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BOOK REVIEW

Paving the Empire Road: BBC television and Black Britons

DARRELL MOTTLEY NEWTON
Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011
xvi+267 pp., illus., appendix, bibliography and index, $80.00 (cloth)

In Paving the Empire Road, Newton examines the impact of African-Caribbeans in British broadcasting as it developed within the BBC Service from the early 1930s and to the first decade of the twenty-first century. The study represents a detailed account of the policies and practice undertaken by the Corporation through its public radio and television service with regard to the representation of African-Caribbeans and in relation to matters of immigration, colour prejudice and ethnic relations in Britain. The author specifically tackles a ‘chronology of efforts’ attempted by the BBC management to develop programmes that portray West Indian culture and that address issues of racism, social welfare and integration in urban areas and in the workplace.

In Chapter One, Newton analyses pre-war radio programming (e.g. Calling the West Indies, 1939, the later Caribbean Voices, 1943–1958), which, prior to the emergence of television as a prime medium of cultural communication, constituted a first broadcast platform for the recognition of African-Caribbean voices and culture within the BBC Empire Service. The chapter also discusses how West Indian themes on radio programmes during and after the war, such as the Colour Bar series (1943), provided opportunities for the BBC management to acknowledge and address concerns over racial discrimination—for example in regard to housing and employment—experienced by West Indians and other colonials immigrating to the ‘motherland’. In Chapter Two, Newton considers post-war television broadcasts and focuses on the commitments made by the BBC, through the use of audience surveys, talk shows, televised documentaries and dramas (e.g. A Man from the Sun, 1956), to deal with controversial issues of race relations, immigration and cultural differences in Britain. Chapter Three examines the delicate climate following the disorders in Notting Hill and Nottingham of the late 1950s. The author discusses how political concerns, public opinion and racial tensions in urban areas affected BBC editorial decisions between the 1960s and 1980s in respect of its televised representation of immigration and race. Critical analyses of the service’s initiatives during this period feature examples such as the West Indian conference, the Going to Britain booklet, as well as controversial Black-themed programmes (Rainbow City, 1967, and
Empire Road, 1978–1979, among others). Newton also points out how dissatisfaction and criticism concerning the misrepresentation and racial stereotyping of Blacks on television drove the BBC management from the 1980s onwards to reconsider their hiring practices in terms of equal opportunities. In Chapter Four, the author presents a series of interviews with media professionals working in the service, which he conducted during the period 1993 and 2010. The interviewees express concern over the inability of British public television to portray balanced or innovative images of African-Caribbeans, and identify the influence of American television and a lack of authenticity in the treatment of multicultural British life. They also suggest strategies directed towards diversification of television imagery, and discuss present opportunities and challenges confronting Black British media professionals within the UK television industry. Chapter Five focuses on the commitments of Greg Dyke, as Director General of the BBC, to increase the presence of ethnic minority staff at the corporation. In this last chapter, Newton provides further discussion with former BBC manager Cyril Husbands on ethnic minority-themed programmes and recent screen portrayals of Black Britons (e.g. Babyfather, 2001–2002; The Crouches, 2003–2005)

Throughout this account, Newton examines in depth a broad range of written documents, such as memoranda, letters, policy decisions and directives of department heads from the BBC Written Archive Centre. Personal interviews with writers, actors and producers, together with archival sources including television scripts and press coverage, complement this extensive historical research. In many respects, the author does not enter into a theoretical discussion of the Black presence in the United Kingdom nor does he focus on the historical and educational significance of BBC programming in the construction of nationhood or of discourses of Britishness. Although Newton initially acknowledges the importance of previous research on the influential social role of television broadcasting in matters of race, immigration and cultural identity (e.g. M. Gillespie, 1995, and S. Hall, 1996, among others), his study does not draw into an explicit cultural semiotic discourse.

On the other hand, this academic study is an important contribution towards the mapping and understanding of the history of black participation within British television (as also discussed in S. Bourne, 2001, S. Malik, 2002 et al.). Newton’s attentions are directed primarily towards documenting the BBC endeavours, as a non-commercial service, to portray immigrant West Indian culture for a varied audience. His factual description manages to highlight how broadcasting choices with relation to race in the UK—not only BBC 1 and 2 but also ITV, Channel 4 and other networks—have generally reflected the problematic issues of assimilation and multiculturalism, which underlay British post-colonial society. While the public service continues in its attempts to address an ever-growing multiethnic nation, Newton leaves the debate open by calling for ‘meaningful changes in broadcast policies’ (p. 241), which would enrich diverse cultural representations on the screen.

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This book takes a new perspective on the arrival of West Indians to Britain from 1948 onwards. It concentrates on the portrayal of the influx from a media perspective, which I found fascinating. There is no doubt that the media fashions the ways in which we view our worlds and as such it is a huge responsibility they carry. Newton explores this through the BBC primarily and shows how they were the forerunners for the other networks that featured race-related matters and black people.

Newton’s introduction gives a background to the advent of black people moving to Britain. This is familiar territory to scholars with an interest and indeed for families who lived through those times and perhaps travelled to the ‘Motherland’. The book is referred to as a study, and there’s no doubt that it is highly researched and referenced throughout. However, that does not stop it from being readable and accessible. Newton begins with the influence of radio on BBC television services and the way in which Pathe newsreels enabled news and public affairs that often featured the challenges of West Indian immigration. The study then follows Black people and the ways in which they were portrayed by the BBC from difficulties with housing and jobs, to famous African American icons and entertainers. There is reference to uprisings and unrests and the way in which they were portrayed by the media. Interestingly the final chapter deals with African Caribbean ‘issues’ that have been portrayed through programmes such as Babyfather, 2001, Shoot the Messenger, 2006, Small Island, 2009. And pertinent Newton states in his conclusion that ‘Our Jamaican Problem’ which was highlighted in 1948 seems to still be represented by the media with little change.

The book is well thought out, and offers an honest look at the broadcasting of ethnic programming. It is not easy reading, in the way that it highlights how black people have been and are still being portrayed as ‘problematic’, but given that the media shapes a country’s view of how ‘others’ are seen it is a necessary study. It maps the attitudes of the BBC directors towards racial programmes and gives an in-depth insight into the workings of the BBC. It is without a doubt an important study for anyone interested in the media and its...
attitudes.
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Adjusting the contrast

VAHNI CAPILDEO

Darrell M. Newton
PAVING THE EMPIRE ROAD: BBC Television and black Britons
22 Sep, Manchester University Press, £50.
9780719018675

Darrell M. Newton has named Paving the Empire Road: BBC Television and black Britons (1978–9), the first BBC drama series by a convicted murderer, as a "black Briton of West Indian descent". Speaking to "each of us as children of media, no matter our gender or ethnic identity", Newton takes us from the days of radio through television's rise in the 1950s, to recent developments in cable and satellite technologies, emphasizing the BBC's role in service and educational broadcasting. This is the context for Newton's historical analysis of BBC policies and practices that hoped to examine and improve racial relations while the BBC itself struggled for autonomy under internal and external pressures: sensitive programmes rescheduled because of local elections; interference from the Colonial Office; the emergence of independent and commercial television in the 1980s and 90s, and the activity of media unions regarding the employment of ethnic minorities; and finally, as Newton's running comparison with the United States suggests, the BBC's offerings, initially more encompassing and nuanced, ceding to new American models with regard to ethnic inclusiveness and preferred genres.

The BBC appears as an organization with a conundrum, described as a "black Briton of chivalry" for being muddled or patronizing. The changeability of broadcasting policies has all along been driven by painstaking viewer research reports and consultation with community groups, showing continuity with today's methods and preoccupations. The Brown Advisory Services Policy Guide for Writers and Producers (1948) lays down language guidelines, a politically correct mantra still lingering in following public feeling after offensive jokes were aired. In the 1950s, the Corporation produced a multi-authored booklet, Going to Britain, preparing immigrants to "keep smiling" in their new life in the UK. How to address difference and redress exclusion without reinforcing apathy? In the 1960s, the answers included targeted programming and smart technology. The characters and situations in broadcasts such as Mrs Chaudhury Goes Shopping were designed to show immigrants how to cope with everyday life. New equipment allowed reporters to make covert recordings of the notoriously unaccommodating landlords' refusals of black tenants.

Telling the familiar story of the arrival of the Empire Windrush at Tilbury Docks in 1948, with its cargo of "new citizens", Newton reminds us of those newsreels that had urged the Colonies to support Britain in the Second World War; indeed, the BBC Caribbean Service radio had been deployed as a recruitment tool. With soldiers' radio messages yielding over time to programmes for, about, or by immigrants, a creative network was threaded between territories. Black media professionals speak directly in Newton's fourth chapter, which is based on interviews over the past twenty years. Musing on self-definition, respondents return to the desire for creative and financial freedom, noting the lack of black representation behind the camera or in managerial positions; the difficulty in obtaining slots anywhere near peak time for the programmes that are made; and the rejection or illicit appropriation of mainstream ideas from minority producers. There is even a suggestion that Britain is just a "host culture", with emigration offering the best chance to exercise one's talent. Finally, Newton takes his readers into the heart of Greg Dyke's BBC. Here the tension lies between the recruitment and training of more diverse staff, and the need to make better use of those already employed by the organization.

At this point, one might ask: who are the "black Britons" of the title? They are, in fact, largely Afro-Caribbean. Early immigrants' acerbic remarks frequently remind the "mother country" that there is less of a cultural difference between the West Indies and Britain than between the nations yoked to form the United Kingdom in 1707. In the 1960s, the Director-General apparently agreed, making an invidious comparison with the relative un-Britishness of South Asian former colonies. Newton refrains, however, from defining "Britishness" (or considering whether some immigration represented a deliberate disengagement from the colonies' independence movements). "Blackness" is hardly essentialized, but "Whiteness" and "Britishness" are underanalysed, and Dyke is more than once called the BBC's "last great White hope". Gender, class and regional factors are sensitively differentiated, and Newton gives evidence that for women, whether Una Marson of BBC Caribbean Voices fame or "a Nigerian midwife" contributing to Women's Programmes, expertise could trump race.

It is a pity that Paving the Empire Road is written in jargonese. Passive constructions placing the verb first abound ("Discussed are . . ."). Newton's choice of words can be baffling; why describe the Black/Asian couple in Empire Road as "removing the binary construct of black and white, yet complicating it further with Eastern and Western cultural affectations"? A pity, too, about the contrast between the appalling copy-editing and the meticulous research. Sir Grantley Adams was never "Governor of Trinidad"; he was the first Premier of Barbados. Empire Road is apparently viewed by 3.9 per cent of the UK population, whereas a comedy in a competing slot is viewed "by an estimated 30 per cent of audiences" — it is not helpful to change the base of comparison between "population" and "audience" without giving proportions or figures. The book sometimes loses itself in lengthy lists, yet remains lacking in desaturated or relevant context. The geographer Ceri Peach, the author of, inter alia, West Indian Migration to Britain: A social geography (1968), figures as "an Oxford sociology professor" and changes sex, "he" becoming "she". Discussion of Channel 4's Badass TV (1995) leaves anonymous the elephant dung artist lumped in with porn stars and rappers; was this the prizewinning Chris Offili? How exactly were "individuals . . . recruited from around the Commonwealth" for the BBC's newsreel section? Yet the overall quality of Newton's work is such that even when paragraphs are repeated almost verbatim, our sense of the author's integrity remains intact.

Newton's substantial scholarship deserves a wide audience. Paving the Empire Road ends provocatively, citing an unspecified report on the challenges the BBC faces regarding "a positive acceptance of cultural diversity" and offering an unanswered question: is this a problem of a few months, or a few decades, ago? The conclusion invokes "meaningful changes", while seeming scopic of the gradual evolution it has explored: from the BBC's "somewhat noble" public encouragement of assimilation and tolerance, to investigation of its own diversity issues. "Before, we would just moan at the television", the actress Treva Etienne says, remarking on the evolving black consciousness of the power to transform media images. Faced with the complexity of the BBC's workings, no reader of Darrell Newton's study dare "just moan" about the slowness or the inevitability of change.