



"Voice"—the monthly radio magazine programme in the Eastern Service of the B.B.C. (Left to right, sitting) Venu Chitale, J.M. Tambimuttu, T.S. Eliot, Una Marson, Mulik Raj Anand, C. Pemberton, Narayana Menon; (standing) George Orwell, Nancy Barratt, William Empson. B.B.C. copyright

"Hello, West Indies!  
This Is Una Marson Calling..."  
Garnette Cadogan

A word to home—a simple call across the waters to say not merely how we are doing, but what we're doing, and to reassure loved ones that, indeed, we are well and are doing good. But even more, a chance to close the distance through the warmth of a human voice. It's World War II, and people in the Caribbean are hungry for news from and about the people who have left for Britain to join the war effort. They crave the voices of those whose sounds no longer populate their streets. So, they tune into the BBC to catch some news, maybe even capture some measure of hope. And to hear their own on the programme *Calling the West Indies*, with its mix of personal messages to relatives and friends, stories of the contribution of West Indians to the war effort, and music? A palpable excitement.

One can catch a glimpse of what *Calling the West Indies* might sound like by going to

YouTube to find the 1943 film special, "Hello! West Indies." West Indians in Britain step up to the microphone in a BBC studio, and talk about their service in the armed forces and in civilian jobs. The first to speak, a poet and playwright and journalist, the first black woman broadcaster for the BBC, is the occasion's luminous host: "Hello, West Indies. This is Una Marson, calling you from London." Her bright voice makes her an apt emcee, but also adds to the spirit of uplift—boosterism, even—that suffuses the film reel. "I'm going to ask some of these West Indians here to tell you something about our work in this country," she promises. Royal Air Force pilot; Air Traffic Control aircraft-woman; ambulance driver; Navy air-sea rescuers; Auxiliary Territorial Service plotting officer; nurse; lumberjacks; Jamaica; Trinidad; Bermuda; Barbados; St. Vincent; Antigua; British Guiana (now Guyana); British Honduras (now Belize)—professions and places are introduced, one testimonial after another, piling up evidence that leaves no doubt that West Indians were crucial to the British war effort.

At the center of the ambassadorial efforts is Una Marson, bringing speakers and audiences together. This was a role that characterized her entire career—building bridges between home and the exiled. In her poetry (poems about black pride and alienation: "Kinky Hair Blues"; "Nigger"; "Quashie Comes to London"); in her plays (*At What a Price*, about a girl leaving the country for the city in Jamaica; *London Calling*, about a woman leaving Jamaica for London, then returning home by homesickness); with her activism (at the League of Coloured Peoples, highlighting issues of radical feminism); in her participation in international women's organizations (International Alliance of Women, where she championed the rights and struggles of black women worldwide); in her welfare work (supporting the young through Jamaica Save the Children Fund); and, most of all, in her education efforts (to inform Jamaicans about their heritage, to fund the education of poor children, to combat a colonial vision with a Pan-Africanist re-education, to promote a broad variety of Caribbean writers)—she was an outstanding advocate who kept returning to Countee Cullen's poignant question, "What is Africa to me?"

There's a well-known photograph of Marson, sitting at the center of a distinguished gathering, which includes T.S. Eliot, Venu Chitale, George Orwell, and William Empson, all involved in the BBC monthly radio program, *Voice*. She's the only black woman in the room, a state of affairs all too familiar to her, and one that shaped her work and activism, both of which pushed to create rooms in which black women would be seen and heard. (In 1935, at the 20th Annual Congress of the International Alliance of Women Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, where she represented Jamaica, she was again the only black woman in the room, and she challenged white feminists to include the concerns and struggles of black women in their advocacy). Her earlier poetry shows

strong marks of her colonial education—Romantic echoes abound—but her time in London (1932–1936, 1938–1945) helped move her more actively along a vector of Pan-Africanism, and she worked tirelessly to present original work from Caribbean voices across the region that would give people in the metropole and beyond a sense of what it meant to hear *home* in the voices on the radio. On programs such as *Calling the West Indies* and its successor, *Caribbean Voices*, she featured writing from Derek Walcott, Sam Selvon, and V.S. Naipaul, she contributed to a richer sense of Caribbean nationalism and black internationalism. For that reason alone she deserves our close, sustained attention.

Through her travels and her multifaceted work she intersected with Haile Selassie (she was his secretary in London during his years of exile), Jamaican poet and folklorist Louise Bennett, Marcus Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, Jomo Kenyatta, Andrew Salkey, Samuel Selvon, Venu Chitale, Harold Moody, and other crucial figures in the history of anti-colonialism, Pan-Africanism, and anti-racism. To enter into the archives through her work and movements is to enter into an important history through a room with her at the center, us peering over her shoulder to learn from her, following her concerns and championing the causes she spent her life fighting for—particularly, the need for us to be at home in the world. At a time when the Windrush generation who helped build Britain are being treated with ingratitude and disdain, many being abused and even deported to countries they no longer know as home as a result of Theresa May's "hostile environment policy," the life and work of Una Marson is all the more urgent and deserving of our attention. Let's return to the archives in search of her, so that there will be work that calls across the distance—many distances—to announce, "Hello, West Indies."