

# Una Marson at the BBC

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A much reproduced photograph from December 1942 shows the Jamaican poet and “Calling the West Indies” producer Una Marson broadcasting from a BBC studio in London. She is framed by leading literary figures of the day, including George Orwell, T. S. Eliot, Mulk Raj Anand, William Empson, and M. J. Tambimuttu.<sup>1</sup> It is an image that has rightly become synonymous with a once submerged network of relations between Anglo-American modernists, metropolitan institutions, and late colonial intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> Like the waves from a radio transmitter, the readers encircling Marson have come to signal a transatlantic circuit of connections that radiate beyond the photograph’s frame to encompass Britain, North America, India, and the West Indies. The image is iconic in two senses, both widely recognized and (because of this) increasingly passed over as symbolic shorthand for something else: cosmopolitan contact and collaboration in London. Meanwhile, the BBC employee occupying the focal point of this picture—head down, eyes lowered, seemingly at work—remains something of an enigma. Centered and well lit she may be, yet Marson’s years at the corporation and the contexts precipitating her departure persist as the subject of “some speculation.”<sup>3</sup> Focusing on Marson’s professional career and daily interactions at the BBC alongside internal, metropolitan, and

1 The photograph, taken in December 1942 (see page 3), first appeared in an issue of *London Calling* (no. 175: 22), the overseas journal of the British Broadcasting Corporation, advertising programs for the week of 14–20 February 1943.

2 See, for example, Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Hounds Mills, UK: Palgrave, 2002); C. L. Innes, *A History of Black and Asian Writing in Britain, 1700–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Sukhdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: HarperCollins, 2003); Anna Snaith, “‘Little Brown Girl’ in a ‘White, White City’: Una Marson and London,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 27, no. 1 (2008): 93–114; and Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

3 Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life of Una Marson, 1905–65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998), 175.

West Indian reactions to it, this essay argues that forms of competition, as much as contact and collaboration, characterized Marson's tenure at the corporation and that these rivalries reveal distinct tensions and fault lines at play in the projection of a West Indian diasporic community from London during World War II.

Critics have recently proposed that competition played a key constitutive role in structuring relations between black Atlantic artists and white metropolitan intellectuals at the midcentury.<sup>4</sup> Peter Kalliney's sense that these rivalries "are expressed most emphatically at an organizational or institutional level, where black players and artists are nominated as representatives of marginalized constituencies," speaks volumes in the case of Marson, who was regarded by many as a pioneer at the BBC, both as a woman and as a black West Indian.<sup>5</sup> One of the first "coloured" employees within a corporation of almost five thousand staff, Marson often became by default a spokesperson for the entire anglophone Caribbean. We will see that when her role was contested, it was typically on the grounds that her programs were unbalanced or not representative of either the region, or racial makeup, of the West Indies. What follows is a story of ongoing disputes and struggles in which Marson found herself competing with fellow West Indians, with her BBC colleagues, and with the patriarchal structures that would pit both men and women against her.

However, Marson's years at the BBC during the 1940s were distinct in other respects from the 1950s scene that is Kalliney's focus. For one thing, the BBC's Third Programme, which he notes allowed black Atlantic artists to provisionally elevate themselves into the upper echelons of high (and in Kalliney's reading, modernist, or proto-modernist) cultural production was only introduced after the Second World War, just days before Marson's departure. As Kalliney notes, the forms of "aesthetic autonomy" elite cultural programming made available, and which allowed the likes of George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, and Andrew Salkey to negotiate some of "the effects of a racially segregated field," were not so readily available to Una Marson.<sup>6</sup> While she tends to be remembered for her literary contributions at the BBC, as the architect of *Caribbean Voices* or indeed as the figure in the photograph of Marson beside Eliot and Orwell, the overwhelming majority of her work at the corporation involved producing and compering "variety"-style entertainment programs that entailed forms of collective rather than individual expression and therefore were expected to be equitable and representative rather

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism and Postwar London* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013); Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*; and Malachi MacIntosh, *Emigration and Caribbean Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*, 26. In a letter to Andrew Salkey, 17 November 1965, *pioneer* is the word George Lamming chose to sum up Una Marson's career following her death (Andrew Salkey Collection, British Library). Women producers before 1939 included May Jenkins and Kathleen Garscadden (*Children's Hour*), Janet Quigley (*Talks*), Marjorie Wace (*Empire Talks*), Mary Hope Allen (*Drama*). Hilda Matheson was director of *Talks* in 1926.

<sup>6</sup> Kalliney's argument is not simply that aesthetic autonomy resolved actually existing institutional prejudices in the 1950s; rather, it was precisely the endurance of a racially segregated field that explains the appeal of aesthetic autonomy to black artists in particular, because it was through autonomy that "the racial hierarchies prevalent in all other aspects of social life were temporarily suspended" (*Commonwealth of Letters*, 12).



Una Marson on the set of *Voice*, a monthly BBC radio magazine program broadcasting modern poetry to English-speaking India. Seated, left to right, Talks broadcaster Venu Chitale; editor of *Poetry London* M. J. Tambimuttu; Anglo-American modernist poet T. S. Eliot; poet, playwright, and BBC producer Una Marson; Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand; BBC announcer Christopher Pemberton; and BBC music producer Narayana Menon. Standing, left to right, British novelist, journalist, and BBC producer George Orwell; Orwell's secretary, Nancy Barrett; and English literary critic William Empson. December 1942. © BBC (BBC copyright material reproduced courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved.)

than autonomous or idiosyncratic. Similarly, her morale-boosting programs on the war effort had to be carefully balanced and “acceptable to both sides.”<sup>7</sup>

More broadly, the BBC’s unique position as a publicly funded broadcaster with relative autonomy from government meant that the production values of balance, impartiality, and objectivity—which took on an almost mythic resonance during wartime when broadcasting was pitted against German “propaganda”—had their own part to play here. Autonomy was an overdetermined value at the BBC during Marson’s time, attached as much to the professional and pragmatic media codes of broadcasting as to modernist aesthetics. I argue that ironically, and unwittingly, these tacit editorial codes of independence, fair play, and autonomy enshrined at the BBC would serve to shore up rather than mitigate the political status quo, including the prevailing racial hierarchies of the period. In other words, and under circumstances different from those compellingly described by Kalliney, autonomy at the BBC for Marson served to reaffirm, rather than provide potential “release” from, the straightjacket of race.

Drawing on a range of unpublished archival sources, including files vetted and released for research since the publication of Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s authoritative biography in 1998, my aim is twofold: First, to recover in greater detail and in more holistic terms than has previously been possible the story of Marson’s working relationships at the BBC between 1939 and 1946.<sup>8</sup> Second, to explore the history of what the director of Empire Services described as “jealousies,” “dissentions,” and “rivalry” that Marson’s appointment provoked during a relatively neglected period of black metropolitan cultural production in the early 1940s. The photograph of Marson above was one of a number of images of the poet put into circulation by the BBC during the early 1940s: in *London Calling*, *Picture Post*, and the *Listener*, and in the documentary film *West Indies Calling*.<sup>9</sup> Together, these images would have signaled an imagined community distinct from the (diasporic) one now familiar to contemporary scholars. “Friendliness” was what the African Services director called the “life-blood” of programs like “Calling the West Indies,” and Marson was heralded by the BBC—“one of us”—when her appointment was publicized in the BBC’s *London Calling* magazine.<sup>10</sup> By bringing Marson into its fold, the BBC was building on its wider hegemonic mission to embrace empire at the brink of decolonization. One of the main ambitions of the Empire Service in this respect was to provide an “indispensable girdle” that could hold together the British Empire at a time when it looked increasingly likely to fall apart.<sup>11</sup> The images of Marson mirrored, in this context, the

<sup>7</sup> Jarrett-Macauley, *Life of Una Marson*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> “Left Staff: Una Marson,” British Broadcasting Corporation Written Archive Center (hereafter BBC WAC), file L1/290/1, was vetted and declared open for research on 7 March 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, in addition to the photograph of Marson here, “Una Marson Joins the BBC Staff,” *London Calling*, no. 80, 13–19 April 1941, 13; “At the B.B.C. Canteen,” *Picture Post*, 27 November 1943, 20; “The Story of Jamaica,” *Listener*, 27 July 1939, 166; and *West Indies Calling* (Rotha Productions, 1943).

<sup>10</sup> “Una Marson Joins the BBC Staff”; John Grenfell Williams, “Broadcasting to the Colonies,” *BBC Yearbook 1946* (London: BBC, 1946), 92.

<sup>11</sup> See Tahj Hole, “Indispensable Girdle of the Commonwealth,” in *BBC Yearbook 1946* (London: BBC, 1946), 84. The girdle image comes from the BBC’s first director-general, John Reith (see *Broadcast over Britain* [1924]), who was in turn echoing William Shakespeare’s Puck.

BBC's own projected self-image as "a microcosm of the Empire itself."<sup>12</sup> Accounts of the "people's war" of 1939–45, with its popular democratic narratives of commonality across class and gender, need to be read in this context alongside what Wendy Webster terms the "people's empire": "A wartime empire that pulled together across differences of race and ethnicity."<sup>13</sup> As Anne Spry Rush has noted, the wartime BBC projected an updated and progressive idea of "egalitarian imperialism" based on "bonds" rather than shackles and centered on ideas of unity and equality.<sup>14</sup> Appeals to mutual loyalty and reciprocity became key to the idea of "victory through harmony" at the BBC.<sup>15</sup>

Critics such as Amanda Bidnall have further argued in this context that collaboration rather than racial conflict characterized cultural relations at the corporation between the 1940s and 1960s. Racism, she suggests, is an anachronistic label for these decades, retrospectively applied from the vantage point of the 1970s.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the story of Marson that unfolds here suggests that race was a radioactive (largely invisible but also pervasive) presence both at and beyond the BBC during the 1940s. What follows is not an account of institutional racism—an equally anachronistic description for a period when racism was arguably a normative set of cultural relations right across British society. Nor does it seek to dispute the existence of genuine cross-cultural friendships or the need to take seriously the collaborative cultures that Bidnall and others describe in different contexts. However, precisely because of the centrality and normativity of racism in wartime and postwar Britain, it would be unrealistic to expect these same cultural relations not to be reproduced from within the BBC, where commitment to balanced and impartial broadcasting demanded a rigid adherence to the middle ground of British public culture.<sup>17</sup>

By dwelling on the life of a single employee, this essay prompts a rethinking of the wider historical structures associated with the midcentury BBC *through* the local contingencies and seemingly serendipitous twists and turns revealed by her biography. To be sure, this was a life as idiosyncratic as it was representative.<sup>18</sup> But it is also one that allows us to prize open prevailing accounts of the BBC as a tool of empire. Such accounts frequently fall back, in the last instance, on a straw notion of the BBC. The BBC was less a stable, bland monolith than a site of competing personal and professional interests, sections, and divisions that did not add up to a coherent identity. There were almost as many BBCs as there were staff. Old-fashioned

12 Antonia White, *BBC at War* (London: BBC, n.d. [circa 1942]), 39.

13 Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

14 On egalitarian imperialism at the BBC, see Anne Spry Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

15 See Christina Baade, *Victory through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

16 Amanda Bidnall, "West Indian Interventions at the Heart of the Cultural Establishment: Edric Connor, Pearl Connor, and the BBC," *Twentieth Century British History* 24, no. 1 (2013): 58–83.

17 See Krishan Kumar, "Holding the Middle Ground: The BBC, the Public, and the Professional Broadcaster," *Sociology*, no. 9 (1975): 67–88.

18 Which is not to say Una Marson's was an isolated case. The staff records for Rudolph Dunbar (the Guianese conductor and one of the main architects of the earliest "Calling the West Indies" programs alongside Marson) show he was locked in a long and bitter dispute with the BBC regarding allegations of racism during the 1940s and 1950s.

imperial racism and enlightened thinking circulated within the same units and corridors of the corporation, and their coexistence needs to be taken seriously if the hegemonic project of the BBC is to be fully grasped.<sup>19</sup> Radio involves the transmission of the personal, intimate voice into the public sphere, something that Marson's *Message Party* programs actively exploited in airing private messages and autobiographical stories of West Indian service personnel from wartime Europe back to the Caribbean. In reconstructing the life of Una Marson at the BBC, this essay also works at the intersection of private and public worlds, a necessary starting point in beginning to understand the complexities of Marson's peculiarly embattled presence at the BBC as at once too representative (speaking for the West Indies as a whole) and too personal (biased, subjective, emotional). Such public-private tensions help illuminate why Marson's position at the BBC was so charged in the early 1940s, before a more established and diverse cast of West Indian voices took up regular positions at the corporation.<sup>20</sup> Marson was among the first to recognize the need for change in this regard, and we can speculate that her introduction of the now famous literary magazine program *Caribbean Voices* (1944–58) was on one level connected to its democratizing potential as a platform for diverse interregional West Indian (literary) voices. Critics have observed that this program served to “attenuate” island insularity during a period of “burgeoning nationalisms” across the West Indies after the war, helping to join up the region as an imagined unity.<sup>21</sup> If the appointment of a black Jamaican producer was also intended as a show of imperial unity from the metropolitan center, the BBC's choice sparked resentment that ironically amplified competing local interests, thereby foreshadowing the challenges faced by Caribbean Federation (1958–62) following the war. More specifically, Marson's life at the BBC reveals the compromised cultural politics of metropolitan-mediated West Indian nationalism, which was at war with itself during the early 1940s and which is an important, if still largely unwritten, aspect of the legacy of *Caribbean Voices*. In the closing section of this essay, I return briefly to reconsider the (hazy) origins of this program in the light of Marson's turbulent BBC career.

### “Growing Pains”: Marson's Appointment at the BBC

On Monday, 3 March 1941, Una Marson began work as an unestablished program assistant in the Empire Production Unit. An internal record of her past achievements records her status as a British subject; her middle-class Jamaican background (as a scholarship student at Hampton High School); and her previous visits to England, Capri, Brussels, and Istanbul

<sup>19</sup> I am using *hegemony* here in the specifically Gramscian sense to describe the maintenance of power through the articulation and accommodation of contradictory forces, the forging of “unity” through difference.

<sup>20</sup> Marson was by no means the lone West Indian at the BBC; her Caribbean colleagues at various points included Ulric Cross, June Grimble, Ken Ablack, Ernest Eyle, and Maurice Chagill. However, as the *BBC Staff Handbook* for 1942 shows, the “West Indian Unit” was relatively tiny and consisted at that time of just three people: Marson, Cedric Lindo (based in Jamaica), and Miss Thwaites (Marson's secretary).

<sup>21</sup> See Glyne Griffith, “Deconstructing Nationalisms: Henry Swanzy, *Caribbean Voices*, and the Development of West Indian Literature,” *Small Axe*, no. 10 (2001): 1–20.

(1932–36), along with her current sojourn in London since 1938. While her literary achievements as poet and playwright are documented, more information is given on her journalistic connections in Jamaica (as editor of *The Cosmopolitan*, as staff reporter at the *Gleaner*, and feature writer for the *Jamaican Standard*) and her collaborative links with social, political, and charitable organizations in Africa, the West Indies and Britain (British Commonwealth League; League of Coloured Students; Save the Children Fund; the Ethiopian Legation during the Italian-Ethiopian war). Marson's particular appeal for the BBC was apparently less as a literary specialist than as a prominent public figure with extensive West Indian connections and media contacts both at home and in London—as somebody, in short, who could command, or commandeer, a substantial Caribbean audience.<sup>22</sup> Her starting salary of £480 plus allowances was significantly higher than the national average in 1941, yet the post had already been downgraded and made subject to an extended probationary period on the recommendation of the Colonial Office.<sup>23</sup> In the weeks leading up to her interview, circulating internal memos began to ask whether there was any “ban” on the corporation “employing coloured staff.”<sup>24</sup> R. A. Rendall, as director of Empire Services, made similar checks about the “appointment of a coloured British subject,” reporting back to colleagues about the Colonial Office: “[They] were very anxious that we should make this experiment though they suggested that we should take the probationary period of two months rather seriously in this case.” The Colonial Office’s cautionary tone led to the post being downgraded from B1 to C.<sup>25</sup> Marson’s probationary period was subsequently extended for a further three months.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the official note of caution, Marson had already won the respect of senior insiders at the BBC. Cecil Madden, an experienced producer in the Empire Service, had worked with Marson on a freelance basis since the late 1930s.<sup>27</sup> Madden spoke in the weeks running up to Marson’s appointment of her intelligence, her excellent connections, and her local knowledge.<sup>28</sup> He also described her as “a very nice person who works very easily with Miss Gilbert [Joan Gilbert, Madden’s production assistant] and is tremendously keen on the creative advancement of the coloured people.”<sup>29</sup> When the Guyanese composer and clarinetist Rudolph Dunbar started making overtures to Madden about possible West Indian broadcasts, Madden seized the opportunity and submitted a prototype schedule for West Indian programs

22 The handwritten, unattributed document is dated 9 May 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1). In most cases, the document gestures only vaguely to Marson’s literary output, describing it, for example as “two books of verse.”

23 The average wage in 1942 was £320, or £6 a week, and considerably less for women.

24 “Coloured Staff,” 21 January 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1). The memo goes on to note: “It has been suggested to us that the Ministry of Information . . . made it known to a candidate for employment that he could not be engaged because it was the Ministry’s policy not to take on coloured staff.” It closes by registering both the novelty and delicacy of the situation: “We should perhaps not quote this information [whether or not “coloured” staff are permitted], but it evidently shows the question is one which requires consideration.”

25 Director of Empire Services to Empire Executive cont., 28 January 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

26 “Trial Period,” 2 May 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

27 See Jarrett-Macauley, *Life of Una Marson*, 144–46.

28 Cecil Madden to Overseas Programmes Producer, “West Indian Programmes,” 8 December 1940 (BBC WAC E2/584).

29 Cecil Madden to Empire Executive, “Una Marson,” 31 January 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1). Note that throughout this essay, I retain the modes of address for BBC staff as they appear in the archives.

on 10 January 1941 that combined suggestions from both Marson and Dunbar. The stage was set for Marson's new role as an assistant West Indian producer starting in March of that year.<sup>30</sup>

However, the seemingly harmonious collaborative working relationships that formed the basis for the "Calling the West Indies" programs would soon be put to the test. In the days and weeks after she started her new job, Marson was involved in a series of bruising personal disputes. First, she had an explosive falling out with Dunbar during program rehearsals for his choir in April 1941. Gilbert wrote to Madden, "The situation has developed as badly as it possibly can," while Madden himself recorded in an internal memo to the director of Empire Services that both Dunbar and Marson had "threatened to down tools" and that the pair "only went on air because Miss Gilbert kept them apart until the red light went out."<sup>31</sup>

Marson felt she had been "bullied on stage" by Dunbar and his choir, who were trying to interfere with her role as compere.<sup>32</sup> Dunbar, on the other hand, felt Marson was intruding on his choir's musical material. The dispute was over intellectual ownership, professionalism, and authority. In a formal letter of complaint, Dunbar emphasizes his expertise and experience, while simultaneously questioning Marson's credentials: "In my capacity as a musician, I have received the highest possible education both in New York and in Paris. I have made a special study of Negro Spirituals in the land of their origin and, I am an authority in Jazz music. . . . Miss Marson has no possible technical claim . . . [,] no knowledge whatsoever of music. . . . She has never visited the United States of America."<sup>33</sup> Dunbar even goes on to suggest Marson has stolen his ideas: having reluctantly provided her with background notes on the music, he says, "I am now astonished to see that the erudite Miss Marson has developed over night into an authority of Negro Spirituals." Dunbar ends his complaint with reference to Marson's "flagrant breach of professional ethics," adding that he will "carry the matter to the highest tribunal of the Corporation."<sup>34</sup>

While Gilbert and Madden both suggested Dunbar could be "difficult" to deal with, Madden's view was that Marson was ultimately to blame for the bitter rivalry that had broken out between them: "She quite deliberately ripped it [Dunbar's material] to pieces and substituted her own ideas about *his* programme, and refused to make any concession whatsoever. . . . I feel she deliberately antagonizes him to test her own strength."<sup>35</sup> Earlier in his memo, Madden refers to a longer history of tensions between Dunbar and Marson that had developed into "open bitterness": it would appear that the triangulated exchanges between Marson, Madden, and Dunbar on the future content of West Indian broadcasts had already soured relations, with both Marson and Dunbar striving to secure the upper hand in terms of the newly established

<sup>30</sup> Dunbar does not appear to have been a contender for the role, perhaps because he was already employed by the Ministry of Information at the time.

<sup>31</sup> Joan Gilbert to Cecil Madden, 14 April 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1); and Cecil Madden to Deputy Director of Empire Services, 14 April 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>32</sup> Una Marson to Joan Gilbert, 11 April 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>33</sup> Rudolph Dunbar to Joan Gilbert, 14 April 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Cecil Madden to Director of Empire Services, 14 April 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

schedules. In turning simultaneously to them both for the raw materials on which to build future West Indian programming, it seems Madden had unwittingly sparked a form of sibling rivalry at the paternalistic BBC.

Coinciding with the Marson and Dunbar debacle, the initially friendly relations between Gilbert and Marson had grown decidedly frosty. Gilbert felt that since Marson's appointment, Marson had become discourteous toward her and was not showing her due respect in consulting her as producer. In a two-page letter of complaint addressed to the deputy director of Empire Services in May 1941, Gilbert refers to further disputes with performers involving Marson, but her main motive for writing is clearly her own power struggle with the poet. According to Gilbert, things had come to a head between the pair in a row over the allocation of air time on 29 April 1941 that resulted in Marson throwing down her script and storming offstage. Gilbert felt Marson's last-minute changes would have "spoil[ed] the balance" of the program and that her emotions were getting the better of her professionalism, that she needed "to put aside her temperament and her own feelings in favour of the good of the programme." Marson had been given too much authority for Gilbert's liking, and things were better when Marson was employed on a more casual basis. Gilbert's claims of professional arrogance are informed by a clear sense of Marson's interruption of a racialized order: "Since Una Marson joined the staff she seems to have got an exaggerated idea of her own position and her own authority, and cannot control herself, consequently at the slightest opposition she becomes extremely rude. Quite frankly, I wouldn't let anybody speak to me in the way Una does, and certainly not a coloured woman."<sup>36</sup>

Far from being put in her place, as Gilbert proposes, Marson was actively encouraged at this time by the director of Empire Services, R. A. Rendall, to take the lead in developing West Indian broadcasting. Marson's position was an uncertain and confusing one in many respects. A junior member of the Empire Service team, an unestablished and inexperienced assistant still on probation, Marson also had an unrivaled inside knowledge of the West Indies, and her bosses were keen to harness this in developing a specialized series of programs for the region. Where Gilbert, and prior to that, Dunbar, had been outraged at Marson taking ownership of programs, the director of Empire Services was keen to ensure others did not assume ownership of Marson. There were wider institutional tensions at this time about where and to whom in the Empire Service Marson effectively belonged and who had rightful claim to her working hours at the corporation. Marson had been mentored by and had done almost all her broadcasting work under Cecil Madden. However, in May 1941, Rendall, who had regarded Madden as meddling somewhat in pressing for Marson's appointment and perhaps wanted to dampen the rivalry between Gilbert and Marson, brought Madden's unofficial mentoring role to an abrupt end. From now on, Marson would work directly under J. Grenfell Williams, director of African Services, and not Madden. Rendall explained in separate notes to Williams

36 Joan Gilbert to Grenfell Williams, 1 May 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

and Madden that Marson's work would be spread across the various broadcasting divisions, departments, and units as appropriate: Kenneth Wright's unit (Overseas Music), Madden's unit (Overseas Entertainments), Miss M. H. Wace's unit (Talks Department), the Outside Broadcasting Department, and the Features and Drama Department.<sup>37</sup>

Rendall explained to Madden that the "difficulties" that had arisen around Marson's appointment were really "growing pains," a phrase that captures the rising stature of Marson's "Calling the West Indies" programs and the wider discomforts they caused.<sup>38</sup> Smarting at the director's suggestion that he was being overly controlling of Marson in this regard, Madden's insistence that the director overestimated his own authority on the West Indies programs perhaps betrays a certain (uncharacteristic) resentment that his own part in their genesis had been underestimated:

I would like to point out that this schedule was drawn up entirely on the strength of Miss Marson's own suggestions to us and contains no programme that she has not asked for at different times, though her views change from day to day, which has been a little disconcerting. . . . We have had a very interesting time getting these new War-time programmes started, particularly as I introduced Miss Marson to Broadcasting and Television many years ago, and have nursed her consistently through all her broadcasting work. I can only assure you that I am only too glad to think that other sections will be asked to help to share in carrying out the new plan when it is devised and approved.<sup>39</sup>

The programs associated with Una Marson (like all BBC producers) were never individual enterprises but the result of extended negotiation, seemingly endless circulating memos, heated conversations, drafting exercises, and extensive consultation. Among other things, these exchanges are an important reminder that the BBC was a place of many parts and of conflicting internal interests. However, in the months and years ahead, it would be rivaling external interests, pitted against the BBC's apparently collaborative networks, that would inflict the most pain on Marson.

### Loyalties, Jealousies, and Dissensions

The two-week staff training course that Una Marson attended in June 1941 broadly echoed Cecil Madden's earliest assessments of the assistant producer. On the one hand, its confidential evaluation was of Marson as a "keen," "imaginative" colleague with an "appreciation of audience," sound "political judgement," "a sense of style," and "feeling for language." The report also signaled that Marson was prone to "crises," technically weak, and "a shade impatient," before concluding, "As the only 'coloured' producer in the BBC, she needs a good

<sup>37</sup> See Director of Empire Services to Cecil Madden, 14 May 1941 (BBC WAC E2/584, Foreign Gen. West Indies, 1939–1950); and Director of Empire Services to Grenfell Williams, 18 May 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>38</sup> Director of Empire Services to Cecil Madden, 14 May 1941.

<sup>39</sup> Cecil Madden to Director of Empire Services, 15 May 1941 (BBC WAC E2/584, Foreign Gen. West Indies, 1939–1950).

deal of backing to enable her to use her abilities to the best advantage, and to overcome the prejudices which undoubtedly exist among some of the staff, with whom she has to work. . . . We find her an extremely intelligent, loyal and lively person.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite undoubted prejudice at the BBC, Marson’s loyalty to the corporation would be reciprocated in the months ahead.<sup>41</sup> Marson was promoted to West Indies producer on 1 January 1942, regraded on the pay scale, and allocated a personal assistant. There were perennial disputes between the BBC’s accounts department and Marson over her expenses claims, which left the fledgling producer feeling her autonomy and professionalism were being undermined.<sup>42</sup> But these were relatively low level in comparison with her earlier confrontations. If the BBC’s annual confidential report on Marson in 1941 was carefully hedged (it used faint praise in assessing her performance as “satisfactory” and “quite good”), from 1942 the same reports speak with more unqualified enthusiasm. While acknowledging the “many difficulties” associated with the West Indian programs themselves, Williams nevertheless speaks of Marson’s “admirable success,” “excellent results” (1942), “usual vigour” (1943), and considerable “achievement” (1944) in overcoming them.<sup>43</sup>

However, the many difficulties that Williams alludes to would not go away. Just as the “Calling the West Indies” schedule was starting to establish itself within the corridors of the BBC, a new set of tensions and conflicts emerged as regional representatives in the West Indies and other interested constituencies in the United Kingdom started to voice concerns. On the one hand, there were complaints, as the director of Empire Services summarized: “We have an undue proportion of coloured West Indians in our programmes.” On the other, there were ongoing accusations that the programs used “too many speakers from some particular island.”<sup>44</sup> Directly or indirectly, these complaints implicated Marson as a black woman and a Jamaican. A major challenge in this regard was reconciling Marson’s own singular-island status with her representative role as producer for a region of many parts. In an internal document she produced in the spring of 1942, Marson noted, “[It is a] difficult task set us to keep the balance in covering roughly 18 islands, British Guiana and British Honduras. At our Christmas party we accomplished this through tears and sweat.”<sup>45</sup> In the same Christmas party program two years later, Marson introduced what she called a “lucky box” system, allowing the names of service members (who, following convention, were identified by place of origin) to be drawn blindly and at random. As it was reported in Jamaica’s *Gleaner*, though,

40 “Special Confidential Report on Miss Una Marson 16th–28th June, 1941,” n.d. (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

41 The training report’s choice of the adjective “loyal” seems to suggest not just professional commitment but also patriotic and imperial duty, qualities that arguably only needed affirming on the grounds that Marson was a “coloured” West Indian.

42 For instance, in the late summer of 1942 there was a protracted dispute over Marson’s occasional late-night cab claims. Marson’s long twelve- to thirteen-hour days meant she ran the risk of getting stranded between Underground stops on her way home late at night.

43 See BBC WAC L1/290/1 for Una Marson’s “Annual Confidential Reports” between 1941 and 1944.

44 “Notes on Broadcasting to the West Indies,” n.d. (BBC WAC E2/584, Foreign Gen. West Indies, 1939–1950).

45 Una Marson to African Services Director, “West Indian Message Programmes,” n.d. (BBC WAC E2/584). This document was marked “Private and Confidential.”

this “little ‘lottery’ for the various West Indian islands at which Michael Brooks and Una played ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ at the ‘drum’” only accentuated the climate of competition.<sup>46</sup> The raffle was written up as an athletic contest of sorts in which “Jamaica took fifth place to speak home, and Bermuda came last. Barbados went off with the ‘grand prize’ as first to call the West Indies at Christmas.” On another occasion, Marson recommended a broadcast about Trinidad to the producer of a series called *Traveller’s Tales*. Marson was responding to complaints raised by an earlier episode in the series titled “We’re from Jamaica,” to which she contributed and about which she noted, “There was naturally some jealousy.”<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, early *Caribbean Voices* program scripts reveal “Jamaican” being crossed out and replaced with “West Indian,” presumably to avoid complaints of bias.<sup>48</sup>

Setting the tone for such complaints, an early cable from Trinidad sent in May 1941 replied to a BBC query about whether West Indian programs could be rebroadcast on the island: “Interest in Calling West Indies here practically nil due to programme material. Public feel Trinidad and surroundings being ignored in favour of Jamaica. More West Indian interest and talks by or re West Indians. . . . Surely some West Indian talent available. More messages from Trinidad British Guiana and Barbados wanted.”<sup>49</sup>

While the BBC explained their options were limited, given Jamaicans constituted three-quarters of all West Indians serving in Britain, the perception that Jamaica was being privileged within West Indian programming left other islands and territories feeling marginalized.<sup>50</sup> As Anya Pearson notes in this context, while the Governor of Jamaica acknowledged that listening to radio “‘might help create a West Indian consciousness and break down insularity’ . . . listeners resented the blanket coverage and complained about the high amount of Jamaican guests.”<sup>51</sup> The inclusivity that the BBC probably presumed by the term *West Indies*, and which was part of its wider wartime emphasis on empire as an intimate unity became, ironically in this context, yet another source of division and competition.<sup>52</sup> A slightly later account of listeners from the Information Office in Trinidad notes a growing interest in BBC broadcasts due to the messaging programs foregrounding locale over the wider region: “There seems to be no doubt whatever that the quick way to popularity is to mention names of local people and places as frequently as possible and to arrange broadcasts by Trinidadians as often as possible.” The report concludes on a less positive note: “If the question simply is whether

46 “Merry West Indies Christmas Party,” *Gleaner*, 27 December 1944, 14.

47 Una Marson to Mr. Leslie Baily, 15 July 1944 (BBC WAC C. G. Lindo Copyright File 1a: 1943–1946).

48 See, for example, the *Caribbean Voices* script for Sunday, 9 September 1945 (BBC WAC *Caribbean Voices* scripts, box nos. 1–264).

49 Cable from Port of Spain to O.L.M., 19 May 1941 (BBC WAC E2/584).

50 O.L.M. to P.B.X., “Radio Distribution Port of Spain Trinidad,” 19 May 1941 (BBC WAC E2/584). For the BBC’s explanation of their limited options, see E2/584, Foreign Gen. West Indies, 1939–1950, 19 May 1941.

51 Anya Rosamond Pearson, “Hello, West Indies!: National Identity and Transnational Connections in the Work of Una Marson, 1932–1946” (master’s thesis, University College London, 2012), 31. See also “Governor of Jamaica to the Secretary of State for the Colonies,” 4 August 1944 (BBC WAC E2/584).

52 See, for example, T. O. Beachcroft, *Calling All Nations* (London: BBC, 1942), which describes the birth of empire broadcasting as a “vivid expression of our unity” (4).

'Calling West Indies' really calls the West Indies at this stage I think the answer must be in the negative so far as Trinidad is concerned."<sup>53</sup> While BBC listener research in the West Indies was not established at this point in the early 1940s, it seems audiences tended to identify with their own islands and territories more than the wider supranational imagined community that "Calling the West Indies" projected. As the director of Empire Services, R. A. Rendall received several requests at that time asking to be named separately within the undifferentiated and all-encompassing "Calling the West Indies" heading. For example, the British Guiana United Broadcasting Company wrote to ask if the service could be renamed "Calling the West Indies and British Guiana," on the grounds that British Guiana was not part of the West Indies.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Rendall was cornered by a Bermudan representative during one of Marson's message evenings: strictly speaking, the representative argued, reference should be to "the West Indies and Bermuda." Rendall rejected such requests on the grounds that they were "too unattractively cumbrous" and that they could lead to future "difficulties," including, presumably, other islands and territories asking to be singled out from the crowd.<sup>55</sup>

Much less easy to handle were the increasing, and increasingly toxic complaints surrounding the issue of racial representation on the programs. By the beginning of 1942, Rendall (now assistant controller for Overseas Services) was speaking of "two special difficulties that Marson ha[d] to cope with—(a) the proper holding of the balance between white and black and the criticism of the West India Committee on this point; and (b) the jealousies and dissensions that rack the West Indian community, particularly the coloured community in London."<sup>56</sup>

Rendall's remarks were made within the context of a recent complaint from a Dr. H. B. Morgan, after Marson invited him to appear on a program in 1941. Morgan, as a white Grenadian creole and member of Parliament, had for some time felt snubbed by "Calling the West Indies" and was not amused by the casual informality of Marson's last-minute request by telephone. Meanwhile, Marson, who had been shielded from Dr. Morgan's long campaign of criticism against "Calling the West Indies" was unaware of the history between them when she phoned him. Rendall outlined his view: "Dr. Morgan's letters and memorandum are, for the most part expressions of prejudices and injured personal vanity. . . . Dr. Morgan's only real complaint against any of the speakers is that they are not he himself."<sup>57</sup> Picking up on

53 Information Officer to BBC, "Memorandum on 'Calling West Indies' Programmes," 25 October 1941 (BBC WAC E2/584).

54 R. A. Rendall to S.W.H., 29 December 1941 (E1/1294/1, Pink File Countries: West Indies—Broadcasting in West Indies, file 1a, September 1940–1942).

55 Other complaints reported by information officers in the West Indies around this time moved beyond inter-island rivalry to focus on the competing interests of the United Kingdom and United States in terms of the race for the West Indian air waves. The view from the Bahamas was that the BBC output was too generic, or not regional enough, and was a poor imitation of North American broadcasting (E2/584 Foreign Gen. West Indies, 1939–1950, 29 Aug 1941). Similarly, the BBC were told listeners in Jamaica found the programs "dull" compared with American programming (E2/584 Foreign Gen. West Indies, 1939–1950, 3 January 1942). See Spry, *Bonds of Empire*, for a more detailed account of tensions between British and American broadcasting platforms.

56 Assistant Controller (Overseas Services) to Controller, "West Indian Programmes: Dr. H. B. Morgan, M.P.," 7 January 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

57 Ibid. Rendall suggests jealousy is the motivating factor for criticisms of Marson on more than one occasion. For example, in response to a complaint against Marson on the grounds of favoritism, Rendall suggests that the complainant's (F. Henriques) nose has been put out of joint because he was dropped from doing the West Indian "Newsletter" on the grounds

Dr. Morgan's reference to another West Indian, Mr. Adams, Rendall suggests Morgan's malevolence stems less from Marson's actions than from a wider tendency among London's West Indian community to lock horns with "Calling the West Indies" and its Jamaican producer:

I notice that Dr. Morgan refers to memoranda received from Mr. Adams, a coloured West Indian actor, who did at one time give a series of broadcasts to the West Indies. This series was brought to an end because we were not satisfied either with the quality or the accuracy of his material. There is no doubt Adams cherished (and maybe still cherishes, in spite of a letter written to Marson in the "Oxford Group" style) a grievance against the Corporation in general and Miss Marson in particular. There is an unfortunate personal history at the back of this which has nothing to do with the Corporation or its work but has been the root of a good deal of trouble-making among West Indians.

. . . I have no reason at all to be other than satisfied with the efforts she [Marson] has made and the way in which she has conducted her official business. It is true that she is a Jamaican and knows comparatively little about the other West Indian islands, but it would be impossible to find anyone who knew all the islands.<sup>58</sup>

The most persistent and organized instance of "trouble-making" against Marson came via Lady Davson and the West India Committee in a dispute stretching back to Marson's earliest days at the BBC.<sup>59</sup> The smooth running of the BBC messaging programs demanded a steady stream of West Indian troops, and there were constant challenges associated with securing the release of service members from units already stretched by war. Access to the armed forces was strictly rationed at certain points during World War II. The West India Committee and their London-based hostel at Aggrey House provided a crucial link in this context, as the initial port of call for West Indian arrivants as well as the main channel through which troops could be ferried through to the BBC. However, Aggrey House in return assumed an unwelcome degree of influence over the broadcasts, requesting that West Indians promote the work of the committee through their messages back home.<sup>60</sup> Fueling Marson's concerns in this regard was the dubious colonial history of the West India Committee, which, as she pointed out on more than one occasion in late 1941 and early 1942, represented the "old tradition" and white planter and business interests:

I have known the West India Committee for ten years. They have constantly refused to employ a coloured West Indian. They laughed at my suggestion that coloured West Indians should serve on any Committee working for the West Indies. Their membership is largely of the wealthy

that "his performance was far from distinguished." R. A. Rendall to Noel Sabine (Colonial Office), 12 June 1941 (BBC WAC E1/1294/1).

<sup>58</sup> Assistant Controller (Overseas Services) to Controller, "West Indian Programmes: Dr. H. B. Morgan, M.P.," 7 January 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

<sup>59</sup> For an excellent account of this affair, see Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *Life of Una Marson*, 151–53.

<sup>60</sup> In an undated memo to the African Services director, Marson says that she has the "impression" that Lady Davson is trying to "create some difficulties" for the BBC; Marson felt that the committee was increasingly overstepping the bounds: "[They are] trying to take on our job" ("West Indian Message Programmes," n.d. [BBC WAC E2/584]). In an unrelated memo, the Acting Empire Intelligence Officer confirms Marson's impression of the committee, which he says is "beginning to feel [its] feet" and is "inclined to press the claims of [its] particular constituents to a fair share of the programme" ("West India Committee and West Indies Programmes," 10 March 1942 [BBC WAC E2/584]).

Planter set. People who are largely responsible for the low standard of living in the West Indies. The 97% coloured people in the West Indies would hardly think of them as benefactors.<sup>61</sup>

In turn, the West India Committee felt Marson was biased in favor of black service personnel and called for the inclusion of more messages by white West Indians as well as the use of white broadcasters. The committee, like Joan Gilbert earlier, believed “Una’s colour prejudices upset the programme.” In fact, it was Gilbert’s affinity with the West India Committee that Gilbert herself recognized was the source of subsequent animosity between them:

Actually, I think she [Marson] was first annoyed because I went to see the West India Committee people, and she realises from the list they’ve sent me, that they are submitting English white West Indians as well as coloured. Una maintains that the “whites” are *not* West Indians, and really wants all coloured people where she can get away with it. The West India Committee on the other hand, strongly submit that the programmes should be fifty-fifty white/coloured where possible.<sup>62</sup>

While Gilbert and the West India Committee use the label *West Indian* in appealing to the BBC broadcasting values of balance, what this dispute effectively registers is the semantically unstable, racially contested character of the term in the early 1940s. As Catherine Hall has noted, the connotations of *West Indian* have shifted historically according to when and where it was used, becoming what John La Rose called an “uncertain amalgamation” by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>63</sup> Associated with white European settlers from the seventeenth until the early twentieth century, and used before that to describe the indigenous inhabitants of the region, it was “not until the 1950s, with the migration of Caribbean men and women to the metropole,” that it came to signify black. As Bill Schwarz elaborates in this context, “The term ‘West Indian’ always represented a complex of competing ideas, a resource for both colonial and anticolonial politics. Its meaning in any particular historical situation derived from the overall balance of forces between colony and metropolis.”<sup>64</sup> Where for Marson *West Indian* is deployed as part of an anticolonial rhetoric that registers and reveals the late colonial prejudices of the West India Committee, for the West India committee it is mobilized as a means of appealing to the political status quo of late colonial culture at the metropolitan center. The West India Committee’s appeal to balance was anything but equitable in this context and ultimately rested on the uneven “balance of forces between colony and metropolis” that held sway in the 1940s. As critics have argued in other contexts, the broadcasting value of “balance” serves to neutralize and accommodate oppositional political positions in ways that help secure hegemonic values at any given moment. In occupying the consensual middle ground, balance appears transcendent, autonomous, and value free, while being ideologically aligned

61 Una Marson to African Services Director, “West Indian Message Programmes,” n.d. (BBC WAC E2/584).

62 Joan Gilbert to Cecil Madden, 25 March 1941 (BBC WAC R46/92).

63 Catherine Hall, “What Is a West Indian?,” in Bill Schwarz, ed., *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 34.

64 Bill Schwarz, “Afterword: The Predicament of History,” in Schwarz, *West Indian Intellectuals*, 248.

to the dominant social group.<sup>65</sup> Marson struggled in vain to challenge this logic by exposing its basis in the views of the white West Indian planter class. On other occasions, she was obliged to try to tip the scales of balance in her favor by appealing herself to the codes of neutrality, stressing that she was “color blind” when making selections for the messaging programs.

The overdetermined character of *West Indian* during the 1940s left it open to the competing claims of both white and black constituencies staking out their interests in early BBC programming. Rendall was typically supportive of Marson regarding external complaints and often identified the racial prejudice behind them. He spoke in this regard of the BBC’s “duty to support Miss Marson,” not least because of “the very grave difficulties” she “constantly faced.”<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the official reply to the West India Committee from J. B. Clark, the controller of Overseas Services, acknowledged the ongoing teething problems with West Indian programs. Clark added he had been a member of the West India Committee for ten years and even confessed to a personal admiration for Lady Davson. However, his response was also unequivocal in stressing that Marson had been the victim rather than the perpetrator of the ongoing rivalries and jealousies associated with her role. He refers in this regard to “a good deal of evidence of both personal and colour prejudice” against Marson, “a real dearth of West Indian material and personnel of the right quality” to support her, and “parochial rivalries” between “constituent colonies.” The letter goes on to defend the Jamaican producer in more personal terms: “Miss Una Marson, with some of whose published work you may be familiar, has a most modest nature, although her achievement in the white western world is of real significance.” Clark closes by adding that the West India Committee has “tended to give undue emphasis to the interests of the white merchants rather than the coloured races,” but that her complaints will be investigated further.<sup>67</sup>

Yet even as Marson’s bosses took her side in these disputes, their abiding professional priority was with preserving the BBC’s reputation for impartiality and balance. In this respect, the director of Empire Services had always argued, “We must be careful to eradicate any justification there may be for complaints that the material is too exclusively of Jamaican interest” and “care must be taken to see that the interests of the white West Indians are not neglected.” Moreover, Rendall suggested Marson’s neutrality could not be relied on in this regard (or, otherwise, did not trust that listeners would rely on it): “Certainly,” he said to her line manager Williams, the job of ensuring even coverage “should not be left exclusively to Miss Marson.”<sup>68</sup> In a slightly later account, he added that Marson’s appointment had raised questions over “the proper holding of the balance between black and white.”<sup>69</sup> Such concerns ultimately led the

<sup>65</sup> See, for example Stuart Hall, Ian Connell, and Lidia Curti, “The ‘Unity’ of Current Affairs Television,” in Tony Bennett, ed., *Popular Television and Film* (London: Open University, 1981).

<sup>66</sup> Assistant Controller (Overseas Services) to Controller (Overseas Services), “West Indian Programmes: Dr. H. B. Morgan, M.P.,” 7 January 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

<sup>67</sup> J. B. Clark to Harold Nicholson, M.P., 7 March 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

<sup>68</sup> R. A. Rendall to Grenfell Williams, “West Indian Programmes,” 18 May 1941 (BBC WAC E1/1294/1).

<sup>69</sup> Assistant Controller (Overseas Services) to Controller (Overseas Services), “West Indian Programmes: Dr. H. B. Morgan, M.P.,” 7 January 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

director to call for a “cast iron system” of regulation that would ensure checks and balances were in place regarding West Indian representation on the programs.<sup>70</sup>

In March 1942, Clark sent an internal memo saying he had come back “empty handed” from his investigation of the Aggrey House affair, and he suggested there was little more to add given Lady Davson’s “obviously prejudiced view and readiness to listen to ex parte gossip.”<sup>71</sup> The controller’s conclusion on the affair was in no small part due to the revelations that followed Williams’s own prior investigation into the matter. Drawing on disclosures from BBC colleagues, the Colonial Office, and even former conspirators against Marson, the clearly shocked Williams wrote to the controller on 25 March 1942:

Aggrey House, it seems, seethes with gossip and backbiting. . . . Its members are continually forming themselves into antagonistic groups and sometimes into a fairly united group antagonistic to any West Indian outside who may have aroused jealousy or bitterness of some member or members of the group. It seems clear that Miss Marson’s appointment to the BBC, far from creating universal feelings of pleasure at the success of a fellow West Indian, had a most unpleasant effect in some West Indian quarters, and the resultant envy, constantly chewed over, developed a hard core of people who, not only criticised Miss Marson, but were prepared to go to the length of doing something about it. Any choice of speakers in West Indian programmes, any rejection of a speaker, any reported remark of Miss Marson’s, in fact almost any step Miss Marson took was and still is the concern of everyone in this particular group.<sup>72</sup>

One of Williams’s sources was Robert Adams, the West Indian actor and previously “violent anti-Marson partisan” who had subsequently become “reconciled to her.” Another was a Miss Cox, who had been told at Aggrey House that the “anti-Marson group was ‘out to get Miss Marson and anyone who protected her out of the B.B.C. at all costs.’”<sup>73</sup>

In the short term, Williams appeared to have cracked the conspiracy, exonerating Marson from the claims that she was prejudiced in her arrangements for the programs. But in the longer term, both the affair and the levels of animosity it unleashed had convinced Marson’s bosses that it was in neither her nor the BBC’s best interest for her to remain the figurehead for the West Indies radio programs. While Williams recommended appointing an assistant to further support the Jamaican producer, Rendall felt more “drastic steps” were required. He appointed a senior colleague, Mr. Evans, who could oversee Marson and offer her “more detailed guidance and direction.”<sup>74</sup> It would appear balance and neutrality could ultimately be reliably restored only through a white male appointment.

70 Controller (Overseas Services) to Assistant Controller (Overseas Services), “West Indian Programme Items,” 25 March 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

71 Controller (Overseas Services), “West Indian Programmes,” 25 March 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

72 African Services Director to Assistant Controller (Overseas Services), 11 March 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584).

73 Ibid.

74 Assistant Controller (Overseas Services) to African Services Director, 10 March 1942 (BBC WAC E2/584). The full name of Mr. Evans is not given. Some of the mud from the West India Committee had clearly stuck for the assistant controller, who added, “While these criticisms reflect prejudice with which we are already familiar, I wish I could feel confident that there was no better basis for such remarks about our service.”

A year on, Marson was expressing feelings of frustration at her lack of responsibility and was looking for opportunities to visit the West Indies. She remained as committed as ever to her job but was feeling tired and homesick and recognized she needed a break from London to recapture her former energy. Seeing that she was seeking opportunities to go overseas and suspecting that she was unhappy, Rendall interviewed Marson in April 1943. Marson spoke of her “frustration” at the lack of progress being made both by herself and the “Calling the West Indies” programs.<sup>75</sup> While Marson seemed to Rendall outwardly reconciled to the appointment of Mr. Evans (if glad of Rendall’s assurances that the decision was not a reflection on her), she later elaborated that “whereas she had no complaint at all about the way she had been treated in the BBC . . . [,] the Colonial Office officials had given her the impression that partly on colour grounds they did not show a fair or proper estimation of her responsibilities and abilities.”<sup>76</sup> Following further assurances, Marson left the interview apparently “cheered up,” and while the assistant controller could not promise her the transatlantic travel she longed for, the pair agreed she would take a short break to recharge.

However, Marson would remain on the edge of physical and mental exhaustion for much of the year ahead. In the spring of 1944, she took four weeks’ sick leave for what her doctor diagnosed as “nervous debility, insomnia, indigestion and general lassitude.”<sup>77</sup> These were the early symptoms of the illness that would eventually take Marson away from England and the BBC. Meanwhile, and despite his assurances about her role when they had met in April 1943, the assistant controller was about to deliver some more unwelcome news.

In the summer of 1944, Rendall had met with Frank Stockdale, head of the Colonial Development and Welfare Organization. During the course of that meeting, Stockdale suggested that listeners in the West Indies were growing tired of Marson, that this was “doing the BBC harm,” and that they should “use her less at the microphone.”<sup>78</sup> With the earlier campaigns against Marson fresh in his mind, and with his own impressions from a previous visit to Jamaica, Rendall felt the need to take decisive action once again. While he was quick to defend the “excellent work of Miss Marson” to Stockdale, the assistant controller concurred that her role as the front woman for “Calling the West Indies” was not simply “difficult” (as he had noted on previous occasions) but effectively untenable:

I think the truth of the matter is that no one person can successfully sustain the position in which Miss Marson has been placed, and I think that she should be made to concentrate on organization and that her appearance at the microphone should be irregular and rare; nor should her name figure in credits as producer, organizer, editor etc. I am satisfied that this would be in her best interests as well as the Corporation’s, and I am sure she is sensible enough to understand this.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Assistant Controller (Overseas Services) to African Services Director, 1 April 1943 (BBC WAC, L1/290/1).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Sick note from Dr. S. G. Papadopoulos, 31 March 1944 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>78</sup> Acting Controller (Overseas Services), 7 August 1944 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Williams, who was charged with breaking this news to Marson after she returned from another period of sick leave, observed that she “seemed” to take the news “very well indeed.”<sup>80</sup> However, his detailed record of their exchange suggests a slightly different story. Far from accepting the rationale behind her relegation to a more behind-the-scenes role, Marson insisted that Stockdale was merely “reflecting the views of white listeners and not those of the great majority of coloured listeners.” Williams’s précis of Marson’s response in the meeting continues:

She had never come across this particular criticism among the many hundreds of West Indian serving men and women and factory workers with whom she had worked in England. Many of them had been regular listeners to the West Indian programmes at home, and a large number of the coloured ones, representative of all the islands, had gone out of their way to tell her how proud they were that a West Indian was appearing in the B.B.C. programmes for the West Indies.<sup>81</sup>

At the same time, Marson added that “she would be glad to devote herself to organizing and producing and to withdraw from actual broadcasting.” While the tone and sincerity of these words are irrecoverable, her parting comments suggest resignation rather than enthusiasm at her repositioning within the “Calling the West Indies” programs: “She added that she was feeling extremely tired and would like to ask again whether the Corporation would consider allowing her to go to the West Indies for a few months at the end of the year.”<sup>82</sup>

Noting Marson’s “excellent” contribution to the BBC and the unique if not irreplaceable skills she brought to her role on “Calling the West Indies,” Williams made a successful case to the corporation for a paid visit to Jamaica. At Marson’s request, the trip would include a six-week period of formal sick leave followed by gentle, “unofficial” BBC duties, allowing her to refresh and widen her Caribbean contacts while exploring the past and future of broadcasting from Britain to Jamaica.<sup>83</sup> However, as Jarrett-Macauley’s biography and letters from Marson’s sister subsequently released by the BBC reveal, Marson’s sojourn was anything but restful. In fact, Marson, all too aware she needed to broaden her regional network of contacts in order to answer the criticism that she was overprivileging Jamaica, threw herself into a punishing work schedule as if her future depended on it. As Una’s sister, Edith Marson-Jones, recalled in a letter to Williams:

You see, dear, Una is very popular here. She had absolutely no rest. . . . We knew she was doing too much, but there was no way of stopping her. . . . Realising that part of her time would be

80 Grenfell Williams, “Note on Interview with Miss Marson: 28.8.44” (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

81 Ibid. Immediately prior to this extract, this sentence had been crossed out: “Although there had been criticism of her personally among West Indian students some time ago.” Whether this strike through was Williams’s own change of position or a result of Marson’s intervention is unclear.

82 Ibid.

83 Williams insisted, against the advice of the Overseas Establishment Officer, on the necessity of treating the time away as official leave rather than work: “I feel that Miss Marson should have some sick leave. She is not well and I think she should have a period of complete rest before she undertakes any work” (BBC WAC L1/290/1). Williams’s handwritten note appears at the bottom of a memo from the Overseas Services Establishment Officer dated 28 March 1945.

spent off the island, she tried to fit in all she could here. She dashed off to the islands, four of them, and attended endless functions in BBC interests, always meeting new people, so that she had a still more taxing time than here. She came back *very tired*. . . . I did not wish her to go [back to England] because she was so exhausted, but she said she had to go. She had used up every ounce of energy. Her nights became more and more sleepless. . . . I had to have the doctor in to give her sleeping tablets.<sup>84</sup>

When, after some delay, Marson eventually returned to London on 18 December 1945, she was in what Miss Doulton, the assistant to the Overseas Establishment officer, relayed to the BBC's medical advisor as a "serious mental state."<sup>85</sup> Marson claimed to be fine, but she was distracted at work or simply failed to appear. She firmly resisted attempts to get specialist help, but her friends and work colleagues were reporting that Marson had taken to locking herself in her flat and was refusing to eat properly. Living alone in a shared house where it was known there was "some colour prejudice against Miss Marson," the Jamaican producer was cajoled by her colleagues into being seen by the BBC medical advisor and a specialist at Middlesex Hospital.<sup>86</sup>

The doctors confirmed that Marson needed urgent medical care, but this placed the BBC in an awkward position. Marson was flatly refusing treatment and could not be persuaded to enter a nursing home voluntarily, even though her condition appeared to be steadily deteriorating. The Middlesex Hospital specialist had pronounced her "certifiable," being of the view that electric or insulin shock treatment would be the most effective cure. The corporation was naturally squeamish about taking the "drastic step" of certifying one of their own employees, and the advice of the BBC's own medical officer was that any application should be signed externally.<sup>87</sup> But without immediate family support or relatives at hand, there appeared to be no one else they could call on.

The dilemma was resolved in the short term when, on 15 January 1946, Doulton and Miss Thwaites, Marson's secretary (the BBC staff primarily responsible for overseeing Marson's care at this stage), persuaded their colleague to sign for voluntary admission at London's Maudsley Hospital. Once installed, numerous attempts were made by the medical team to persuade Marson to undergo convulsive treatment, but all of them failed. Six weeks later, by 28 February, the doctor's opinion was that Marson would need to be certified: she could not be forced to undergo treatment as a voluntary patient. Following high-level discussions at the BBC, it was eventually decided that Doulton should sign the certification application. On 13 March 1946, Marson finally agreed to be transferred to St. Andrews Hospital in Northampton, though only

<sup>84</sup> Edith Marson-Jones to Grenfell Williams, n.d. (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>85</sup> J. F. Doulton to Dr. A. F. Whyte, 11 January 1946 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. Dr. Paton, a West Indian clergyman friend, had agreed to sign the documentation if required, but by the time it became necessary he had left the country.

after being threatened with isolation. As the BBC's medical advisor Dr. Whyte summarized, "On admission there [she] was certified as a person of unsound mind."<sup>88</sup>

By early April, and without signs of significant improvement in her condition (the BBC's medical officer speaks of a "relapse" at the start of April), St. Andrews Hospital recommended insulin treatment.<sup>89</sup> Her treatment lasted from 8 April until the beginning of July, but despite "steady improvement," Marson was still not well enough to leave the hospital. Until the summer of 1946, Williams harbored hopes that Marson would return to work, so indispensable was she in his view to the "Calling the West Indies" programs.<sup>90</sup> However, doctors and medical reports remained inconclusive about the timescale and prospects for her recovery, and in October 1946 Williams was obliged to inform Marson that "in view of medical advice," her contract would have to be terminated.<sup>91</sup>

### An Unexpected Turn

Marson's doctors were of the view that full recovery would require an extended period of rest in the West Indies. Fortunately, Marson's old friend, the Jamaican poet J. E. C. McFarlane had been on leave in England, accompanied by his wife and daughter, since April. The McFarlanes were due to return to Jamaica in October, and they offered to escort Marson home. Marson was eventually discharged on 4 October 1946 and was due to set sail with the McFarlanes on 15 October. But there was a final twist to the story. Marson's sister had anticipated that there could be problems if Marson, who "ha[d] always had a definite will of her own" was simply "sent home" rather than being "persuaded" to go. Specifically, Marson-Jones indicated her sister might consent to return only if she was "free from fear for her immediate future," noting Marson's likely feelings in response to the actions being planned on her behalf: "It is quite possible that she may not be anxious to come back to Jamaica now. She is very keen on her work at the BBC. In the island here there is no opening where her experience and ability could be used, and she would be unduly worried about her future if it were left a blank."<sup>92</sup> What Doulton called the "unexpected, dramatic and somewhat fantastic turn" of events on the day of Marson's departure was perhaps on one level a manifestation of the worries identified by Marson's sister.<sup>93</sup> Doulton's eyewitness account, quoted at length below, helps illuminate

88 Dr. A. F. Whyte, "Miss Una Marson," 3 April 1946 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

89 Dr. A. F. Whyte to J. F. Doulton, 11 October 1946 (BBC WAC L1/290/1). As the hospital explained to the BBC at the time (3 April 1946): 'This treatment consists of gradually increasing doses of insulin until coma is obtained and the subsequent termination of this by the administration of sugar. The method of treatment as you will appreciate is not without a certain degree of risk the chief danger being heart failure. We have found however, that in experienced hands the risks are not so great that they should deter us from giving her the benefit of this form of treatment.' The treatment got the go-ahead after Williams received consent from Marson's sister in Jamaica.

90 Grenfell Williams to Edith Marson-Jones, 14 February 1946 (BBC WAC L1/290/1). Williams added, "We, who are concerned with the programme for the West Indies, are hoping that Miss Marson will recover completely, with the rest and treatment . . . and come back to her work with us full of her old enthusiasm."

91 J. F. Doulton, "Miss Una Marson," report, n.d. (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

92 Edith Marson-Jones to Grenfell Williams, 9 September 1946 (BBC WAC L1/290/2).

93 J. F. Doulton to Controller (Overseas Services), 16 October 1946 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

Henry Swanzy's recollection of the "outlandish story" recorded in Delia Jarrett-Macauley's biography:

In anticipation of possible difficulties we had decided that a car should be hired to take them all to the port at Swansea. . . . On Sunday evening Macfarlane [sic] 'phoned me to say that Miss Marson was being extremely difficult and had refused so far either to finish her own packing or to allow them to do it for her. I therefore offered to go around at 8 o'clock on Monday morning in case I could give any assistance in getting her off. When I got there I found that there was an extra passenger about whom I had not been told in Macfarlane's daughter aged about 14 and that despite my warnings there was far too much luggage for the car. We therefore arranged that Miss Marson, Mrs. Macfarlane and the daughter should go by [the hired] car. . . . As I had come up in my own car I offered to drive down with Mr. Blott [Marson's solicitor] and take Macfarlane and the luggage as well. We arrived at Swansea about 4.30 but when we got to the docks . . . the other car had not arrived. After an hour's searching and telephoning they still failed to turn up and the boat sailed . . . with a despondent Macfarlane on board having left behind not only Miss Marson but far more important his wife and child. When we got back to the dock gates we found that the other car had just arrived. The delay on the journey was caused by the deliberate and sustained obstructionism by Miss Marson and by a breakdown at Neath caused chiefly by her interference. The driver had only got them to the dock at all by having a taxi. The representatives of Elders & Fyffes, the owners of the boat to whom we had talked at intervals, then arranged to send a radio telephone message out to the boat to find out if she could drop anchor so that we could send the passengers out by pilot boat. This was arranged and with firm handling we had little further difficulty in getting Miss Marson on board. . . . by means of a rope ladder.<sup>94</sup>

Considerable care is required in trying to connect the tragic circumstances leading to Marson's breakdown and departure from the BBC, for which there is perhaps no definitive causal explanation. Marson appears to have been both agent and victim in relation to the forms of competition traced across this essay. What the files reveal is neither a tale of the pathological and temperamental producer, forever on the brink of hysteria, though we know from available accounts of her life that Marson had a history of mental illness.<sup>95</sup> Nor is it simply the story of a prejudiced and tyrannical employer, though we have seen that paternalism and casual racism went hand in hand at the BBC in the period associated with Marson's tenure. The doctors who treated Marson in early 1946 were particularly concerned about the "delusions" from which she was suffering, and understood these as signs of a persecution complex and paranoid schizophrenia.<sup>96</sup> The delusions centered on Marson's sense that her BBC colleagues and

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. See Jarrett-Macauley, *Life of Una Marson*, for Swanzy's account of this episode. Recalling the events in 1988, over forty years after they took place, Swanzy foregrounds the subjectivism and uncertainty of his memory: "'I think . . .'" "I remember . . .," and his reliance on "gossip." Faced with this speculative "outlandish story" (as the biography refers to it), Jarrett-Macauley's account is understandably reticent, seeking neither to confirm nor question Swanzy's account, which is left dangling in the narrative as just that: an outlandish story.

<sup>95</sup> As Jarrett-Macauley notes, "There has been considerable speculation about Una's mental stability; some people have wondered if she were mad. The truth was a little more complicated" (*Life of Una Marson*, 167).

<sup>96</sup> The BBC's medical advisor, Dr. Whyte, glossed the report from the Maudsley Hospital on 25 April 1946 as follows: "Miss Marson is suffering from schizophrenia and has delusions of persecution by a group of individuals, but she is unable to say who the members of this group are." Dr. A. F. Whyte, "Miss Una Marson," 3 May 1946 (BBC WAC File L1/290/1).

fellow West Indians were seeking to do her harm. One of the most specific iterations of this was pointed to by Miss Doulton: “[She has] an obsession that she was poisoned while out in the West Indies and that the man responsible was our representative there, [Cedric] Lindo, who she thinks wants her job.”<sup>97</sup> There is no need to ascribe any literal truth to such statements to suggest that Marson’s delusions were more than a pure manifestation of inner psychosis, that they were also imagined responses to external stimuli and the very real cultures of competition that have been explored during the course of this essay. However, while it is possible to speculate that the forms of rivalry in which Marson was obliged to participate were a factor in precipitating her declining health in the mid-1940s, it would be ultimately misleading to lay the blame with a single perpetrator. We have seen that, in albeit very different ways, both Marson and BBC staff found themselves caught up in a frequently racialized climate of competition that was larger than any of them. The case of Una Marson suggests race permeated everything from quotidian working practices and apparently trivial office politics to the seemingly neutral values of impartiality and balance standing at the very core of BBC broadcasting.<sup>98</sup> Marson’s life, including the difficult circumstances surrounding her breakdown, are put on record here less to give insight into a private life (though hopefully they are of biographical value) than to illuminate the public cultures of competition in wider circulation in the period running up to and including Marson’s illness. Paradoxically in this context, it is by persisting with the intimate biographical detail of Marson’s breakdown that we can begin to see that episode less in terms of an imminent psychological narrative than of one bound up with the public paranoia that had come to surround Marson’s professional position at the time.

### Postscript: Voices, Dreams, and Nightmares

While it turned out to be something of a swan song for Marson, *Caribbean Voices* has persisted as the definitive statement of her contribution at the BBC. Yet despite its reputation, the origins of that program remain unclear, and there is still considerable confusion over when it first started. Available accounts date the beginning of *Caribbean Voices* as either March 1943 or March 1945.<sup>99</sup> This slippage is not surprising: despite the BBC’s reputation as an

97 J. F. Doulton to Dr. A. F. Whyte, 11 January 1946 (BBC WAC L1/290/1). The prominent Jamaican couple, Cedric and Gladys Lindo, would go on to play a leading role as regional representatives for the BBC, actively involved in consciousness raising about the BBC’s West Indies programs in the Caribbean (once Marson’s remit), and selecting stories for the now famous *Caribbean Voices* program, which Marson had a significant hand in molding before the termination of her contract.

98 See, for example, Bidnall, “West Indian Interventions.”

99 For example, March 1943 is the start date given in Jarrett-Macauley, *Life of Una Marson*; Phillip Nanton, “What Does Mr. Swanzey Want? Shaping or Reflecting? An Assessment of Henry Swanzey’s Contribution to the Development of Caribbean Literature,” *Kunapipi* 20, no. 1 (1998): 11–20; Glyne Griffith, “This Is London Calling the West Indies”: The BBC’s *Caribbean Voices*,” in Bill Schwarz, ed., *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 196–208; Rush, *Bonds of Empire*; Darrell Newton, *Paving the Empire Road: BBC Television and Black Britons* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011); and Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters*. March 1945 is the start date given in Rhonda Cobham, “The *Caribbean Voices* Programme and the Development of West Indian Short Fiction: 1945–1958,” in Peter O. Stummer, ed., *The Story Must Be Told: Short Narrative Prose in the New English Literatures* (Bayreuth:

elephantine bureaucracy, there is no archival paper trail recording the genesis and rationale behind the program. For all its retrospective notoriety, no drum roll announced the arrival of *Caribbean Voices* at the time. “11 March 1943” appears to have been a typographical error in Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s influential biography of Marson, which refers to the first broadcast story as “Mrs. Arroway’s Joe” by the Jamaican writer R. L. C Aarons; the surviving script confirms the story was broadcast two years later, on Sunday, 11 March 1945. Meanwhile, the BBC’s own detailed inventory places “Mrs. Arroway’s Joe” first in its chronological catalogue of *Caribbean Voices* scripts. However, tantalizing snippets of information scattered elsewhere in the archive and pieced together in the production of this research show that *Caribbean Voices* was in fact first aired on 1 October 1944.<sup>100</sup> What this reveals is just how closely the inauguration *Caribbean Voices* coincided with the request for Marson to step back from the microphone (August 1944), her bouts of leave, and her subsequent breakdown the following year. These events and upheavals partly explain the gaps in the archive and Marson’s scant mentions in the earliest surviving *Caribbean Voices* scripts. We have seen that Marson was feeling increasingly out of touch with the West Indian literary scene during the critical period when *Caribbean Voices* first went on air. By the summer of 1944, Marson’s name had come to be regarded as so toxic that the BBC requested she play a more behind-the-scenes role as a producer, while they withheld her name from program credits. The earliest surviving (post-March 1945) scripts for the *Caribbean Voices* program she is today famous for founding never carried her name as producer. When her poem “Towards the Stars” (ironically, a powerful poetic declaration of personal independence) was broadcast on an early *Caribbean Voices* program, it was not attributed to her and is simply described as “by a Jamaican away from home.”<sup>101</sup> The relegation of Marson to a behind-the-scenes broadcasting role adds a layer of uncertainty to the program’s beginnings and earliest intentions. Marson’s frantic trip around the Caribbean in 1945, described earlier, was partly to promote and gather a wider range of literary materials for *Caribbean Voices*. She returned to London clutching a batch of new manuscripts from across the islands that might have allowed her to further democratize the program by de-centering Jamaica. But the trip coincided with her breakdown and subsequent departure from the BBC. The archive shows many of these newly acquired scripts were never broadcast and constitute another gap in the program’s early history.

Yet we do know that Marson’s reluctant departure was not a final farewell to England, nor would it be the end of her relationship with the BBC.<sup>102</sup> When she had fully recovered from her breakdown in 1948, Marson continued to correspond with former colleagues at the

Koningshausen, 1986), 146–60; and John Figueroa, “Flaming Faith of These First Years: *Caribbean Voices*,” in Maggie Butcher, ed., *Tibisiri* (Aarhus: Dangeroo, 1989), 59–80.

<sup>100</sup> See also the more definitive BBC “Programmes as Broadcast” files.

<sup>101</sup> *Caribbean Voices*, 27 May 1945 (BBC WAC script 35). June Grimble became the announcer heading up program scripts, and mentions of Marson were rare in these early programs.

<sup>102</sup> See chapter 16 of Jarrett-Macauley’s *Life of Una Marson* for a more comprehensive account of this period. While Marson never returned as an occasional contributor in the manner Williams had envisaged might be possible, she did give one more interview on *Woman’s Hour* during a fleeting visit to London in January 1965, a year before her untimely death.

corporation, most notably, perhaps, with her successor on the now famous *Caribbean Voices* program that she had first introduced in 1944: Henry Swanzy.<sup>103</sup> *Caribbean Voices* was going from strength to strength under Swanzy and by December 1947, Williams was suggesting dedicating the whole of the Sunday space to the literary magazine so that they could stay on top of the sheer volume of submissions.

However, one side effect of Marson's departure had been that perceptions of Jamaican overrepresentation on the West Indian programs, a source of so much competitive animosity under Marson, now became an issue of underrepresentation on Swanzy's *Caribbean Voices* of the late 1940s and early 1950s. After the various betrayals Marson had suffered during her years at the BBC, she was now given the tacit backing of key figures within Jamaica's literary establishment, some of whom started to withhold work from the program under Swanzy. Swanzy himself spoke of the Jamaican Poetry League "launching an offensive" against *Caribbean Voices*, while the BBC's Jamaica-based West Indian representative, Gladys Lindo, noted that the pioneering Jamaican poet Vivian Virtue "ha[d] always boycotted Caribbean Voices," despite Virtue being a regular contributor during Marson's time.<sup>104</sup> In Swanzy's review of 1947 that was broadcast on *Caribbean Voices* on 11 January 1948, Swanzy spoke candidly and critically of Jamaican output: "I must say, frankly, that the Jamaican contribution has not by any means been up to the quality or even the quantity of other islands. And that seems strange. . . . Maybe it is the link with the negro writers in America. . . . But what ever it may be I don't think we can compare the weight, the total weight of the Jamaican contribution with those of other islands."<sup>105</sup>

In the correspondence between Marson and Swanzy during this period, the competitive streak characterizing much of Marson's own BBC career would flare up again. In a letter from Marson to Swanzy written on 13 May 1952 and following Swanzy's visit to Jamaica in the March of that year, the former producer makes no bones of what Swanzy once alluded to as the "bad blood" between them:

Dear Henry,

I am still without a letter from you since your return to London. Surely it is time to give attention to this matter; I suppose you are neglecting me as I neglected you for so many years. But you should know that it is better to render good for evil. . . . I think it is time that Jamaica got more attention in *Caribbean Voices* and suggested that you could use material from our ten publications. Please let me know what you feel about this. We own the broadcasting rights and have contracted with our authors for the percentage they will receive.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>103</sup> This correspondence dates back at least as far as November 1948, when Marson sent Swanzy a greeting card from Jamaica.

<sup>104</sup> Henry Swanzy to Gladys Lindo, 20 October 1950; and Gladys Lindo to Henry Swanzy, 4 April 1951. Henry Swanzy Papers, University of Birmingham (hereafter HSP).

<sup>105</sup> "Talk by Henry Swanzy," *Caribbean Voices*, 11 January 1948 (BBC WAC script 160).

<sup>106</sup> Una Marson to Henry Swanzy, 13 May 1952, HSP.

While Marson implies that the dearth of Jamaican material broadcast on *Caribbean Voices* is due to a lack of “attention,” Swanzys main concern was that the island itself had turned its back on the program, and in his reply he asks her if she “could encourage any of [her] friends to send in material.”<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, Swanzys politely declines the offer of published materials, noting in reply that the “habit” of *Caribbean Voices* is to use “unpublished manuscripts” only; a departure, incidentally, from Marson’s own habit as producer.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, Swanzys hackles appear to rise at the suggestion *Caribbean Voices* would need to rely for its material on Marson’s own local publishing enterprise in Jamaica, Pioneer Press. Swanzys goes on to remind Marson in this context that, anyway, “the short stories that appeared in [her] London collection had already appeared in the programme.”<sup>109</sup> The subtext of the exchange concerns competing claims to literary ownership, copyright, and origins.

Jamaica remained something of a problem for Swanzys throughout his time as the producer of *Caribbean Voices*. On one occasion he spoke of the “complacency” and “stupidity” of the island, and would reserve some of his most scathing criticism for Jamaican authors, anthologies, and magazines.<sup>110</sup> In his final months on the program, Swanzys had a prolonged disagreement with the Lindos (Jamaicans) over the relative merits of the Barbadian George Lamming and the Jamaican Roger Mais, and on 3 September 1953 Swanzys wrote to his friend Frank Collymore (editor of the Barbadian little magazine *Bim*) about his annoyance at Jamaican criticism of Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*: “For ‘tedious’ read non-Jamaican,” he said, contrasting such responses with the island’s (in his view, regrettable) love of Mais.<sup>111</sup> Collymore was more than just a friend and fellow editor of course, but a Bajan like Lamming: interisland rivalry, it seems, did not simply disappear with Una Marson.

To be clear, Swanzys relations with Jamaica were always more multifaceted and open than these selective quotations suggest, but they capture something of the intermittent and occasional frustrations he felt as producer on *Caribbean Voices*. Swanzys would confide at one point to Collymore that the hostile relations between his program and Jamaica were getting him down. “To tell you the truth,” he wrote in a letter dated 31 January 1951, “I am also feeling a little depressed at the moment. Nothing comes out of Jamaica except spite.” His trip to the island in 1952 (during which he visited Marson) only seemed to make matters worse: “You ask me of my experience of Jamaica,” Swanzys wrote to Collymore. “Well to be candid, I feel as though I have swallowed dozens of razor blades, all in the pleasantest company, of course.”<sup>112</sup> The hostility that Swanzys perceived to be coming out of Jamaica made him feel at times lonely, low, an outsider, an interloper. Jamaica was a “headache,” he once said, and the

<sup>107</sup> Henry Swanzys to Una Marson, 20 May 1952, HSP.

<sup>108</sup> Marson was regularly reprimanded during her time at the BBC for not securing copyright permission for previously published scripts read on *Caribbean Voices*. Meanwhile, Swanzys comment here seems slightly disingenuous in that his programs did in fact regularly use previously published materials from little magazines.

<sup>109</sup> Henry Swanzys to Una Marson, 20 May 1952, HSP.

<sup>110</sup> Henry Swanzys to Gladys Lindo, 20 October 1950, HSP.

<sup>111</sup> Henry Swanzys to Frank Collymore, 3 September 1953, HSP.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 31 January 1951; 20 May 1952.

ceaseless rivalry, or “posturing,” as he put it, played on his “nerves,” just as it had done on Marson’s.<sup>113</sup> Marson and Swanzy were by no means alone in this regard: other less-well-known producers for “Calling the West Indies” programs and especially *Caribbean Voices* came under fire or found their tempers tested by the climate of competition that broadcasts intermittently aroused.<sup>114</sup> In other words, there is an interesting homology to be traced between Marson’s (pathologized) paranoia in the mid-1940s and a wider climate of professional paranoia experienced by subsequent producers at the BBC.

Yet Marson’s time at the BBC was a story not simply of fallouts and foes but of friendships and long-lasting loyalties that cut jaggedly across racial lines. Often these friendships outlived the professional working relationships that created an adversarial culture under different circumstances.<sup>115</sup> Marson retained a lifelong connection with Rudolph Dunbar, while Henry Swanzy’s own diaries reveal a personal affection for the Jamaican poet that tells a slightly different and more ambivalent story (if the crossed out text is anything to go by) to the professional correspondence: “Poor Una Marson, the Jamaican poetess, reaching for the stars, sailed is sent back home to the West Indies, against her will and deeply disturbed. I found her one of the most amiable of all at 200, despite the fact that this diary does not mention her very much. If only one had one area to deal with!”<sup>116</sup> Marson remained in touch with Grenfell Williams, T. S. Eliot, and George Orwell, while continuing to speak in the fondest terms of her time working under Cecil Madden. Williams, meanwhile, described Marson as “on the side of the angels.”<sup>117</sup> In a letter to BBC Features producer Lawrence Gilliam on 6 March 1957, Marson reflected, “My years at the B.B.C. now seem like a dream—an exciting dream which ended in a nightmare when I got ill. But it is the happy things that I constantly recall and the wonderful people with whom I was associated.”<sup>118</sup>

However, none of these personal friendships could save Marson, at the time of her employment, from the apparently dispassionate values of professional autonomy. In Joan Gilbert’s early assessment, Marson could not control her “temperament” or her “feelings” for

113 “You must forgive my raw nerves, but I find the posturing in your island very tedious, if understandable,” wrote Swanzy to Lindo on 19 June 1950 (HSP). Swanzy’s remarks were fueled by what he called, in a slightly earlier letter to Collymore on 15 June 1950, the “bad tempered comment” on *Caribbean Voices* from the Jamaican poets Vivian Virtue and A. J. Seymour (HSP).

114 For example, Edward (“Willy”) Edmett, Swanzy’s immediate successor as producer on *Caribbean Voices*, was cautioned for his uncharacteristically intemperate response to a complaint from the West Indies about the program in April 1953. Meanwhile, in June 1957, Ken Ablack’s cricketing commentaries on “Calling the West Indies” were lambasted in British Guiana. As it was reported in the *Gleaner*, “An editorial today attacked the biased broadcasts of Trinidad-born Kenneth Ablack during the cricket series now being played in England by the West Indies team. . . . The Chronicle’s [Daily Chronicle, Guyana] main concern is the ‘consistent down-grading by Mr. Ablack of British Guiana’s wicketkeeper-batsman Rohan Kanhai, whose efforts have been no worse than any other West Indies team member’” (*Gleaner*, 15 June 1957).

115 On Dunbar and Marson meeting again in late 1964, see Jarrett-Macauley, *Life of Una Marson*, 220. Ken Ablack, Ulric Cross, Mary Treadgold, and June Grimble were other “enduring friends” (148).

116 Henry Swanzy diaries, entry for 13 July 1945 (“Icabod,” vol. 2, July 1945), University of Warwick. The diaries covering Swanzy’s trip to Jamaica referred to earlier in this chapter also conflict somewhat with impressions he gave Collymore in letters, and which suggest a warmth towards both Marson and the island.

117 Grenfell Williams to Cedric Lindo, 13 January 1950 (BBC WAC E1/1308/2). Williams’s comment was prompted by Marson’s outspoken defense, in the *Gleaner*, of the need for public broadcasting in the Caribbean.

118 Una Marson to Lawrence Gilliam, 6 March 1957 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

the good of the program. She was not neutral or autonomous enough. During her first weeks at the BBC, Marson was also criticized from various quarters for being impolite: her interview technique was sometimes regarded as too direct, while her attitude in the studio was occasionally regarded as rude. Codes of politeness and social etiquette were potent racial signifiers in the 1940s when the figure of the antisocial West Indian settler began to take a firm hold within popular public discourse.<sup>119</sup> On one level, such characterizations suggested Marson's inability, or unwillingness, to submit herself to the "moderate" values of elevated English culture which were a tacit barometer of balance and neutrality at the BBC at the time. By the same token, Gilbert's refusal to accept Marson's outspokenness, partly on the grounds that it came from a "coloured woman" could be given such casual expression precisely because it formed part of the commonsense consensus surrounding the subordinate status of blacks and women in the metropolitan workplace. In her daily transactions at the BBC, Marson rarely forgot, or was rarely allowed to forget, who she was: whether as a woman, as a Jamaican, as a West Indian, or as a black person. On the advice of the Colonial Office, Marson was placed on a different pay scale as a "coloured" colonial subject.<sup>120</sup> Her probation period was extended and subject to special scrutiny on the same grounds. In traveling around the country to record messages from West Indian troops, Marson confronted a "colour bar" when seeking hotel accommodation.<sup>121</sup> Her programs came to be positioned by members of the West Indian community in London and the Caribbean as those of a partial presenter, biased towards Jamaica, or problematically predisposed towards black West Indians. And in the end, it was only Una Marson who was obliged to personally defend herself and her programs against the charge of prejudice.

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<sup>119</sup> See also Una Marson's poem "Politeness" in her contemporaneous collection *Towards the Stars* (London: University of London Press, 1945): "They tell us / That our skin is black / But our hearts are white. / We tell them / That their skin is white / But their hearts are black" (44).

<sup>120</sup> See memo from Director of Empire Services on 28 January 1941 (BBC WAC L1/290/1).

<sup>121</sup> On 18 June 1942, Joanna Spicer wrote to the Welsh regional director after Marson was refused accommodation at the Park Hotel on 12 June 1942 during one of her message programs. "I am sure you will agree with us in regretting that such a thing should happen. I suppose we cannot hope to influence hotels about the accommodation of coloured persons, and that we must just make sure that they will in fact be accommodated before making a reservation for a coloured person" (BBC WAC L1/290/1).