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Diasporic Creativity: Refugee Intellectuals, Exiled Poets and Corporate Cosmopolitanism at the BBC World Service

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The BBC World Service has received much of its intellectual and creative impetus from diasporic and displaced people. This will be illustrated in three case studies of individuals broadcasting to India and the Caribbean in the 1930s and 40s and to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Exiled, refugee, and dissident intellectuals were assembled at Bush House, the London home of the World Service. There, they established, and historically renewed, the BBC's corporate cosmopolitanism.

The BBC World Service (BBCWS) is literally, and financially, a state broadcaster. Funded through a parliamentary 'grant-in-aid' administered by the Foreign Office, it nevertheless retains a unique 'aura of impartiality' and projects a cosmopolitan soundscape of the world, albeit limited by prevailing corporate interests and British geopolitical priorities. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) dictates where the WS broadcasts but editorial control rests with broadcasters, except at times of war.

Currently the BBCWS broadcasts to an estimated 185 million listeners, viewers and web users around the world in 32 languages as well as in English. The number of language services changes according to geopolitical, financial and marketing imperatives. Resources are now being re-directed from radio to new regional tri-platform (radio, online and TV) services in Arabic and Persian. The paradox remains: how can WS as a state broadcaster maintain its aura of impartiality and its reputation as a forum for free debate? The answer proposed is: through diasporic creativity and corporate cosmopolitanism.

From Empire Service to Diasporic Overseas Service

The BBC Empire Service started off as a diasporic contact zone at its foundation in 1932 (Gillespie, 2010). Diasporic contact zones are social and symbolic spaces and places for creativity, performance and representation (Pratt 1992). They are marked by historically forged, asymmetric power relations, in this case negotiated through the interactions between British and diasporic broadcasters based at Bush House and their audiences (interpellated by the "London Calling!" channel signature), but also through the web of professional and personal exchanges, friendships, working relationships and rivalries among broadcasters.

The first Director General, Sir John Reith, announced that the Empire Service would provide 'a unique opportunity to foster bonds of understanding and friendship between the peoples of Britain's scattered dominions and the mother country, and to bring to Britons overseas the benefits already enjoyed by the British public at home' (Mansell 1973:1). The British diaspora included administrators, soldiers, settlers, experts, and assorted expatriates. The

Empire Service would keep them in touch with the motherland and with each other.

The threat of war transformed the BBC's imperial mission in the English language into one of fighting fascism in foreign tongues. The first 'vernacular' language services were set up in Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese in 1938 to compete with Italian and German radio propaganda. The BBC transmuted into a polyglot Tower of Babel. From 1937 to 1941 BBC staff numbers increased three-fold to 9000 (Mansell, 1978: 104). In 1939 the Empire Service was re-named the BBC Overseas Service. The embryonic Ministry of Information asked the BBC to monitor enemy propaganda in dozens of languages. Dissident writers, artists and intellectuals who flocked to London, the epicentre of the fight against fascism in Europe, found their linguistic skills in strong demand. After a voice test and a translation exercise, 'gifted amateurs' began broadcasting to their compatriots and/or monitoring radio and press in their respective languages. By October 1941 nearly 250 bulletins in 30 languages were being monitored daily by 500 foreign language specialists who listened to the war unfold and translated its intrigues, surprises and tragedies (Mansell 1978: 104). Among them were diasporic intellectual stars like Ernest Gombrich, George Weidenfeld, Martin Esslin, and Anatol Goldberg (later the BBC's most popular voice across Russia). By 1942, the BBC was broadcasting in 45 languages. But most of what was broadcast was scripted in English and translated.

'Talking to India'

The Eastern Services first broadcast in English and Hindustani (and later in Bengali, Gujerati and Marathi) to India. George Orwell was a Talks Producer (1941-43) working in close partnership with an Indian Muslim called Zulfaqar Ali Bokahari, Indian Programme Organiser (1940-65) for 'Talking to India', and later Head of Pakistan radio. 'Talking to India' broadcast commentaries, poetry, plays and music, targeting anti-fascist propaganda at India's intellectual and cultural elites. Orwell's scripts were translated into Hindustani and read out, or 'ventriloquised' by Bokhari and other diasporic Indians (Thiranagama 2010). The aim was to secure the allegiance of Indians to Britain's war effort. This was a time of fraught Indo-British relations. The 'Quit India Movement' was taking off and prominent Indian nationalists were allying with the Axis Powers. Subhas Chandra Bose's 'Free India' radio propaganda was influential among Indian audiences.

The right kind of diasporic voice emanating from the imperial metropolis was, as the BBC knew, a tool of enormous cultural and political power. Accent, tone and cadence were essential to conveying a British perspective, without compromising the BBC's reputation for impartiality (Ranasinha 2010). Diasporic Indians were courted to contribute to the programmes. Voices critical of British policy were considered particularly valuable. Mulk Raj Anand, who had arrived in Britain from the Punjab in 1924 to undertake postgraduate studies, was a key figure in London's intellectual and cultural scene. A friend of Orwell, Louis McNiece, TS Eliot, EM Forster, Virginia Woolf, he helped shape London's literary modernism by injecting anti-imperial and cosmopolitan perspectives (Ranasinha 2010). Anand was well known for his

anti-imperialist Indian nationalist rhetoric. His novel *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) raged against the exploitation as 'cannon fodder' of the two million Indian soldiers who fought under the British flag in the First World War. His opposition to the colonial government, and its brutal suppression of nationalists, put him in conflict with the British government. But, to the BBC, dissident diasporic voices would increase the Indian audience's confidence, and the credibility and influence of broadcasts. At first Anand refused the BBC's overtures. However, in 1942, Anand capitulated. He not only "ventriloquised" Orwell's scripts but authored his own. He contributed to the 'Open Letters' Series, condemning the Nazism and Fascism as vociferously as he did British imperialism, combining a cosmopolitan internationalism with Indian nationalism.

Many diasporic broadcasters were caught up in the contradictions posed by the war: the paradoxes of trying to fight fascism and imperialism at the same time. Some Indian dissidents and exiles aligned themselves with the British while others acted as cultural brokers. For example, Venu Chitale worked for the Indian section during the war and broadcast pioneering programmes in Hindi and Marathi comparing the situation of women in Britain and India while Princess Indira of Kapurthala was House of Commons correspondent for the BBC.

The cultural politics of Indian broadcasters during the war remains relatively little researched. The Caribbean case is better known.

Caribbean Voices

The Caribbean section of the BBC's Overseas Service was launched in 1939 with a programme *Calling the West Indies* to boost the morale of the Island colonies and counter nationalist sentiments. Like the Eastern Services, it relayed messages from service men in 'the mother country' to their families back home (Newton, 2008). Una Marson, a journalist and poet was a leading figure in the service who believed in the power of literary expression as a tool of cultural and social development. She participated in the poetry magazine series *Voice* edited by Orwell for the Eastern Service. This poetry programme was one of the few truly cross-diasporic contact zones at the World Service. It brought together diasporic Indians and Caribbeans alongside their peers in other language services in the fight against fascism – and the shared belief in the power of the pen over the sword.

During the war, Una Marson began to receive short essays and pieces of writing and some of these were broadcast. This provided the catalyst for *Caribbean Voices,* a weekly programme in which poets, playwrights and prose writers showcased their writing. It was first broadcast in 1943 with Una Marson as the presenter but her time at the BBC (1939-45) was difficult. She felt conflicting loyalties: supporting the war effort and campaigning for liberation from colonial rule. Living in London and moving in its transnational political, intellectual and literary networks, she became committed to pan-Africanism and in 1945 she returned to the Caribbean. Her successor, Irishman Henry Swanzy, continued to respond to demands from audiences for cultural space and representation. Caribbean Voices helped launch the

careers of V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming and Derek Walcott. It provided an outlet for young writers, it paid very well.

Previously unknown Caribbean voices were being selected, edited and judged by metropolitan standards. The programme's embrace of local dialect, idioms and syntax transgressed the conventions of standardized English and was often a source of conflict. *Caribbean Voices* afforded prestige and recognition, but voices legitimated by the 'mother country' and the BBC were seen as an arm of colonialism. Self-irony and distantiating devices were deployed by Caribbean writers as means of expressing the sense of ambivalent belonging and self consciousness they felt towards both the 'mother country' and the island colonies. Caribbean Voices provided a bridge between the islands and the metropolis and a creative contact zone for Caribbean writers and intellectuals but its unique brand of corporate cosmopolitanism was marked by profound political and cultural contradictions and conflicts.

Soviet Voices, Literary Lives

After 1945, diplomatic and World Service focus shifted to the Soviet Empire. Again, the right kinds of voices were needed and, again, diasporic intellectuals and writers provided them. Many of the staff had courageously sustained double lives as dissident poets, writers, artists and musicians at home. Those who could assemble in London found a creative 'home from home' at Bush House.

Exilic intellectuals still had an ambivalent status at Bush House and were closely monitored. The BBC employed 'switch censors' to interrupt any broadcaster who went off script. Those preferentially hired were from their countries' educational upper echelons: brilliant linguists, many commanding five or more languages. Two demands clashed. The BBC management adopted a 'war style' of authoritative broadcasting, while the dissident intellectuals preferred a love of words that went deeper than the flat registers of World Service bulletins. At first, the dissident hirelings were reduced to mere translators and credible ventriloquisers and scripts were usually written by centralised editorial teams. Gradually, they won a degree of creative autonomy.

Diasporic writers often made use of their exile as a literary device – a distancing technique that plays with borders between insider and outsider, but which is also crucial to the self-distancing techniques so fundamental to the BBC World Service styles of reporting at an empathetic distance. This is a central feature of the corporate style of cosmopolitanism practiced at the World Service. These tensions were experienced acutely, but also reconciled as complementary, by Ravil Bukharaev, a Tatar poet and journalist:

> *There is nothing in the world less conducive to poetry than BBC journalism [..] If poetry […] is an utterly personal and therefore highly partial medium, journalism is concerned as far as possible with objectivity in a very biased world […] poetry puts me in touch with something imperishable and solid in a journalistic world of the ever new and quickly forgotten. Poetry shows you that with all the cultural trends*

> *and developing technologies worldwide, human beings do not change much as regards love, compassion, faith and their opposites […] There is always hope while we try to understand one another. Even in that Babylon of languages and ethnic diversity, the BBC World Service, we can understand one another as journalists who respect the BBC Charter of fair reporting and as poets, with a need for self understanding, thereby benefiting others as well as ourselves. So journalism and poetry at the BBC have come to share the same territory and expertise.* (Bukharaev in Weissbort 2003: 96-7)

The fate of diasporic writers was not always pleasant. In 1978 Georgi Markov, a distinguished Bulgarian novelist, was murdered by a poisoned tipped umbrella while he was making his way to work at the Bush House where he worked for the Bulgarian Service. It is likely that he was assassinated because of his anti-communist literary rather than political activities and for fear of the impact of his dissident BBC broadcasts. This legendary tale of the poisoned tip umbrella later found its way into a novel (written in French and translated into English) entitled '*The Russian Service*' by Zinovy Zinik, a broadcaster for the Russian Service since 1975. The story revolves around a Mr Narator who becomes obsessed with foreign broadcasts. He defects to the West in order to meet the faces behind the voices. However, in London, he is persuaded by émigré broadcasters that he will be the next victim of the poisoned umbrella and a political martyr. This surreal comic novel explores the often intimate and liberating relationship between émigré broadcasters and their audiences behind the Iron Curtain. In Zinik's words:

> *… All of us,* [Russian immigrants in London] *especially at the time of the Iron Curtain, led a kind of ethereal existence. We existed for Russia on the air only, in a bodiless state. The very term 'foreign news' – news from a foreign i.e. another world – has something other-worldly about it. […] The BBC canteen – that's a special case … All the political changes in the country were reflected in the way the BBC canteen was run!.* (Zinik in Weissbort 2003: 195-205)

Zinik's writing connects past and present, being here and there. His novels, broadcasts and plays are a sustained reflection on the exile condition. The exiled writer becomes emblematic of the fate of his or her country: writing becomes a form of exile, and exile a literary device, an alternative perspective on the world. Zinik's irreverent, dissident diasporic perspective allows for an outsider's view of the English from the inside, and an insider's stance on the Russians from the outside. Ironic distances ripple through his writing.

Vibrant literary cultures blossomed in the contact zones of the bar and the canteen at Bush House, where the lights never went out. Broadcasting was always 24/7. Relative freedom of expression went hand in hand with the very peculiar 'out of body experience' that international broadcasting can be.

Conclusion

Diasporic intellectuals and journalists, poets and film directors, script writers and artists from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region found Bush House a fertile environment in which to develop their talents. Their talents have transformed Britain's culture of international broadcasting, literary networks and intellectual horizons, and forged a unique brand of corporate cosmopolitanism at the BBC. As writers and broadcasters, they have mediated culture, politics, and identities between Britain and their (former) home countries. But balancing corporate interests and geo-political priorities with a literary career is no easy task. Many writers experience profound political and cultural ambivalence. Diasporic contact zones are zones of conflict, where colonial, postcolonial and Cold War interests clashed, and cosmopolitan and national imaginaries and practices had either to collude or collide. The term diaspora can only be shorthand for successive displacements and complex movements. Yet these three case studies show how examining the lives and works of diasporic individuals through the institutional prism of the BBC World Service, we can ground our analyses of the personal and political, the biographical and the literary and connect these to wider historical processes.

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