Elizabeth Gunner, *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 240 pp, ISBN 978-1-108-47064-3

In the face of the Zondo Commission's horrific and horrifying news about the capture of state-owned enterprises such as Eskom, Prasa, and SABC, commentators claim the capture was the outcome of Jacob Zuma's 'nine squandered years'. The same capture similarly happened under apartheid. Furthermore, the apartheid state wielded considerable control and regulation over state firms through its regulatory and control mechanisms. During apartheid South Africa, prior to the years of what we now term state capture, a special capture of the Black people's voice occurred, as did a special capture of the auditory, a capture of SABC radio sound by apartheid authorities. This was a state capture of a different kind, one meant for control rather than corruption. As a state-owned corporation, the SABC, I would argue, was likewise captured by the apartheid regime with this level of control. Radio capture became a significant instrument for the apartheid regime as they sought to dominate the Black community through domination rather than consent.

Ironically, apartheid's seizure of SABC radio was unsuccessful. Instead, radio became a site of resistance against the authority that attempted to control it. Radio became the hidden literature of the aural, the drama of the airwaves and, as a result, radio in the process also became a conduit for many talents neglected by the apartheid administration. Radio stations, such as Radio Bantu, subsequently Radio Zulu, and currently Ukhozi FM, were taken over by the state in the 1960s during the presidency of Hendrick Verwoerd to implement racist and violent policies. In the book *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*, Liz Gunner goes into additional depth about the capture of radio stations. According to her, radio stations carried out apartheid's policy of suppressing Black people. This subjugation was intended to control and stifle the Black voice, beginning with the first emergence of the Black voice during the war years of the 1940s. The Black voice was intended to be passive rather than assertive. When K. E. Masinga first appeared on radio, a technology previously available only to whites, a seed of a Black culture was planted, and a subtle resistance to apartheid was forged.

Hearing a Black man's voice and sound on the radio was a watershed moment and, because of this, according to Gunner, radio provided a fantastic platform for Black radio listeners to traverse and develop their own path to modernity that was distinct from western society's ideals of modernity. Gunner writes that the transition to Black modernity could only be accomplished through serialised radio dramas and shows that captured the hearts and minds of ordinary Black South Africans during apartheid. Gunner makes a compelling case in her book that radio drama had a substantive influence in shaping South African culture and identity, as well as giving a platform to challenge apartheid ideologies. Apart from enforcing certain kinds of ethnicity on Black South Africans, the apartheid regime also exploited the media to maintain its hold on power. Despite this, Gunner shows that Zulu radio drama played

an important role in the production of culture for a subaltern audience beyond the aims of governmental control. In her book, *Radio Soundings*, Gunner examines radio drama in the context of Zulu-language radio. Gunner asks a pertinent question along the lines of, 'What did the mediatisation of the voice as sound signify in the setting of the racially separated South African state?' Later, she expands on this subject in the post-1990 democratic age, 'tracing voice in a fundamentally transformed situation', implying that even during the upheavals of apartheid power, radio capture could not persist long.

Instead, the evolution of radio, particularly Zulu radio during apartheid, aided and encouraged its listeners in KwaZulu-Natal and across the country in developing a new sense of personal identity. Radio also aided in the dissemination of familiar ideas of family life and society among the imagined community of listeners. Although Gunner's primary objective is to study South Africa's cultural landscape during apartheid, *Radio Soundings* also contributes significantly to radio theory by situating her historical analysis within the political and cultural components of 'sonic agency'. Liz Gunner brilliantly attempts to narrate the story of Black agency through sound and radio. She does this because sound is unseen and its architectural and structuring aspects in everyday life might be elusive; furthermore, the narratives given by radio dramas created the possibility for African agency. Gunner contends that the emphasis on issues such as love, courting and family life were staples in the building of the modern, producing a discourse of the modern in relation to social life and giving various interpretations of community and selfhood.

With the emergence of Web 2.0, *Radio Soundings* serves as a sharp reminder of the power of radio's 'old' medium. During apartheid's institutionalised segregation, the strength of radio promoted and preserved the various sounds of Black modernity. Radio Zulu's jazz and music programmes, in particular, kept up with global popular music and genres, assisting in the creation of modern themes. Gunner's book also analyses how radio changed not only the society of those who listened to it, but also how listeners played an equally vital role in shaping the Black voice on radio. Because many of the listeners wrote in comments and questions regarding the programmes, the process was two-way. The book, on the other hand, concentrates primarily on the content creation of serialised dramas, with more emphasis on their production by stations and less emphasis on their consumption by audiences and listeners. By doing so, Gunner prioritises giving the reader a vivid sense of the content of Zulu radio broadcasts over the audience and impact in her book.

Some evidence is presented to show that listener responses influenced how programmes were created, such as references to listener letters or reviews, but there was more to be said about the demographics of listenership and the role that radio-listening played in everyday lives, as demonstrated by Deborah Spitalnick's work on Zambia. More substance would be given to the initial allegation that Zulu radio influenced the lives of millions through a systematic campaign to increase listenership. A more complete description of listening habits, in a similar vein, would have helped to address the small strangeness of the part on exiles like Bloke Modisane in London, who were neither broadcasting in isiZulu nor, seemingly, being heard in

South Africa. What is clear is that there was and still is a close link between Zulu radio stations and their listeners, and as a result, during and after apartheid's demise, Zulu radio maintained a devoted listenership by providing a welcoming source of familiar moral ideals. Several motifs emerge from this history as well.

In her book *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern*, Gunner posits that a few important people had a substantial impact on the early history of Zulu radio. Figures such as K. E. Masinga, whom Gunner identifies as a 'founding father of the Black voice of radio', made significant contributions to assuring the establishment of a vernacular voice, particularly the Zulu language, in the arena of radio. Masinga did this at a time when the space itself was intended to disparage and demean Black languages by classifying them as weaker and inferior to their English and Afrikaans counterparts. Polymaths like Winnie Mahlangu and Alexius Buthelezi dominated the airwaves in the 1960s and 1970s, writing and performing dramas, composing music, and producing programmes.

Meanwhile, Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi introduced Zulu drama to BBC audiences worldwide. Since the 1970s, their stories were dominated by dramas that have become household names rather than individuals. Some of the *amastori*, or dramas, were thinly disguised government propaganda. For example, *uBhekifa* portrayed the story of a small-town police officer in Pietermaritzburg in 1970. It romanticised traditional rural life while vilifying Johannesburg criminals and militant communists – *amaphekulazikhuni* (roughly, 'what blows over the burning faggots') – who arrived from the north. The show aired for 40 episodes. Some of the isiZulu broadcasts that could be heard in South Africa, on the other hand, were covertly subversive. Thokozani Nene, a prominent actor-presenter, claimed that it was common practice in the 1970s to start tightly restricted news programmes with the disclaimer, 'The words I am going to pronounce are not my own.' Nene also managed to sneak in snippets of a praise poem (*izibongo*) to Shaka, Cetshwayo or one of the other Zulu monarchs. Izibongo was a popular character on Zulu radio, featuring in shows such as *Ubongilinda Mzikayifani* (1974).

Other dramas pushed the envelope even further. *Abangane Ababi* (Bad Friends) by Abigail Zondi premiered in 1979 as a fable about a young girl who quits the dullness of her rural upbringing to flirt with humiliation in a distant township. Despite the fact that the protagonist resigns herself to respectability in the end, the prior thirty-five episodes emphasised the colour, brutality and moral ambiguity of modern metropolitan living. The serial was an implied inversion of the apartheid state's concern with 'tradition', but it also challenged the male monopoly of media and cultural creation in the 1970s as a story largely about women and, uncommonly, written by a woman. The story focused primarily about the relationships of women of different generations. Many of the ensuing dramas had important female characters, such as the popular *Yiz' Uvalo*, which aired for one hundred episodes from 1986 to 1987 and starred Radio Zulu's grande dame Lindiwe 'MaLindi' Ntuli. The show aired every weekday for six months and followed the rise and fall of a serial killer, Sigidi, played by Eric Ngcobo. Gunner contends that the plot's violence was critical in moderating and normalising local populations' awareness of the violence that had lately erupted

in Natal and would persist for the next decade.

While Radio Zulu was viewed as a tool of state control, dramatic serials encouraged varied kinds of identity and provided resistance to apartheid propaganda. According to Gunner, these dramas were a mix of drama and comedy, reflecting a subtle kind of subversion of apartheid hegemony. The Zulu radio dramas provided a forum for writers and listeners (urban and rural) to engage without openly addressing politics. Furthermore, unlike news broadcasts or current affairs programming, these dramas were not subjected to the same apartheid editorial scrutiny. Through this account one gets the impression that *Radio Soundings* by Liz Gunner is a case study of how radio directly fostered the construction of a modern identity among Black South Africans through these serialised radio dramas. Gunner also contends that voice in general, and specifically voice through radio technology, established a historical soundscape that was a source of power in apartheid South Africa. Throughout the book, it is also clear that Gunner believes that this voice, as mediated by radio, continues to shape identity construction in the region.

This was also true in my case at home, as the radio benefited me in navigating my own world and, as a result, in gaining a sense of the world and my place in it as a young Xhosa kid growing up in the dusty streets of Kwazakhele in Gqeberha, the Eastern Cape. Serialised radio dramas were created not just for entertainment purposes, but also for the sake of identity creation and formation. This was especially significant during an apartheid regime that tried to exercise dominance over the Black subject. These dramas, on the other hand, changed the power dynamic by empowering Black listeners to build their own identities. One of the book's claims on the general formation of Black identity is that it did not occur in isolation from the identity and cultural formation of African Americans. Gunner contends that the African American connection with Black South Africa has a long history and has become a fundamental component of Black current South African identity. Indeed, Gunner contends that the path to Black South African modernity was paved by this enduring link, which spanned religion, popular culture (including music and expressive arts) and worldwide Black politics.

One of the book's primary claims is the link between African American culture and Zulu radio serials, which 'formed an essential component of Black modern South African identity'. Gunner, for her part, contends that power discourses in South Africa should not be a zero-sum game controlled by modern capitalism. *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern* aims to demonstrate how soundscapes create a continuous field in which so-called subaltern groups might potentially disrupt dominant actors. For example, after the incorporation of the Zulu language into technology, radio became a venue where Black voices fought apartheid's beliefs of spatial architecture, segregation, and division. One of the book's main points is that radio helped to create a 'Zulu-language voice' in both rural and urban locations, notwithstanding racial geographic isolation.

Despite the horrific and restrictive character of radio during apartheid, the affordances of radio as a technology allowed messages to move and enabled groups to be mobile 'electronically', if not physically. This book also makes the convincing

case that the state faced a difficult task in trying to preserve its control and regulation of the radio medium because it was impossible to completely manage the medium. Beyond the actual radio production, Liz Gunner maintains that this medium had a subversive function because of the audiences it attracts, 'enabling, with some types of popular music, the maintenance of a tenuous bridge between classes and groups in the divided community of Zulu speakers' (20).

Through the numerous recollections or the way that character names have left their marks on memories, the author effectively illustrates the broad attraction of these programmes. The participation aspect was also immediately evident because some pieces finished with a request for public feedback, inspiring an impressive number of letters from viewers (not found in the archives but mentioned in the interviews). Sometimes a production would be asked to create a sequel at the listeners' desire. Black populations joined in their shared passion for these programmes, which blended the use of recognised oral traditions with modern sound effects, folk songs and urban music, despite being severely restricted in their movement and split between rural and urban areas. The assertion made by David Coplan's[1] work on popular music and Litheko Modisane's study on Black film – that cultural forms provided a platform for nuanced resistance to apartheid ideology – resonates with other histories of South African culture[2]. Gunner's analysis supports this claim. Jacob Dlamini, who disputes the idea and stereotype that Black people during apartheid had no fond recollections of the past, finds the study to be compelling as well. Dlamini and Gunner demonstrate how Black people managed to lead urgent lives despite experiencing poverty and criminality. They possessed morals, music, literature and art, which together shaped Black life during that time of oppression.[3]

Elizabeth Gunner's book shows how the history of radio determined the position that Zulu language speakers came to occupy within the larger South African nation, as well as how successive governments and listeners influenced the form of radio. Secondly, we learn a lot about how radio narrated daily life and how popular radio programmes were interwoven into daily rhythms in both rural and urban locations and across South Africa's national borders. As a result, the book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in learning more about South Africa's social history. Finally, the book's theoretical interest in the concept of 'voice' is explored through a sociological examination of the personal lives of several renowned radio broadcasters and scriptwriters, as well as a more literary examination of the texts of a variety of popular radio dramas.

Sociological investigation of the human histories of a number of notable radio presenters and scriptwriters is followed by a more literary analysis of the texts of a variety of popular radio dramas. This multi-levelled, interdisciplinary and highly innovative analysis of radio through national history, institutional history of radio stations, personal life histories of individuals, and the history of radio drama as a genre,

1 D. B. Coplan, *In township tonight: South Africa's Black city music and theatre* (London: Longman, 1985).
2 L. Modisane, *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films* (New York: Springer, 2012).
3 J. Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2009).

brings radio, history, and its 'soundings' to life. The book also contributes significantly by confounding issues of voice and agency. While previous accounts of apartheid-era radio may have portrayed it as a tool of propaganda, Gunner's book provides a more nuanced account by emphasising the agency of individual broadcasters in shaping the medium and its genres within the larger constraints imposed by the apartheid or post-apartheid state or, more recently, the market, which has increased competition among radio stations. South African radio, according to the book, 'opened up a place for an inclusive presence of a Black modernity that defined, brutally at times, what it would take from the past and what it would take with it into the present'. (194) I would strongly suggest *Radio Soundings*: *South Africa and the Black Modern* to those interested not just in the history of radio in South Africa, but also in its potential to provide 'voice'; it also explores links to social and political events, everyday rhythms and shared transnational histories.

Rather than providing summaries for each chapter of the book, I focused on the debates that piqued my interest. As an MA student immersed in research on the role of sound and radio in mobilising Black communities during apartheid, I was most interested in understanding the role of voice, particularly Black language voice in radio, in creating spaces for Black people to navigate and create their own modernity, especially during a difficult time under an oppressive and violent apartheid regime. Liz Gunner's book includes a wide range of issues, and her work should not be regarded solely as a history of radio. While the majority of the book focuses on the emergence of Zulu-language radio in South Africa, as mediated by Radio Bantu, which was established in 1960, and Ukhozi FM since then, the book is also about shedding light on the understudied nature of African voice and, in particular, the role those African languages played in building a cultural identity in apartheid South Africa. Gunner's book provides a significant intervention in this regard. However, it should be noted that the book should not be viewed solely as a history of radio. While traditional histories of media institutions may focus on how organisations evolve through time, *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern* provides much more – it gives us not just the history of radio in South Africa; it also provides us with a wholesome cultural and social history of South Africa.

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