Williams became aware of Swanzy and his literary interests when he came across a long poem on the battle of Britain which the latter had submitted to the BBC. Swanzy had been employed as a producer in the BBC General Overseas Service in 1941, and had submitted this poem which received lukewarm praise from Cecil Day Lewis, writer and friend of poets, Auden and Spender. As Swanzy recalls:

...[Cecil Day Lewis said things which were justified, I think, but still he might have been a little less lukewarm about the poem. Thereafter, I never had sufficient confidence, as I didn’t get much encouragement, really, and I thought, perhaps out of a sort of empathy, that it would be nice to assist some of these writers from the West Indies if I could, because they didn’t get much help either, really.<sup>8</sup>

Henry Swanzy came to *Caribbean Voices* therefore, with literary interests, experience in broadcasting, and, perhaps most importantly, an empathy for aspiring writers who lacked encouragement and guidance rather than talent. In addition to all these, however, Swanzy also brought a developing interest in the Caribbean and its emerging literatures as a result of a work by Arthur Calder-Marshall which he had read. As Swanzy indicates:

...I mean, one had the idea of Glory Dead which one had read, and one also had the sort of ‘left-wing’ view of encouraging people who had had a raw deal, really... And my problem of course is that I come from Ireland, you see. I’m Irish, and although I left Ireland when I was five and never went back, or seldom did, one did have the feeling that what one wrote and was interested in was not the kind of thing that somebody like a Philip Larkin or a Gavin Ewart would write, really.<sup>9</sup>

Thus Swanzy implies that, out of the experience of his Irishness, and as a consequence of reading Calder-Marshall’s Glory Dead, he was able to imaginatively empathize with Caribbean writers seeking literary expression in their own particular colonial context. Perhaps if we briefly examine some of the salient aspects of Calder-Marshall’s Glory Dead, we might gain a better sense of what Swanzy characterized as his own “sort of ‘left-wing’ view” which he brought to the *Caribbean Voices* program in July, 1946. In addition, since Arthur Calder-Marshall would be brought in frequently by Swanzy to serve as a literary critic on the program, an examination of his own focus and sensibilities as represented in Glory Dead might also shed some light on the role he played as a critic of the emerging literature.

Glory Dead, with its title derived from a West Indian plantation song which cryptically proclaims that, “Glory dead when backra come/Glory dead/Glory dead when white man come,” was published by Michael Joseph Ltd. in 1939. It is an expatriate analysis of the historical and social tensions between the white, Trinidadian bourgeoisie of the 1930s, and the laboring classes in that island whose ancestry is linked to slavery and indentureship. Arthur Calder-Marshall sojourned in Trinidad and Tobago during the late 1930s, the period in the region which is marked by significant social upheaval and labor unrest. Writing and lecturing on unionization and related topics while in Trinidad, he clearly represented himself as deeply sympathetic to the cause of labor, and he concludes one section of his insightful travel-narrative with the following observation:

The struggle of the coloured worker will not be peaceful, because force will be used to suppress each effort towards greater responsibility, in the same way that force was used

in Trinidad and Barbados in 1937 and in Jamaica and British Guiana in 1938.

Commissions will be appointed as they have been in the past.

They will make recommendations, most of which will be ignored. But each time certain advances will be made...A new spirit has arisen among the workers. They have tasted freedom; they begin to know their power. And they intend to use that power, not as whites fear and perhaps like to think, for the stupid display of violence, but for the attainment of better education, better conditions of work and a higher standard of life.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, through the lens of Glory Dead, we begin to observe parallels between Calder-Marshall's ideological position and, for example, Una Marson's own focus on the downtrodden and disenfranchised in Jamaica. Marson was no longer at the BBC, and no longer a direct influence on the shape and direction of *Caribbean Voices*, but sensibilities and interests which were akin to hers would nevertheless be influential on the program as a result of individuals such as Arthur Calder-Marshall. In Glory Dead, Calder-Marshall writes with an economy of language which is concise, yet rich with imaginative description and incisive comprehension of the society and culture described. This is not to suggest that, as a 'cultural outsider' he was devoid of stereotypical readings of certain aspects of Caribbean reality. There is, for example, occasional evidence of a residual imperialist gaze in observations such as the following:

...For most creoles one day is not connected with the next in the construction of long-term purposes. To-day is a miraculous conception. This day is not born from the last and denies the parentage of to-morrow.<sup>11</sup>

However, his status as 'cultural outsider' meant that, despite the occasional pitfall resulting from the inevitable residue of the colonizer's gaze, he was able to bring a quality of disinterestedness to other aspects of social and cultural observation of Trinidadian society that would have been far more challenging for the 'cultural insider' to achieve. Writing about the complexities of social interactions in the context of racialized memory and the politics of class in Trinidad of the 1930s, for example, he observes that:

Mrs. Tournevant's great-grandmother was freed from slavery when she bore her master's bastard. As she talks to Mrs. Wilson, she is torn in two directions. Being seen talking to a white woman raises her prestige among neighbours and that gives her pleasure. But she knows that behind Mrs. Wilson's affability is contempt and maybe hatred. The pretence of equality is a mask for white superiority: it is like a millionaire wearing dungarees. She is being patronised and she is submitting to being patronised to gain caste with neighbours. So Mrs. Tournevant, laughing and smiling, hates Mrs. Wilson from West Kensington, and hates herself for talking to her.<sup>12</sup>

Such astute observation and grasp of what might be called the psychological 'fallout' from a long history of colonialism and institutionalized racism in the pre-independence Caribbean, would be crucial to a sophisticated comprehension of the cultural context out of which Caribbean literature would emerge. Using Glory Dead as a barometer of Calder-Marshall's social and critical insight into the state of affairs in the British Caribbean, therefore, it is feasible to argue that he sufficiently understood major aspects of the social and cultural climate of the day, to be of value to *Caribbean Voices* as it sought to successfully blend empathy with admonishment, and encouragement with disinterested, literary standards.

In addition to his general assessment of social and cultural attitudes in 1930s Trinidad, an assessment which I have been suggesting can provide us with a working knowledge of

Calder-Marshall's attitude towards an emerging Caribbean literature, *Glory Dead* also provides us with Calder-Marshall's sense of the writer's relation to society, and the relationship in art, between the particular and the universal. Commenting on one of his public presentations on art and society, given at the L'Ouverture hall in Port-of Spain, Calder-Marshall states:

I tried to describe the way literature springs from the relation of the author, with his gifts, to the society of his time, and the variations thus entailed between literatures of different countries and ages. I pointed to Alfred Mendes as a Trinidadian novelist who represented native qualities of the island. I deplored the local verse as derivative from the Victorian and Edwardian traditions of English literature and having no relation to the life of the island...I tried to explain...[t]hat universality is only achieved by particular definition of character. I tried to make plain that a great work of art could be enjoyed by a wide audience, but that it would only be a great work of art if it had its roots in the life and thought of a particular time and place.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Calder-Marshall's view of a literary work's 'universality' being subordinate to its rootedness in 'the life and thought of a particular time and place,' was complementary to Henry Swanzy's demand for 'local color' from the submissions forwarded to him from the Caribbean. Indeed, Swanzy and Calder-Marshall did not always agree in their respective analyses of the submissions sent to the BBC from the Caribbean, but they certainly shared what Swanzy referred to above, as the "sort of 'left wing' view of encouraging people who had had a raw deal."

Henry Swanzy would not actually travel to the Caribbean until March, 1952, when he visited Jamaica, and so he would come to depend on Calder-Marshall's travel-narrative, and then on his own intimate contact with West Indians such as George Lamming, Sam Selvon, Edgar Mittleholzer, Pauline Henriques and others who had settled in London, to provide him with a sense of Caribbean cultural reality. Although such exposure to Caribbean culture might be understood to be somewhat limited because it was dependent on an expatriate, textual interpretation of Trinidad and Tobago, on one hand, and personal interaction with transplanted West Indians, on the other, it was a significant exposure nevertheless.

As indicated earlier, Calder-Marshall's 'outsider' status in Trinidad provided him with a view of the society and its racial and class dynamics which would have been difficult for an 'insider' to achieve. In addition, his foreigner status allowed him access to both the upper and lower echelons of the society, a circumstance which would have been denied a Trinidadian of the lower classes, for obvious reasons, and a passage which would have been met with much skepticism from the lower classes, if an upper class local had sought the forthright interchange which Calder-Marshall managed to achieve with this group of persons.

At the same time, Swanzy's interaction with immigrants such as Lamming, Selvon, Henriques, and others who had come to London from the Caribbean to pursue careers in the arts, would have been characterized as much by these individuals' shared interests and experiences as colonial subjects in the heart of Empire, as by their national and cultural differences as Barbadians, Trinidadians, Jamaicans, etc. In this way, Henry Swanzy was arguably better poised than many at home in the Caribbean, at a time when nationalism was generally comprehended as the proper political response to colonialism, to bring a broad aesthetic sensibility and an informed regionalist, rather than narrow nationalist, artistic perspective to *Caribbean Voices*. Such a perspective would have positive consequences for the development of *Caribbean Voices* and, by extension, for the developing Caribbean literature. Having examined some of Swanzy's influences which derived from his Caribbean experience,

in a manner of speaking, let us consider some of the experiences and influences he had garnered from elsewhere.

Henry Valentine Swanzy was born near Cork, Ireland in 1915, but moved with his mother, Joan Frances Swanzy, to England just five years later in 1920 when his father, the reverend S. I. Swanzy died. He studied Modern History at Oxford, graduating in 1936 with first class honors in that subject. After graduation, he worked for three years as assistant principal on probation in the Colonial and Dominions Office, and then, in 1941, began his career with the BBC as a producer in the General Overseas Service. As a producer in the Overseas Service for five years, and with his acknowledged literary interests, combined with his academic achievement at Oxford, he was poised to be seen by his employers as a suitable replacement for Una Marson. He was chosen for the post by John Grenfell Williams, a writer and activist who was himself recruited as director of the BBC Colonial Service because of a book he had published:

John Grenfell Williams is worth mentioning in all of this.

He was an interesting figure at the BBC, a South African liberal who, in 1936, published a book called, I am Black: the Story of Shabala. It was a sort of early version of Cry the Beloved Country, though not quite as accomplished as that work. Anyway, Williams got a job as director of the Colonial Service through this book of his, really, and he read the long poem which I had submitted to the BBC, was aware of my literary interests, and so he offered me the position.<sup>14</sup>

With Una Marson's return to Jamaica, John Grenfell Williams recognised the value of having someone from the Caribbean who was similarly interested in literature and culture, and who was based in the region. Towards this end, he appointed Jamaican, Cedric Gale Lindo as Caribbean-based literary agent who could help encourage submissions to the program in London. Towards this end, Grenfell Williams established a BBC office in Kingston, Jamaica, and arranged for Cedric Lindo and his wife Gladys to function as regional editors.

Cedric and Gladys Lindo collected literary submissions sent to them from throughout the British Caribbean, and then forwarded those efforts they had approved to Swanzy in London. Twice each month they sent their selections to the BBC, and Henry Swanzy determined what would be broadcast.

Like Una Marson, Cedric Lindo was a journalist as well as a literary aficionado, well-known among Jamaica's literary elite for his involvement in local cultural events. He and his wife Gladys often collaborated in the decision-making process regarding the submissions they received. However, as the correspondence between the Kingston office and the London office reveals, Gladys rather than Cedric functioned as the official liaison between Caribbean-based contributors and Henry Swanzy in London.

Although Gladys Lindo rather than Cedric functioned as the official publicity agent in Jamaica, one frequently senses in much of her correspondence with Swanzy that she is conveying Cedric's opinion as much as she is speaking in her own voice. One senses this putative ventriloquism not merely on those occasions when, as observed earlier, she writes to Swanzy of Eric Coddling's response to Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin, but also on other occasions where neither the names Eric Coddling nor Cedric Lindo are invoked. She also frequently speaks on behalf of this or that select group of listeners in Jamaica, as she provides Swanzy with feedback on various broadcasts.

Clearly, some aspects of her function as an unofficial spokesperson for the Jamaican listenership are understandable, but on other occasions, it is not patently clear for whom Gladys Lindo speaks. At the same time, her correspondence with Swanzy suggests that she was not unaware of the authority she exercised as *Caribbean Voices*'s official representative in the Caribbean. In other words, Gladys Lindo's letters to Henry Swanzy are themselves a complex exercise in 'voice' and representation, a literary version, in a manner of speaking, of the more practical and at times contentious issue of who should read the literature on the radio program.

In a letter to Swanzy, dated November 10, 1947, for example, Mrs. Lindo writes: ...Incidentally, there were some very caustic remarks from my friends on the programme of the 2<sup>nd</sup> November. There was quite a large group listening – fourteen in all – and the opinion of the majority was that it was not only poor, but very poor.

I was unable to identify the story, as I missed the name and did not recognise it as one passed through this office.... The reader also was not good. I think it was Mr. [Gordon] Bell of Barbados. I appreciate that it is better to have West Indians reading in the programme, but suggest that if it is not possible to get a good West Indian reader, a good English one would be preferable.<sup>15</sup>

The complaints from Gladys Lindo's office regarding Barbadian reader, Gordon Bell, as well as Jamaican reader, John Figueroa are features of several of her letters to Swanzy over a one-year period, until, in June 1948, Swanzy expresses his firm commitment to keeping readers such as Figueroa on *Caribbean Voices* :

Dear Mrs. Lindo,

Far from 'sitting in a corner and weeping,' he [ie. Michael G. Smith, whose poetry John Figueroa had read on a broadcast] said that Figueroa read better than he could himself, and although he thought he was a little bit histrionic, he thought it was a very good performance. In this, I must say that we all agree over here, including Mr. Grenfell-Williams...

don't you think that the campaign of criticism in Jamaica may not be unconnected with the founding of a local poetry programme by the local poetry "ring" ?....

The long and the short of it is that we shall continue to regard Figueroa as our main poetic exponent, but we shall try to get more variation in readers, perhaps from some of the West Indian actors and others who are living in London. I still think it would be a pity if we went back to the BBC Repertory Company.<sup>16</sup>

The irony revealed in this disagreement between Gladys Lindo and Henry Swanzy is fairly obvious, but there are also subtler consequences which would derive from the disagreement over whose voice should be heard via the BBC airwaves. On one hand, we encounter the ironic situation of the BBC personnel in London desiring West Indian voices on *Caribbean Voices*, while the personnel in Kingston, or at least some of them, want English voices.

Indeed, in this matter of appropriate voice, one aspect which informed the view of some of the Jamaican personnel was class and the eccentric foibles which can perhaps befall all classes, but which so often seem to plague certain sectors of the bourgeoisie. Thus, as we have already noted in John Figueroa's critique of this situation,

“...when one looks more carefully, and observes who are strongly praised as readers, one cannot help noticing they are either English or have very ‘Oxford English’ voices....”<sup>17</sup>

Bourgeois colonial attitudes in the Caribbean appear to be informing some listeners’ responses to Caribbean readers in the BBC studios in London. At the same time, however, it is important to observe that Swanzy’s insistence on a Caribbean literature grounded in the particular, and expressive of ‘local colour,’ soon prompted submissions which employed the vernacular of specific territories for literary effect. Therefore, a Jamaican listener hearing a Barbadian reader attempting a Jamaican accent, or a Trinidadian listener hearing a Jamaican trying to represent the speech patterns of say, a Trinidadian taxi driver, would be immediately aware of the ways in which the poem or prose excerpt had been compromised by a flawed reading.

Such a challenge at the level of *vraisemblance*, exacerbated by radio broadcast because one actually hears the narrator’s or persona’s voice rather than imagines it, produced several results.

As West Indians such as George Lamming, Sam Selvon and others from different British colonies traveled to London in the 1950s to seek literary careers, they were of interest to Swanzy and the BBC not only because they were aspiring writers, although that was paramount, but also for their voices. Employment opportunities for readers on the program were thus expanded as more West Indians settled in England after the war. Simultaneously, Swanzy’s call for ‘local colour’ had the eventual effect of making writers pay closer attention to representing West Indian voice on the page.

Indeed, as Rhonda Cobham tells us, the early criticism of several submissions which employed vernacular left much to be desired. Cobham states:

The first story written completely and successfully in dialect to be broadcast was Samaroo Joseph’s “Taxi Mister” (1948), an ingenious reproduction of the non-stop harangue of a talkative taxi driver on the Port of Spain-San Fernando route.

The writer captures the style and timing of his loquacious persona and manages to give the whole piece the structure and implied characterisation of a good dramatic monologue. Yet the only critical comment the story attracts is that its appeal is limited because not everyone knows what travelling in a Trinidad taxi is like.<sup>18</sup>

Cobham goes on to suggest that during the program’s early years, such limited critical expertise regarding the use of vernacular in fiction, led few short-story writers to experiment with dialect beyond the direct speech of their characters. In many cases, as she suggests, even such direct speech was inappropriately rendered:

In “Carnival Aftermath” (1952) by Basil Balgobin, for example, three men arrive at a hospital, each thinking himself the father of a child born nine months after the carnival revelries.

The narrator tells us that he realises from the accents of the other two prospective fathers that they each come from a different West Indian island, but the reader/listener is not able to recognise this difference from the way in which the dialogue of the three men is reported.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these early failings, both in terms of the lack of critical expertise to assess the literary use of vernacular, as well as some writers’ flawed use of dialect, Swanzy’s call for writing which spoke of something particularly West Indian, led writers to focus on what Kamau Brathwaite would later call “nation language.” In addition, the regional

reach of the broadcasts challenged writers, who sought to make literary use of the vernacular, to pay keen attention, not only to their own 'nation language,' but to the vernacular of other territories as well. Failure to do so could easily lead to inadequacies at the narrative level.

These were significant considerations for the emergent literature, because the BBC program's particular circumstances helped to forge, at the literary and aesthetic levels, an early sense among the writers that Caribbean literature would be fundamentally concerned with the peculiarities of Caribbean vernaculars. Certainly, this situation may have developed organically, but what I want to suggest is that it was given impetus by Swanzy's focus on the Caribbean local and particular. It was also spurred on by listeners/writers in the Caribbean who were able to hear, via the BBC broadcasts, when the voicing on the page and over the microphone succeeded or failed. Laurence Breiner, for example, highlights the importance of this fortuitous circumstance for West Indian poetry which emerged during the period of *Caribbean Voices* :

It was a great piece of luck for the development of West Indian poetry that the cachet of metropolitan approval came first of all not in the form of publication by a British anthology or magazine (venues which would consciously or not have tended to encourage more exotic subject matter and less exotic language), but in the form of a radio program that made poets think about how their work would sound to a diverse West Indian audience listening at home.<sup>20</sup>

The BBC broadcasts helped to foster a sense of a developing Caribbean literature, not only because aspiring writers in one territory were able to hear the work of writers in other territories and thus take solace in the fact that each was not a single voice crying in a literary wilderness. The broadcasts also helped focus attention on the diversity of Caribbean vernaculars and thus drew attention to narrative form and poetic voice as much as content.

The program also helped to attenuate, at least at the literary level, a tendency toward insularity which had already existed in the region because of the geographical isolation of territories within the archipelago. When one considers further that the burgeoning nationalisms in the region would eventually seek more insularist than regionalist political perspectives as the British Caribbean undertook decolonization, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the writers' attention to regional vernaculars served to creatively attenuate some of the effects of this insular outlook.

John Figueroa draws our attention to some of the more beneficial effects of this 'marriage' of literature and radio in the mid-twentieth century Caribbean:

The other great source of influence which Caribbean Voices possessed is very easy to overlook or underestimate in this age of TV and satellites: it was a radio programme, a short wave radio programme. That would have been important anywhere, but it was pre-eminent in the Caribbean, where 1200 miles of sea separated Trinidad and Jamaica, and where communication was by infrequent ocean liners from North to East and South, or by regular schooner in the South. Short-wave radio really eradicated time and space. And Caribbean Voices brought together those who were interested from St. Lucia and Tortola and Guiana and Trinidad and Barbados and Jamaica in a way that nothing else, except cricket broadcasting, ever has. Furthermore, in a society not too well known for reading,

the spoken word, by way of radio, even when it was producing literature, had an impact that books would have lacked, except among the very few.<sup>21</sup>

As editor of *Caribbean Voices* for eight years, Henry Swanzy insisted upon writing which in his estimation touched some truth of representation by approximating *vox populi* rather than by attempting to echo *vox dei*. His editorship was not infallible, but it consistently grasped for that which was genuine and new in the developing literature rather than that which was cloaked in the raiment of calcified, bourgeois tradition and respectability. In this way and in several other ways, Henry Swanzy and *Caribbean Voices* provided early West Indian writers and their writing with a creative retreat, a literal and figurative support system, and a regional rather than a limited nationalist view of what Caribbean literature was poised to achieve. Indeed, he helped provide them with a 'room of their own.'

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<sup>1</sup> Delia Jarrett-Macauley, The Life of Una Marson: 1905-65 (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998) 137-9.

<sup>2</sup> Jarrett-Macauley 144.

<sup>3</sup> Jarrett-Macauley 146.

<sup>4</sup> Jarrett-Macauley 147.

<sup>5</sup> Jarrett-Macauley 152.

<sup>6</sup> Jarrett-Macauley 158.

<sup>7</sup> Jarrett-Macauley 167.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Swanzy, personal interview, 24 October 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Swanzy, personal interview, 24 October 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, Glory Dead (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1939) 239

<sup>11</sup> Calder-Marshall 35.

<sup>12</sup> Calder-Marshall 43.

<sup>13</sup> Calder-Marshall 148-9.

<sup>14</sup> Swanzy, personal interview, 24 October 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Gladys Lindo, letter to Henry Swanzy, 10 November 1947, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Swanzy, letter to Gladys Lindo, 23 June 1948, Swanzy Archive.

<sup>17</sup> Figueroa, "The Flaming Faith of These First Years: *Caribbean Voices*," 61.

<sup>18</sup> Cobham, "The Caribbean Voices Programme and the Development of West Indian Short Fiction: 1945-1958," 155.

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<sup>19</sup> Cobham 155-6.

<sup>20</sup> Laurence Breiner, Black Yeats: Eric Roach and the Politics of Poetry unpublished ms. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Figueroa, "The Flaming Faith of These First Years: *Caribbean Voices*" 72-3.