

Radio, voice and the rhythms of the everyday

Book review of Gunner, Liz (2019). *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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In *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*, Liz Gunner provides a compelling history of the role of radio in the formation of a Black modern identity. A significant part of the book focuses on the emergence of Zulu-language radio in South Africa, mediated through Radio Bantu which was set up in 1960 and Ukhozi FM since 1994. African-language media continue to be under-studied and Gunner's book makes an important intervention in this regard. However, the book should not be read merely as a history of radio. While conventional histories of media institutions may focus on how organisations change over time, *Radio Soundings* offers so much more than that.

First of all, Gunner demonstrates how the history of radio shaped what place Zulu-language speakers came to occupy within the wider South Africa nation and how both successive governments and listeners influenced the nature of radio. Secondly, we learn much about how radio narrated daily life and how in turn popular radio programmes were incorporated into the rhythms of the everyday in both rural and urban areas as well as across South Africa's national borders. This makes the book an important resource for anyone interested in gaining a better understanding of South Africa's social history. Finally, the book's theoretical interest in the notion of 'voice' is explored via a sociological exploration of the individual lives of a number of prominent radio broadcasters and script writers as well as a more literary analysis of the texts of a range of popular radio dramas.

This multi-levelled, interdisciplinary and highly original analysis of radio through the history of the nation, the institutional history of radio stations, the personal life histories of individuals and the history of radio drama as a genre brings radio, history and its 'soundings' alive. The book also makes an important contribution by complicating questions of voice and agency. While previous accounts of Apartheid-era radio may have presented it as a tool of propaganda, Gunner's book offers a more nuanced account by highlighting the agency of individual broadcasters in shaping the medium and its genres *within* the wider constraints – whether imposed by the Apartheid or post-Apartheid state or more recently the market which has intensified the competition between radio stations. A key argument in the book is that radio helped to constitute a 'Zulu-language voice' in both rural and urban areas while defying the racial spatial segregation. The affordances of radio as a technology allowed texts to travel and enabled communities to be mobile 'electronically' if not physically. The book is divided into three parts.

Part One examines the migration of established oral Zulu-language forms to radio and highlights the important role of King Edward Masinga and Alexius Buthelezi in this regard. It discusses the early beginnings of Zulu-language radio in the context of the Second World War and the pressures the government faced in ensuring that South Africans were united against Germany. It demonstrates that it is impossible to make sense of South African radio "without seeing its wider entanglement in the history of empire and of the African continent" (p. 6). Against the background of the war, former headteacher, K.E. Masinga, apparently walked into the Durban SABC studios and asked if he could serve as the station's first announcer of a Zulu-language news broadcast. After some initial hesitation, the station obliged and Masinga read out his first three-minute news item in December 1941. The remainder of Part One discusses the important contribution of Alexius Buthelezi,

composer of radio music dramas, a producer and an actor, to Zulu-language radio. One of his dramas, *uNokwezi*, made it onto a number of international radio stations, highlighting again the transnational dimension of South African radio.

This theme is developed further in Part Two which focuses on two exiled South African writers, Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi, who both made radio drama during the 1960s in London: Bloke Modisane at the BBC while Lewis Nkosi produced the 'Africa Abroad' programme at the Transcription Centre. Recent #BlackLivesMatter protests in the wake of George Floyd's brutal killing saw multiple outpourings of solidarity against anti-black racism across different racial geographies worldwide. The role of digital technology and social media has been considered to be crucial in making these global connections and shared identities across borders possible. However, chapters Three and Four powerfully demonstrate that radio, too, operated as a transnational medium that linked up black South Africans with African Americans and black Britons, fuelled by a shared history and common interest in music such as jazz and writers such as James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. The book argues that these connections played a crucial role in the shaping of a black modern South African identity.

The role of radio in the formation of novel identities is explored further in Part Three of the book which focuses more closely on the evolution of the Zulu-language radio drama genre since the 1970s. This part of the book beautifully illustrates how the dramas began to address key social and political concerns such as the violence in KwaZulu-Natal province in the 1980s as well as the newly obtained freedoms of the 1990s when Apartheid formally ended alongside the anxieties produced by the AIDS pandemic. These developments all posed a range of challenges to gender relations and daily family life which the dramas interrogated. The final chapter of Part Three examines how ordinary people came to voice their concerns even more directly through the genre of phone-in talk shows and the Vuka Mzansi Breakfast Show more specifically, a popular programme on Ukhozi FM which operated within a now much more competitive and commercialised broadcasting landscape. The book concludes that South African radio "opened up a space for an inclusive presence of a black modernity that defined, painfully at times, what it would take from the past and what it would take with it into the present" (p. 194). I would highly recommend *Radio Soundings* to readers not only interested in the history of radio in South Africa but in its ability to give 'voice' and its connections with social and political developments, the rhythms of the everyday and shared transnational histories.