

## Generative transcription

Roach, Rebecca

DOI:

[10.1080/17449855.2024.2339395](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2339395)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Roach, R 2024, 'Generative transcription: The interview in post-World War 2 anglophone African literary culture', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2339395>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



## Generative transcription: The interview in post-World War 2 anglophone African literary culture

Rebecca Roach

To cite this article: Rebecca Roach (05 May 2024): Generative transcription: The interview in post-World War 2 anglophone African literary culture, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2024.2339395](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2339395)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2339395>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 05 May 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Generative transcription: The interview in post-World War 2 anglophone African literary culture

Rebecca Roach 

Department of English Literature, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the ways in which the interview form was deployed in the 1960s and 1970s as a means to engender and critique a pan-African anglophone literary public within the context of decolonization. In so doing, it argues that the transcribed interview becomes a troublesome signifier of the legacies of colonialism while also offering a generative means by which to constitute literary publics and models of authorship across a number of newly decolonized countries. To do so, the article draws on three collections: broadcast interviews produced by the BBC's English-language African service with host Edward Blishen; broadcast interviews produced by the London-based Transcription Centre, an organization dedicated to promoting anglophone African culture and funded by the Central Intelligence Agency-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom; and satirical interviews published over several issues of the leading little magazine of African arts and culture, *Transition*.

### KEYWORDS

*Transition*; interviews; Transcription Centre; British Broadcasting Corporation; Dennis Duerden; African Writers Club

As part of its sound archives, the British Library in London houses a collection entitled “African Writers’ Club”. Purportedly, it “comprises over 250 hours of radio programmes recorded in the 1960s at the Transcription Centre (TC), London, under its Director Dennis Duerden” (British Library 2023). Including contributions from Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Richard Rive, Kofi Awoonor and others, the collection note confidently announces that “This material should prove invaluable to students of African Studies, and in particular to students of the rich vein of creative writing in Africa in the middle of the 20th century.” In fact, there is more to this collection than is first apparent. To begin with, many of the items were not produced by the TC, but rather the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) overseas service as part of its regular series *African Theatre* and *Writers’ Club* (presumably where the collection name comes from). We might also note that the collection description makes no mention of the TC’s roots – funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). The archival conflation of these two enterprises is unhelpful to say the least, but the act of unpicking can be suggestive for “students of African Studies”.<sup>1</sup> In this article I want to look more closely at this collection, drawing also on material scattered across other

**CONTACT** Rebecca Roach  [r.roach@bham.ac.uk](mailto:r.roach@bham.ac.uk)  Department of English Literature, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

institutional archives.<sup>2</sup> I will focus particularly on the perceived function of the interview in both engendering and critiquing a pan-African anglophone literary field across the 1950s–1970s.

My interest in the interview is theoretical and methodological, as well as contextual. The interview form, I contend, offers a useful, if hitherto often underutilized, focus for examining the perceived make-up of a literary field (Bourdieu 1996). The interview is a form in which two people converse for the purposes of publication or broadcast. Originating in 19th-century newsprint, they are fundamentally intermedial in nature – promising to transcribe (i.e., render in writing) an “original” private talk into a form that is therefore more valuable, more authentic for an absent reading public. What Michael Schudson (1995) has identified as the triadic structure of the interview – interviewer, interviewee, and absent public – means that the form models certain assumptions around, for example, constructions of authorship and readership, and the wider operations (and presumed health) of a public sphere (Roach 2018). From this perspective, an act of transcription can constitute a literary field.

Despite their utility – and ubiquity in the 20th century – interviews have often been dismissed by literary scholars as unformed transcription, as paratextual or publicity-oriented ephemera, and either in competition with or a distraction from the work itself, even as scholars often scan them for insight into an author’s craft, influences, or attitudes. Little magazines and radio have experienced similar uneven fortunes within literary scholarship, due both to critical attitudes and to variable collection policies around these supposedly ephemeral materials in often inaccessible and intermedial formats (Cohen 2012). In the context of colonial and postcolonial literary scholarship, the shape and vicissitudes of both the oral (transcription) and the archive are further inflected: Caroline Levine (2013) has castigated scholars for ignoring the “great unwritten”, and Anjali Nerlekar and Francesca Orsini (2022) note that the “archival *collection* – of documents, records, images, books, manuscripts, artefacts – became an integral part of the colonial-imperial state and its rhetoric of custodianship, knowledge production and progress” (212–213; original emphasis) and the state, neglect or voluminousness of an archive can make visible certain colonial and decolonial strategies of power, and their limits. Let us then examine the British Library’s “African Writers’ Club” collection for the priorities and values that it enunciates, even as we seek to chart the contours of a literary field transcribed within it. Let us then sound the British Library’s “African Writers’ Club” collection for the priorities and values that it enunciates, even as we seek to chart the contours of a literary field transcribed within it.

The materials collected in the “African Writers’ Club” were created in an era of significant transformation for anglophone African literary culture. Against the broader backdrop of decolonization, new institutional relations were being formed in the cultural realm, with implications for the constitution of the literary field and its imagined publics. While this was a period of cultural explosion (Bailkin 2014, 230) for sub-Saharan Africa, institutional relations often replicated in troublesome ways the former imperial–colonial relations – the BBC, for example, provided personnel and technical advice to the newly inaugurated African national broadcasting services, while the University of London developed various African offshoots. Publishing was no exception – Oxford’s Three Crowns Press and Heinemann African Writers Series would both seek new business and readers on the continent, while also “extroverting” African literature for a foreign

market (Julien 2006). The perceived urgencies of the Cold War also saw American organizations, such as the CCF, operating across the continent, with the latter sponsoring Pan-African conferences, arts centres, radio programming, and little magazines such as *Transition* and *Black Orpheus*. In such structures we can see the reaffirmation of what Sarah Brouillette (2021) has called the “underdevelopment” of postcolonial publishing in Africa and a high-culture reliance on international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Against this background, the interviews and discussion programmes featured in the *African Writers’ Club*; and produced by the BBC and TC promoted certain visions of what constituted African literary culture and its specific cultural and geographical orientations. For many critics they are a vocal example of radio’s democratic potential. For Liz Gunner (2010), the “crisp tones and accents of varied inflection from various parts of Africa and North America rubbed up against those of a more recognisable cultivated Britishness”, the cacophony of voices symptomatic of “a new, expansive moment in radio and black cultural and political negotiation” (259). Meanwhile, for Jordanna Bailkin (2014), the programmes offer, if not quite the “sounds of independence”, then certainly a reminder of how Africans and Britons “experienced the reconfiguration of specific forms of imperial power” via “speech, music and noise” at a moment of colonial dismantlement (243). While I do not want to argue against such assessments of the benefits of such radio talk, I do want to nuance this analysis. After discussing the “African Writers’ Club” materials, I will consequently turn to look at how the interview was perceived by the writers and readers of *Transition* magazine – a title that “introverted” African literature for its readers (Bulson 2012) – and, in doing so, provide a useful alternative account of the interview’s function in anglophone African literary culture in this period.

### The BBC and the (African) Writers’ Club

In 1966 the BBC was promoting its *Writers’ Club* (WC) programme to readers of the *Journal of Modern African Studies*. The explicit aim of the 30-minute programme was to “encourage African authors who write in English by broadcasting their short stories, poetry and other work” (Copps 1966, 96). The BBC related a roster of past guests including Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel (later Es’kia) Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka, and James Ngugi (later Ngugi wa Thiong’o), and took credit for having provided “early encouragement” to now established writers (96). Moreover, it aimed to “assist development by spreading news and information”, thus “promoting better understanding between African people, and between Africa and Britain” (97). In the eyes of the BBC, radio programming can provide vital support to an anglophone African literary field, which in turn will facilitate world peace. That might sound glib, but we see repeated use of the language of “friendship” at the BBC (Briggs 1970, 512), a rhetoric that, as Julie Cyzewski (2018) has noted, could foster an intimate listener experience while also being “instrumentalized to promote specific geopolitical relations” with former colonies (323).

Certainly, this was a central conundrum for the BBC as it launched and then broadcast WC. Although the BBC was a public broadcaster with a degree of autonomy from the British government, overseas broadcasting had inevitably made relations between the two, particularly commonwealth and foreign office departments,

more intricate. The African Service was only established in 1961, but the BBC had been broadcasting on airwaves across the continent in some capacity since the inauguration of the Empire Service in 1932. Initially aimed at white populations living overseas, that English-language service aimed to offer British culture to the “lonely listener”, cementing cultural ties with the dominions (Hall 2010; Potter 2020, 171). This orientation became more encompassing during the darkening political atmosphere of the 1930s and during wartime, when the renamed Overseas Service scaled up output to target a more heterogeneous overseas listener – including via literary programming such as *Caribbean Voices* and *Meet My Friend*. After the war, a general awareness that the service was on the “front line” and a diplomatic imperative in an era of decolonization and Cold War politics had led to a degree of cooperation with the government and consensus over broadcasting in the “national interest” (Webb 2008, 559). As Russia, Egypt, and Yemen increasingly targeted African airwaves, the BBC would pursue the “scramble for Africa”. It would do this by providing certain resources to nascent colonial and national broadcasters, including content, staff training, and interchanges of personnel. T.W. Chalmers, for example, moved from the BBC to become director of broadcasting at the Nigerian Broadcasting Service in 1951, and Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi would travel to London to train at Bush House (Armour 1984). On the airwaves, the BBC introduced services in Hausa, Somali, and Swahili in 1957, and also English-language programmes targeted regionally at East and West Africa. When *WC* launched in February 1959, it was firmly enmeshed in an environment of decolonization, while also representing the mouthpiece of imperialism.

### **Writers’ Club**

For the first four years, *WC* was a monthly half-hour programme broadcast across West Africa. Later it became a 15-minute weekly, broadcast to East and Central Africa. Through these various incarnations it would stretch to 500 programmes over 12 years. Subjects included John Akar, Cyprian Ekwesi, Andrew Salkey, Banjo Solaru, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and many others, although women featured extremely rarely.

Despite its envisioned listener and focus, the programme was more a product of the transnational focus of the BBC’s Overseas Service than that might suggest. The programme was the result of close collaboration between producer Mary Treadgold and host Edward Blishen, both of whom had experience in colonial education. At the BBC, Treadgold focused on “educational programmes in the widest sense for Africa and the Caribbean” (Watrous 1960a) and Blishen would contribute to literary programming across current and former colonies (*Calling the Falklands*, *Calling the Caribbean*, and *African Theatre*). *WC* was developed less specifically for African listeners than as part of an effort in transnational and (neo)colonial programming effort. Given the pair’s backgrounds it is not surprising also to see an educationalist bent in the formation of *WC*. Like its Caribbean counterpart, *WC* was paternalistic in conception and, initially at least, oriented towards “young” and “unestablished” writers. While the two terms were often used synonymously with “novice”, Treadgold (1959a) did privately admit that “unestablished” was a tactful term for writers without an international, metropolitan

reputation, thus indicating that this was a programme with a distinctly developmentalist conception of African literary culture.

The programme provided authors with “critical advice” and encouragement (Blisshen 1971, 2) through the medium of discussion – authors talking about their own and others’ work and also reading it. Programmes might range from a conversation with John Nagenda about the influence of D.H. Lawrence on his work and the broader literary scene (Blisshen 1967), to the very much more mechanically pedagogical “General Do’s and Don’ts” of manuscript presentation (Blisshen 1963, 1). This was a programme that aimed to give practical literary advice.

The programme also envisaged itself as providing an important outlet for publication. Early on, it solicited manuscripts from “unestablished” writers for on-air reading, and correspondence around selection reveals the degree to which Treadgold at least conceived of their role as steering the direction of African literature through the provision on generalized critical feedback. Treadgold expresses repeated exasperation at what she sees as derivative writing in the submissions offered to them: “imported phrases and a terrible idea of diction” (1959b); “just rehashing old Greek myths is not what we want” (Treadgold 1960). She proposes future broadcasts pointers on “unity of conception” which might be “of great help and interest to West African writers”, indicating a strong attitude of cultural uplift (Treadgold 1959a).

This developmentalist view of African literary culture would shift over the years. Later, Treadgold would hand over to Veronica Manoukian (1970), and under her the programme would focus on published books and magazines, “since it’s felt there are now sufficient outlets for unpublished African writers”. We also see this in Blisshen’s retrospective account, where he talks of the programme as offering, not a “first-class professional-writers’ course” (quoted in Watrous 1960b, 1) but “a kind of information centre for writers in Africa” (Blisshen 1971, 10). In contrast to the earlier paternalistic developmentalism, this is a vision of the programme as a hub, as a neutral transmitter of information that facilitates cultural contact – and denudes both the contemporary realities of colonialism and its legacies and the BBC’s own complicated role as mouth-piece of empire.

The format of the programme provided it with a degree of flexibility. Discussions – sometimes scripted, sometimes not, and sometimes with Blisshen directing, sometimes not – were usually interspersed with readings of works, and with introduction, commentary, and links from Blisshen. While the subjects’ distinct voices and accents provided an aural effect of diversity within discussions, Blisshen’s clipped received pronunciation (RP) tones were nevertheless dominant.

Although critical encouragement might have been the aim of the programme, criticism in the voice of the colonizer is freighted in ways that an unvoiced text is not. Blisshen himself was clearly concerned with this point. His recollections of the programmes repeatedly focus on the tone and nature of interchange: recalling a discussion with Ngugi, “the idea was that I should mildly criticise it and he would defend it, but now in fact the most self-critical of writers launched the fiercest attack on his own work, so our roles were reversed” (Blisshen 1971, 8). Another time, Blisshen remembers “being severe, from time to time, on a poem or story that our reader then, with his fiendish skill, read so that it sounded marvellous” and of being “once very sharply spoken to by the studio manager [ ... ]; she thought I’d been horrible to a certain poet” (9). Yet in



discussion with Cosmo Pieterse, who “so strongly and so rightly believes that conflict and clash are the soul of good discussion, that during a recording I’ve addressed to him confidently, for his confirmation, an opinion he’s fervently supported only for disagreement” (10). Quite how to instigate critical discussions in this context was clearly a fraught issue for the programme and host against a wider institutional and cultural context.

This was a point further brought home by the shifting cultural politics that surrounded the interview format. As I have argued elsewhere, at mid-century the broadcast interview would increasingly become a site of contestation around the good functioning of democracy and the public sphere (Roach 2018). Both McCarthyism in the US and the Suez Crisis in the UK had left journalists concerned that the interview form, supposedly a mechanism for holding politicians to account, was too often deployed uncritically, becoming merely a cosy and friendly chat. The result was a stylistic shift towards interrogative interviewing and probing questions deployed against politicians, but also increasingly against writers, as evidenced, for example, in the *Mike Wallace Show* in the States or the BBC’s own *Frankly Speaking*. How appropriate, however, was this newly interrogative style for WC, with its context of decolonial “encouragement”? How might interrogative questioning, in Blishen’s voice, be received by listeners on the African continent – as critical engagement, or imperial oppression? It is a question with no clear answer for Blishen and the BBC.

### The Transcription Centre

The BBC, however, was not the only fish in the sea of metropolitan efforts at African literary interview programming. It had competition in the form of the TC. Like the BBC, this organization produced radio broadcasts on topics including black internationalism, the role of the author in African culture, pan-African and national literary scenes, and the influence of European authors. Like the BBC, it reviewed recent little magazines, read out letters and extracts, and included music, but with a focus on interviews and discussion. The TC shared with the BBC an overwhelmingly friendly and intimate tone for interviews between literary enthusiasts; it also shared many of the same guests: African-affiliated poets, novelists, playwrights, critics, and educationalists – with the odd jazz musician, politician, and farmer thrown in for good measure. The BBC even occasionally used TC content and relied on the TC as a source of information on African literary affairs. Indeed, there were close personnel ties between the two enterprises, with the director of the TC, Dennis Duerden, having worked as the BBC’s West African (Hausa) producer and on many of the same programmes (for Africa and the Caribbean) as Blishen and Treadgold, before he resigned to take up the new role. In addition, the TC had on its board T.W. Chalmers, a special assistant to the BBC’s head of overseas and foreign relations. The multiple similarities and connections between the endeavours are notable; it is perhaps no surprise that at some point a busy archivist conflated the collections.

But of course, the TC was a distinct operation. It worked “in association with the Congress for Cultural Freedom” but with “absolutely no connection with the BBC”, as its responses to external enquiries clarified (Duerden 1964, 1). Its backer (to the tune of £9000 a year) was the American CCF, a significant player in international cultural diplomacy. The TC was in some senses a tiny operation



with limited operations, but one that could also claim independence from the British government and the Establishment in a way that the large and comparatively well-funded BBC never could. In other senses, of course, the TC was associated with a major American sponsor, with all the accusations of cultural imperialism that this might bring, and which would later be revealed (crushingly for the many enterprises it funded) as a CIA front. Even before this revelation, Duerden does not seem to have always advertised the connection – his boss complaining, for example, that the CCF was not being given any credit for its support (Hunt 1962) – suggesting that he was wary of promoting the centre’s institutional connections.

This is likely due to the conceived purpose of the TC. At the outset, Dennis Duerden was struggling for a name to describe the fledgling endeavour. Writing to his boss John C. Hunt, Duerden was worrying that “‘Cultural Transcriptions’, does not carry the idea of an interchange of ideas on radio programmes which the service would provide by initiating conferences, distributing scripts, etc.” (1961b). The centrality of discussion, and the interview format for the entire endeavour are indicated in his phrase “interchange of ideas”. However, what might strike us first is the proposed name of the new project. “Cultural Transcriptions” would eventually become the “Transcription Centre”, seemingly an odd doubling down of an opaque, technical term. Today we associate “transcription” with a textual record of the oral – an act of archiving. But that is not the sense in which Duerden is using it.

In radio lingo, the term “transcription” referred to the technology deployed in non-live broadcasts. Specifically, a transcription disc was a high-quality record that was intended to be used for (and often recorded from) a future radio broadcast. It was also a play-limited technology as the quality of the disc recording would degrade rapidly (often only able to be replayed five or six times); each play would transform the media, thus offering something of a history of its use. From the late 1920s until the 1940s such technology was widespread in the US in syndicated radio as a means of broadcasting across time zones, but later fell out of fashion thanks to the rise of disk jockeys and magnetic tape (Millard 1995, 172–174). Nevertheless, in the non-commercial context of British imperial broadcasting it was embraced for longer – the BBC had inaugurated its own service during the war with the object of “the projection of Britain by good radio” (Briggs 1979, 506), and the “increasingly lively enterprise” (505) would expand in the 1950s to produce large numbers of programmes annually for use overseas. Transcription in this moment is less a technology of permanent archiving than of limited listener expansion.

The discussion above about the utility of radio transcription leads to certain conclusions. Duerden’s project was not archival, nor was it, like the BBC projects, a “projection” of empire. Explaining his activities to his BBC boss, Duerden talks of helping “African intellectuals, e.g. the African staff of universities, African writers and artists, by encouraging them in the field of sound radio” (1961a). Radio transcriptions – and the interchange they facilitate – are a tool to be deployed by a cultural as much as a technical elite in the generation of a literary field. Secondly, the operative distinction in Duerden’s description is not between oral and written, but rather live and recorded, with the latter associated with expanded broadcasting (transcribed for broadcast in other regions). The word “transcription” connotes, not replay, scrivenering or “mimicry” (Bhabha 1984) here,

but a creative endeavour that will (temporarily) engender a public and cultural field beyond the record.

It thus makes sense that the TC conceived of its radio interviews as one among many activities: a hub “in which there would be greater opportunity for the contact and interchange of ideas between artists, writers, musicians, actors, and critics” (Speed 1965, 286). Certainly, Duerden saw the TC’s role as expansive: it would organize events which could be venues for discussion, discussions that could in turn be transcribed (in both senses of the term) as a means to engender a greater community of African literature and culture. The TC becomes in this view, less akin to the BBC and more to the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), the London-based arts movement established in 1966 and designed to forge contact and collaboration amongst West Indian writers, artists, and intellectuals living in Britain. Like CAM, the TC would host events ranging from informal conversations in its offices, through to panels at academic conferences, to producing its own circular, *Cultural Events in Africa* which, like CAM’s *Newsletter*, included news items, publications, and events (and excerpts from the transcribed interviews). Given these similarities, it is notable that the TC does not have the same reputation and visibility as its Caribbean counterpart. This is, no doubt, partly the result of CCF-funding revelations. Nevertheless, the comparison is useful for flagging the TC’s central commitment to interchange that, unlike the BBC, went beyond broadcasting a programme.

But what interchanges did this programme facilitate via its interviews? *Africa Abroad*, the TC’s central endeavour, was a radio programme transcribed on disc and made available to subscribers (as a record or script). It went through various iterations across its run, beginning as a weekly 15-minute programme for broadcast in Sierra Leone which ran for 154 episodes. Extracts from these were used in the production of a monthly 30-minute programme for Uganda and later Zambia. These programmes were also marketed to independent radio stations across the African continent, to the BBC’s overseas (including African) and home services, and to broadcasters in Germany, Sweden, North America, and Australia – in over 21 different countries by 1965.

*Africa Abroad* was conceived as “a magazine programme featuring the social and cultural activities of Africans as well as people of African descent living abroad” (Duerden 1963, 1). In its pan-African and diasporic reach, the programme promoted a distinctly transnational conception of culture and the public sphere. Across interviews and discussions, the focus is on the literature of a continent rather than a nation. While Ama Ata Aidoo carefully distinguishes between Ghanaian and Nigerian dramatic forms in her answers, she is also pushed to situate that literature within the context of African literature, and an African literature that is increasingly being institutionalized in US higher education (Aidoo and McGregor [1967] 1972). We see this similarly in the frequent interviewing of Mphahlele. His own itineracy is evident from the locations in which he is interviewed – Freetown, Sierra Leone; Nairobi, Kenya; London, UK (en route from Denver, USA, to Lusaka in Zambia) – and it is his conception of a transnational African literature that is foregrounded in discussions. In a 1964/65 interview for the TC, he is asked repeatedly by Robert Serumaga about the cultural life of Kenya and “what will be the criterion for calling a writer an ‘African writer’ in Nairobi?” (Mphahlele and Serumaga [1965] 1972, 99). His answers just as repeatedly return the question to the

scale of the continent. Given his own role at the CCF, we might not be surprised that Mphahlele's vision is of a Pan-African cultural field, but it is worth noting, nonetheless.

As a programme, *Africa Abroad* sought to constitute a transnational and diasporic African literary culture both formally and aurally. The interlocutors utilized by the TC were heterogenous in accent and in background, while sharing a professional dedication to the arts. Unlike the BBC, where RP was rife, the TC avoided using British voices, thus underlying aurally the centre's focus on cross-cultural contact and debate. The young, exiled South African reporter and writer Lewis Nkosi had commenced as interviewer and host of the *Africa Abroad* series in March 1962, and was followed two years later by Nigerian critic and translator Aminu Abdullah. Later, Ugandan playwright Robert Serumaga would conduct a significant number of discussions, along with Duerden. The situational nature of many of the discussions meant that several interlocutors were also well-known writers from multiple countries, including Caribbean nations, and linguistic traditions – Andrew Salkey, Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, and Cosmo Pieterse. In a less heterogeneous move, the few women interviewed were matched with a female conversationalist, Maxime McGregor (née Lautré).

In terms of focus, the discussions were overwhelmingly literary in nature. The argumentative (at least in Blisshen's eyes) Pieterse would later characterize Nkosi's discussions as "literary" with an emphasis on biography – helpful for novice listeners – as well as literary influences and projects (Pieterse 1972, ix). Nkosi's discussion with Christopher Okigbo is symptomatic; the questions are gentle and occasionally stilted: "Have you been writing poetry long?" and "What do you conceive of as your audience?" (Okigbo and Nkosi [1962] 1972, 134, 135). But while Gerald Moore (2002) would criticize the lack of wit in such interchanges, as the *Paris Review* had discovered a few years before, it is often the simple question that provokes the most interesting responses, and the straight-man interviewer can offer a useful backdrop against which subjects can shine. Accused of saying "some very vile things about negritude poets" at a Kambala conference (certainly not a tame question by Nkosi), Okigbo is given the opportunity to correct misunderstandings, and expand on his views for a broader audience (Okigbo and Nkosi [1962] 1972, 138). Meanwhile, Serumaga's conversations, as Pieterse saw it, were literary but assumed significant prior audience knowledge and a desire for "a frank and direct confession" of "personal life, philosophy and working methods" (Pieterse 1972, ix). Serumaga's discussion with Okigbo is certainly lively; it begins with Serumaga asking Okigbo outright out if he wrote "Lament of the Drums", with Okigbo denying this. Later, a debate about integrating literary influence turns as much on eating lamb chops and wearing an Italian jacket as it does on having studied classics at university (Okigbo and Serumaga [1965] 1972). Energetic and vibrant, it is not exactly confession.

In reality, the *Africa Abroad* discussions exhibited a great deal of homogeneity, whoever the interlocutor. This is at the level of both content – a general interest in the role and methods of the author in a (post)colonial and diasporic context – and tone. These are friendly and engaged exchanges that elaborate and clarify, but rarely interrogate. That is not to say that they were apolitical, but, as Peter Kalliney has shown, Duerden deliberately resisted pressure from the CCF to expand its remit from what Hunt called the "exclusively literary" and instead "clung" to a policy of aesthetic autonomy (Hunt quoted in Kalliney 2015, 353). We thus hear little of the Commonwealth

Immigrants Act 1962 or racial hostility in Britain, even if there is more than the odd allusion to Vietnam, Black Power, and Kenyan political independence among talk of metre and rhyme.

In 1972, as the centre was closing down, Duerden and Pieterse would edit a volume of interviews, transcribed from *Africa Abroad* and published with Heinemann's African Writing series. *African Writers Talking* (Duerden and Pieterse 1972) would reshape these interviews less as promoting interchange of ideas – media in the service of community formation – and more as a “library”, “an archive of great historical interest, giving an essential first-hand account of the development of post-Independence African literature” (Pieterse 1972, vii, ix). The volume pitches these interchanges explicitly as interviews, as transcribed for the historical record rather than for play-limited broadcast to an absent public. While the book still notes the occasion of each discussion in headnotes, privileging while also recording the events in which the interviews took place, the focus is more upon documentation. Although the title is not *African Writers Interviewed*, the volume nevertheless insists, throughout the introduction and peritextual material, upon the intermedial and formal nature of these exchanges in a way that their radio equivalents did not. This is a project with an eye to the TC's legacy as much as to its activities.

### “The World of Hogarth Mbogwa” in *Transition*

What was that legacy? And how did the absent public perceive the interchange of ideas that both the TC and the BBC, in their differing accents, purported to broadcast? Although we do not have extensive monitoring reports, we do have a couple of examples from a venue that was similarly committed to such interchange but also published outside the metropole.

*Transition* was a little magazine that shared with its London-based interlocutors a liberal commitment to African literary culture through the “forum of free discussion” (Hall and Neogy 1967, 46). Critics such as Eric Bulson (2012) have often pointed to *Transition*'s letters pages as a vital means by which this print media “created an expansive community of readers who could engage in a conversation about current literary and cultural events” (282). The letters were “critical to the goals” (Bulson 2012, 281) of *Transition*, enabling it to function, as one contemporary reviewer put it, as “the vehicle of an open and vigorous dialogue between all those with an interest in Africa and those more directly concerned with, or even practically involved in, the evolution of the continent” (Irele 1967, 443).

Less attention has been paid to the use of interviews across the journal, but they certainly contributed to this goal. Throughout its run (and across different editors), *Transition* included numerous interviews with writers and intellectuals. The general “*Transition* interview” provided little by way of portraiture or personal detail but attended closely to its subjects' cultural and political viewpoints on topics relevant to Africans. These were usually serious interviews, emulating those of the *Paris Review* which it praised. They closely followed the subject's ideas – James Baldwin on Negritude and Black Power exceptionalism (Baldwin and Bondy 1964), V.S. Naipaul on provincialism and colonialism (Naipaul and Rowe-Evans 1971), Soyinka on academic autonomy and intellectual elitism (Soyinka and Jeyifous 1973). Following the revelations about

CCF-CIA funding, Neogy would defend the magazine through an interview that was interrogative rather than friendly in tone (Hall and Neogy 1967), while expressing commitment to “interchange of ideas”.

While this liberal tenet made itself known in the form of the journal, that did not stop *Transition* from critiquing the less than idealistic tendencies of the interview form as it appeared on African airways. In 1971 it printed a satirical interview, purportedly a transcript of a radio discussion. Authored by playwright Murray Carlin, it paints an entertaining picture of the stereotypical “African writer” as constructed in the imperial metropole interview in this period. Titled “The World of HOGARTH MBOGWA: A Literary Interview”, the piece explicitly spoofs the typical BBC WC interview (Carlin 1971, 35). The interviewer is one “Edward Blushless”, who comes under sustained critique. He is an inane figure painfully devoid of critical awareness. Introducing the subject, he immediately skips over Hogarth Mbogwa’s “exciting achievements in the exciting field of African literature – our listeners are all aware of that” – in favour of requests for personal and practical details such as how long he is staying in London, his “Personal Agony as a writer”, recollections of “famed” meeting with other writers, and details of his new teaching job (35). Instead of close engagement, he adopts the refrain of “How Exciting!” to respond inappropriately to everything from the state of African universities to the subject’s discussing his education at the hands of Scottish missionaries, to announcing a new prose project.

Meanwhile, the “celebrity” interviewee is similarly skewered. Hogarth Mbogwa, “The Grand Young man of African literature; author of *Fifteen Poems; A Black Man’s Hate for Harvard*, etcetera” (Carlin 1971, 35) is a stereotype of the generic African writer imbricated in the transnational network of institutions that surround literary culture. Mbogwa describes his journey to free himself from being “mentally colonised by Britain” (35) (Blushless quickly concurs) when taught the poetry of Burns and from the “capitalist-imperialism and its array of bourgeois-literary cliché” (36) such as metre, character, and plot. This “search for [his] Africanness” is juxtaposed against Mbogwa’s upcoming “Foyles” – a reference to the ubiquity of a reading at the London bookstore for international writers – and his travels to Australia, India, and Tokyo for a “conf”, before heading to the US for a job at the University of African Letters, Henry Ford II Campus (35, 36–38).

As presented in this interview, African literature writ large is shaped by internationalist considerations. Authors travel back and forth to American institutions via their London equivalents, while making their names with works that simultaneously reject such centres of academic power: *I Spit at Yale* and *Princeton Pphhrrrrfft* (Carlin 1971, 36, 38). The influence of international political movements is indicated in names – in a nod to Malcolm X and the Black Power movement, one young African writer named after Martin Luther King Jr. discards its “Christian Uncle Tom” associations in favour of the new first name “X.X.X” (38). The positive effects of this for African literature overall are ostensibly applauded – writers rejecting the “shackles” of “imperialist iambics” are also “liberated” from plot and character “and all that nonsense” with the result that writing a poem now never takes more than ten minutes – but the reader is left doubtful (38).

The interview clearly struck a chord. In the following issue, letters expressed appreciation. Alongside impassioned and often disagreeing letters to the editor concerning articles about racism in America and the fallout of the CCF funding revelations, readers

took the time to praise the Mbogwa interview. More suggestively, one reader offered her own follow-up, which *Transition* printed in full. The premise was an interview for a local radio station, hosted by “prominent black writer” “Sammy Ngui”, and with “Stalwart Ageless”, a “liberal white who has ‘discovered’ African writing” (Kitonga 1972, 11). Presented as a revelatory talk show (entitled *The Man Behind the Mask*), it rather repeats the comfortable dialogue of the Blushless/Blishen format to send up, not the African writer, but rather Ageless’s paternalistic, inexperienced, and “friendly” attitude. Introduced as a “critic”, Ageless immediately refutes this “too harsh a term”, instead describing himself as a “an interested observer of the struggle for selfhood on the part of my black brothers, an appreciative audience of one of their attempts at aesthetic expression” (11). So, too, he rejects the term “expert”; rather, he is a “devotee to the cause of brotherhood between the races” (11). While he might insist on relations of equality and friendliness, Ageless’s own colonial privilege and unearned authority as a literary expert are repeatedly made clear: his training is in botany – specifically the four-leaf clover – and his knowledge of New African writing is born of reading novels while assistants do his lab work. He talks the language of equality but there is always more than a hint of the attitude of “uplift[ft]” (11).

In the pages of *Transition*, the format that WC made popular, and which was partly replicated in *Africa Abroad*, is skewered and along with it the literary field that it constitutes. Neither the writer, nor the interviewer, nor the transnational network that it reveals escapes the satirist’s pen. If one is criticized for their obsessive signalling of their participation in Anglo American networks of literary prestige, the other is ridiculed for their amateur and inept discussion. Friendly dialogue might be presented as supporting African literary culture but can, at its worst, be patronizing and uninformed, compounding underdevelopment. While *Transition* was itself committed to dialogue, it also recognized that discussion transcribed was culturally constituted, and constituting.

To conclude, we might concur that the British Library’s “African Writers’ Club” collection is indeed invaluable for students of African literature, revealing the degree to which transcribed interviews (in both senses) were central to the construction of an African literary field in the eyes of institutional funders, authors, and their publics in this moment of decolonial energies. In my own work (Roach 2018) I have championed the often marginalized form of the interview in literary studies; what this collection demonstrates is how generative marginal forms such as the interview can be for the building of literary publics (and canons). The collection also reveals the degree to which acts of transcription are bound up by complicated networks of cultural production. Transcription, via interviews, is never simply documentation.

## Notes

1. I am not the first to note this. Liz Gunner (2010) charts the confusion in a footnote to her article discussing the collection. From examining the accession notes it seems that the British Library inherited it from the National Sound Archive, from where the collection came. Compounding the problem is that relevant archival materials are scattered across known collections in London, Reading (UK), Chicago, Austin, and archives of national broadcasters across anglophone Africa.
2. My thanks to: the British Library and particularly Stephen Cleary, Lead Curator, Drama and Literature Recordings, who kindly let me examine the paperwork and acquisitions files related to the African Writers’ Club collection; the BBC for permission to quote



from materials held at the Written Archives, Caversham; to the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin for permission to quote from materials held as part of the Transcription Centre Papers; to the University of Chicago for permission to quote from materials held as part of the International Congress for Cultural Freedom collection at the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center; and to Katharyn Duerden Owen for permission to quote from Dennis Duerden's unpublished materials.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship.

## Notes on contributor

*Rebecca Roach* is Associate Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Birmingham. Her work examines anglophone literary cultures and media. She is the author of *Literature and the Rise of the Interview* (Oxford UP, 2018) and her forthcoming monograph examines historical relations between literature and computing.

## ORCID

Rebecca Roach  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8102-4287>

## References

- Aidoo, Ama Ata, Maxime McGregor. [1967] 1972. "Interview for *Africa Abroad*." Reprinted in *African Writers Talking*, edited by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, 17–27. London: Heineman.
- Armour, Charles. 1984. "The BBC and the Development of Broadcasting in British Colonial Africa 1946–56." *African Affairs* 83 (322): 359–402. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a097624>.
- Baillkin, Jordanna. 2014. "The Sounds of Independence? Lessons from Africa and beyond at the Transcription Centre Archive." *History Workshop Journal* 78 (1): 229–245. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbu019>.
- Baldwin, James, and Francois Bondy. 1964. "James Baldwin, as Interviewed by Francois Bondy." *Transition* 12 (12): 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2934484>.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1984. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28:125–133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778467>.
- Blishen, Edward. 1963. Writer's Club: Edward Blishen Discusses the "General Do's and Don'ts" to Writers. Script for recording on August 7 (not as broadcast). Box Africa 60. BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
- Blishen, Edward. 1967. Writer's Club: Edward Blishen and John Nagenda from Uganda, discuss D. H. Lawrence. Script not as broadcast, recorded 19 January. Box Africa 59. BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
- Blishen, Edward. 1971. Writer's Club. Hand emended script for broadcast on 28 August. African Writers' Club. Sound Archive, British Library.



- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1996. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Briggs, Asa. 1970. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume III: The War of Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Briggs, Asa. 1979. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume IV: Sound & Vision*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- British Library. 2023. "African Writers' Club." British Library website. <https://www.bl.uk/collections/african-writers-club>.
- Brouillette, Sarah. 2021. *Underdevelopment and African Literature: Emerging Forms of Reading. Elements in Publishing and Book Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bulson, Eric. 2012. "Little Magazine, World Form." In *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, edited by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough, 267–287. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carlin, Murray. 1971. "The World of Hogarth Mbogwa: A Literary Interview." *Transition* 40:35–38.
- Cohen, Debra Rae. 2012. "Intermediality and the Problem of the Listener." *Modernism/modernity* 19 (3): 569–592. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2012.0069>.
- Copps, Elizabeth. 1966. "The BBC African Service." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 4 (1): 96–97. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00013008>.
- Cyzewski, Julie. 2018. "Making Friends': The Geopolitics of the Interview on the BBC's Eastern Services." *Biography* 41 (2): 322–343. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2018.0026>.
- Duerden, Dennis. 1961a. Unpaid Leave: July. Memo to West African Programme Organiser. May 5. International Association for Cultural Freedom Records, Box 126. Folder 3. Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
- Duerden, Dennis. 1961b. Letter to John C. Hunt. October 18. International Association for Cultural Freedom Records, Box 126. Folder 3. Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
- Duerden, Dennis. 1963. African Abroad 52. Script. Recorded August 28. The Transcription Centre Records, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- Duerden, Dennis. 1964. Letter to Edward Alexander. May 14. The Transcription Centre Records, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- Duerden, Dennis, and Cosmo Pieterse, eds. 1972. *African Writers Talking*. London: Heineman.
- Gunner, Liz. 2010. "Reconfiguring Diaspora: Africa on the Rise and the Radio Voices of Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane." *Social Dynamics* 36 (2): 256–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2010.489329>.
- Hall, Andrew. 2010. "The BBC Empire Service: The Voice, the Discourse of the Mater and Ventriloquism." *South Asian Diaspora* 2 (1): 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438190903541952>.
- Hall, Tony, and Raget Neogy. 1967. "Raget Neogy on the CIA." Interview. *Transition* 32: 45–46. Reprint of "On the Carpet." *Sunday Nation* (Nairobi) June 11.
- Hunt, John C. 1962. Letter to Dennis Duerden. July 18. International Association for Cultural Freedom Records, Box 126. Folder 3. Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
- Irele, Abiola. 1967. "Transition, Nos. 1–32, Edited by Rajat Neogy." *Review. The Journal of Modern African Studies* 5 (3): 442–447. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00016323>.
- Julien, Eileen. 2006. "The Extroverted African Novel." In *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, edited by Franco Moretti, 667–702. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kalliney, Peter. 2015. "Modernism, African Literature, and the Cold War." *Modern Language Quarterly* 76 (3): 333–368. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-2920051>.
- Kitonga, Ellen. 1972. "The Man Behind A Mask, A Literary Interview (2)." Letter to the Editor. *Transition* 41:11.
- Levine, Caroline. 2013. "The Great Unwritten: World Literature and the Effacement of Orality." *Modern Language Quarterly* 74 (2): 217–237. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-2072998>.

- Manoukian, Veronica. 1970. Letter to Nii-Ankrah Aryee. December 14. Box Africa 60. BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
- Millard, Andre. 1995. *American on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, Gerald. 2002. "The Transcription Centre in the Sixties: Navigating the Narrow Seas." *Research in African Literatures* 33 (3): 167–181. <https://doi.org/10.2979/RAL.2002.33.3.167>.
- Mphaele, Ezekiel, and Robert Serumaga. [1965] 1972. "Interview for *Africa Abroad*." Reprinted in *African Writers Talking*, edited by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, 98–101. London: Heineman.
- Naipaul, V. S., and Adrian Rowe-Evans. 1971. "V. S. Naipaul: A *Transition* Interview." *Transition* 40:56–59, 61–62.
- Nerlekar, Anjali, and Francesca Orsini. 2022. "Introduction: Postcolonial Archives." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 45 (2): 211–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2022.2040803>.
- Okigbo, Christopher, and Lewis Nkosi. [1962] 1972. "Interview for *Africa Abroad*." Reprinted in *African Writers Talking*, edited by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, 133–138. London: Heineman.
- Okigbo, Christopher, and Robert Serumaga. [1965] 1972. "Interview for *Africa Abroad*." Reprinted in *African Writers Talking*, edited by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, 143–147. London: Heineman.
- Pieterse, Cosmo. 1972. "Introduction." In *African Writers Talking*, edited by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, vii–ix. London: Heineman.
- Potter, Simon J. 2020. *Wireless Internationalism and Distant Listening: Britain, Propaganda, and the Invention of Global Radio, 1920–1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roach, Rebecca. 2018. *Literature and the Rise of the Interview*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schudson, Michael. 1995. *The Power of News*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Soyinka, Wole, and Biodun Jeyifous. 1973. "Wole Soyinka, A *Transition* Interview." *Transition* 42:62–64.
- Speed, Diana. 1965. "The Transcription Centre, London." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 3 (2): 286–288. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00023697>.
- Treadgold, Mary. 1959a. Letter to Edward Blishen. April 8. Talks/Blishen-Edward/1959-60/File 2. BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
- Treadgold, Mary. 1959b. Letter to Edward Blishen. February 23. Talks/Blishen-Edward/1959-60/File 2. BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
- Treadgold, Mary. 1960. Letter to Edward Blishen. August 2. Talks/Blishen-Edward/1959-60/File 2. BBC Written Archives, Caversham.
- Watrous, Eliot. 1960a. Leaving Note: Miss M. Treadgold. November 23. Personal File. L1/9091 Treadgold, Mary. BBC Written Archives Caversham.
- Watrous, Eliot. 1960b. Annual Confidential Report: Miss M Treadgold. Personal File. L1/9091 Treadgold, Mary. BBC Written Archives Caversham.
- Webb, Alban. 2008. "Constitutional Niceties: Three Crucial Dates in Cold War Relations between the BBC External Services and the Foreign Office." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 28 (4): 557–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439680802311900>.