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REVIEW ARTICLE

Radio and the Nation: histories of broadcasting, conflict and race in Southern Africa

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Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern, by Liz Gunner, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, xiv + 224 pp.

Powerful Frequencies: Radio, State Power, and the Cold War in Angola, 1931–2002, by Marissa J. Moorman, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2019, xxi + 257 pp.

African radio began largely as a colonial project. It enabled Europeans to feel connected to their home nations and each other; to hear of world news and current affairs; and to enjoy familiar music and other cultural programming in European languages. Some stations also marketed themselves to African audiences by reframing their content as a benefit of European occupation. In Ghana's inaugural 1935 broadcast, Governor Arnold Hodson defined radio's technological and social function in Eurocentric terms of high culture and patriarchy:

> It is very similar to the magic stone we read about in fairy tales. We press a button and are transported to London. Again, we press it and hear an opera from Berlin … mothers, when the children have been fractious or when they have had a trying day, cooking and washing clothes, or men who have had a hard day's work, will sit down and listen to first-class music which will banish their cares and make them forget all their worries.[1]

Within a decade, the Second World War had strengthened anti-colonial nationalism across the continent, and radio was at the forefront of the imperial campaign of continuity and stability (Campbell 2018, 209). Many radio networks spoke of cultural engagement, access to education and freedom of knowledge, whilst conditioning listeners to the continued acceptance of colonial rule (Bloom 2014, 136). Some stations began to include Africans as contributors and then programme makers. In time, many of these stations Africanised sufficiently that listeners began to recognise themselves in the voice of the station. Elsewhere, radio continued to empower European residents and Africa-born white settlers with the rhetoric of white supremacy. Liz Gunner's *Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern* and Marissa J. Moorman's *Powerful Frequencies: Radio, State Power, and the Cold War in Angola, 1931–2002* each provide a wealth of information about the journeys undertaken by radio – its technology, producers, writers, listeners and regulators – within complex histories of colonisation, apartheid, oppression, violent uprisings, civil war and Cold War politics. In doing so, they contribute to a strengthening corpus of African radio

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studies scholarship that seeks to illuminate unique and shared experiences of radio production and reception throughout the three phases of twentieth-century radio broadcasting in Africa.

During the first phase of radio, from the late 1920s, broadcasters had relatively basic communication aims. In South Africa, the first radio broadcasts in sub-Saharan Africa were enabled by South African Railways in 1923 (Afolayan 2004, 114). In Zimbabwe, Imperial Airways introduced radio in 1933 to provide information and weather reports (Amienyi and Igyor 1997, 158). There was rarely any intention of producing original content for African audiences, and most programmes were relayed from Europe. The British supported the idea of radio as an independent public service based on the BBC model.[2] They relayed programmes from London to British colonies beginning in East Africa with Kenya in 1927 and in West Africa with Sierra Leone in 1934. In the 1940s and 1950s, under the supervision of BBC personnel, African broadcasters in Anglophone colonies began translating news and other content into African languages. Over time, broadcasting was re-centred to colonial capitals where African programme makers exercised creative freedom (Smith 2018). In French colonies almost all broadcasts continued to be in French and were transmitted from France. This was in line with "the prevailing philosophy … that the French territories in Africa were actually an extension of France" (Mytton n.d., 5). The Portuguese permitted colonial officials to introduce radio through amateur radio clubs, but in time the state created a monopoly on broadcasting.

As the majority of sub-Saharan Africa was liberated from imperialism in the 1960s, radio played a significant role in the building of new nations, with a notable exception being Mozambique where the radio station was closed four months after independence (LM-Radio). The second phase of radio history saw African governments maintain the monopoly on broadcasting that had been established by colonial authorities and introduce policies to control broadcasting for at least 30 years (Mytton n.d., 6). So significant was radio to both state and society that coup leaders legitimised their success by declaring victory on air. During a bloody uprising on 7 September 1974, Mozambique's radio station was taken over by the Frelimo army in the final stages of the war for independence (LM-Radio). In Angola's attempted coup of 27 May 1977, listeners woke to the news that rebel soldiers led by Nito Alves had taken control of the national radio station. President Agostinho Neto responded by asking Cuban troops to enter the station's grounds with tanks, and soon after "Cuban voices spoke over the microphone of RNA [Rádio Nacional de Angola], securing the station in the name of Neto" (Moorman 2019, 101). Two years later, on 4 June 1979, Ghana's radio station became a battleground as state troops attempted to prevent insurgent members of the armed forces from taking control of radio and the country. Immediately after his extrication from prison, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings ran to Broadcasting House to announce the overthrow of Lieutenant General Frederick Akuffo's military junta. Rawlings asked the public to keep calm, whilst gunshots were heard in the background and a civilian broadcaster announced "I am under fire!" (Amamoo 2000, 191–5). The coup of 25 May 1997 that placed Sierra Leone's Armed Forces Revolutionary Council in power was also declared on radio. Following the announcement by coup leader Corporal Tamba Gborie, one of Johnny Paul Koroma's first actions as the new Head of State was to close all private broadcasters and take absolute control of radio. These events all belong to African political and broadcasting history: the

two are intertwined and, as these examples illustrate, the tactics of revolution echoed across the continent as new nations emerged and sought genuine stability of their own making.

The third phase of sub-Saharan Africa's twentieth-century radio history begins with the end of state monopolies on domestic and external broadcasting from the late 1980s (Mytton n.d., 8). Whilst state radio continues, it must compete for audiences against a growing number of independent broadcasters funded by institutions and commercial advertisers. There are now many state and independent stations broadcasting African sound: music, stories, knowledge and beliefs. Academic interest in these stations is also thriving, and in 2019 Cambridge University Press's International African Library and Ohio University Press's New African Histories both published new scholarly research in the field. Gunner's *Radio Soundings* and Moorman's *Powerful Frequencies* explore the nuanced relationships between state, broadcaster and listener within the complex history of their respective geographical fields. Individually, these texts demonstrate how important broadcasting has been to the South African and Angolan national journeys and the ways in which radio can reflect, create and distort identity. Collectively, these engaging works attest to the significance of African radio studies and current scholarly interest in African liberation radio. In addressing key historical events, they also explore concepts of voice and sound, the evidence of propaganda and challenges of archival research, and the experiences of producers and listeners.

Gunner, an established scholar in radio studies, has written for a reader conversant in the history of South Africa. This assumption frees her pages from lengthy narration of historical context. Instead she looks in detail at the broadcasters and writers who were involved in producing Zulu-language radio dramas. Large portions of the book are devoted to close readings of selected dramas and how they provided for audiences by reflecting lived experiences. Across parts one and two, each chapter looks at a different figure in the creation of a distinctly Zulu sound and the liberation of black voices through radio. Chapter One looks at K. E. Masinga, whom Gunner introduces as "one of the architects of black radio in South Africa" (25). From its origins proudly speaking to white settlers, the addition of a Zulu service in 1941 made Masinga responsible for translating English news of the Second World War. Gunner explains that Masinga was not permitted to change anything in the process of translation, and yet he used the Zulu language in such a way that it received "a new authority, even legitimacy …. It was a kind of revolution" (6).

The second chapter focuses on Alexius Buthelezi, a key figure in Radio Bantu and Radio Zulu who is studied through his musical dramas of the 1960s and 1970s. Gunner frames Buthelezi's career and writing within the complex political landscape of the newly formed Republic of South Africa. This was an era in which Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd fired SABC's Director General, Dr Gideon Roos, for referring to black men as "Mr" on radio (49); where broadcasting provided possibilities for creativity in African-language radio but in an intensely controlled space (54); and where Buthelezi drew in new audiences through dramas that echoed oral literature within modern domestic dramas of South African life (60).[3]

Part Two of *Radio Soundings* explores South African broadcasters in Britain through the figures of Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi, exiled South Africans whom Gunner includes as writers employing the possibilities of radio to imagine a distant home. Modisane and

Nkosi were in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s when a very active community of artists from Africa and the Caribbean were based at the BBC. As such, Gunner's text also contributes to scholarship on the BBC's global network of writers and intellectuals who were "charting a new sensibility of blackness at a particular moment in late empire" (75). Modisane was an influential outsider, whose work "had weight" at the BBC (92). Gunner also describes him as having a "double-voice" as he wrote for both the Home and African services during an era when the BBC was both imperial and postcolonial (80). In the early 1960s, Nkosi entered the London broadcasting scene when he began working for the Transcription Centre and producing *African Abroad*. Gunner describes the Transcription Centre as providing "a free space for the production of pan-African or diasporic African voice," which featured a broad spectrum of cultural and political views (96). The chapter provides detail about the content of *African Abroad*, including Nkosi drawing on the ideas of figures such as James Baldwin, Kwame Nkrumah, Langston Hughes and Banna Kanute to seek an answer to his core concern: "What, if anything, binds all black people together?" (110).

The third part of Gunner's text offers close readings of Zulu programmes from the 1970s to the 2000s, with a chapter dedicated to each decade preceding the book's conclusion. In these chapters *Radio Soundings* centres the experience of contextual listening. Through three Zulu radio dramas of the mid-1970s, Gunner considers African-language radio audiences at a time when SABC was dominated by ideologies of apartheid with the intention of controlling "a restive, modernising black populace" (117). She argues that 1970s broadcasters received their voice from the early struggles of Masinga and that a Zulu sound was being used to bind an imagined community together through the shared act of listening. News readers articulated their frustrations at having to read heavily censored news that they did not believe, dramas "provoked listeners and helped them navigate the journey to the present" (134) and, at a time when legal spatial restrictions prevented travel across apartheid-mapped cities, sports programmes transported football fans to the pitch. The chapter on the 1980s presents a two-part, 100-episode drama series that explores ideas of family, the everyday, pain and resistance in "a time of extreme insecurity, of social turbulence, political violence, and psychic angst" (138). Gunner's reading of the series suggests that the writer, M. V. Bhangu, employed the metaphysical and supernatural within the experience of the modern to explore indigenous power at a time when the African National Congress (ANC) called upon the masses to rise against oppression.

In looking at dramas of the immediate post-apartheid era, Gunner argues that the relationship between broadcaster and audience had become one of trust built over many decades, and so writers were able to guide listeners to locate themselves within the new present by taking them "deep into the trauma as well as the excitement and glamour of [the new order]" (158). Continuing an argument that threads throughout the book, Gunner states that millennial drama had the power to reshape the identities of listeners: the marginalised, destitute, working class, aspirant and middle classes. Besides drama, the chapter – titled "Finding a Centre" – also considers Vuka Mzansi's Breakfast Show to demonstrate how language itself is a flexible and versatile character. Gunner concludes that "voice in radio can become a means of presenting a different way of seeing and being in the world" (190–91). As such, *Radio Soundings* comes full circle and reminds us that in the 1940s Masinga's use of the Zulu language had begun "a kind of revolution" through South African radio.

One of Gunner's strengths as a writer is her ability to capture the spirit of the dramas through their plots, characters and themes. But she also reminds us that even if we listened to the recordings ourselves, we could not hear what would have been heard by audiences in the unique historical moments of their original broadcast when the drama reflected the listener's reality. Divergently, Moorman's scholarship on Angolan radio employs oral history rather than close reading to enrich her archival work. Her focus is on radio as a "specific technology to think about independence struggles and postcolonial state making" (5). Building upon Moorman's research on Angolan music in the social history and soundscape of the country's late colonial period, *Powerful Frequencies* extends beyond Portuguese imperialism to the years of civil war within a Cold War context. Whilst framing radio as a technology, it is made clear that "[h]ow and why people use technologies, and what meanings radio can produce and how, are not questions with technical answers. They are human problems" (4). Moorman's skill as a writer lies in her ability to draw her reader into these human problems of the colonial and postcolonial epochs of Angolan history, where the act of listening takes place in awareness of the novel ways in which radio technology is employed by key factions to unsettle regimes, protest against opposition, promote propaganda and defend agendas.

The first three chapters of *Powerful Frequencies* explore the intriguing worlds of white settlers establishing radio clubs, guerrilla forces supporting their ground war by broadcasting from outside Angola's borders, and the colonial state's employment of radio as a "technopolitical solution to the problem of nationalist movements and anticolonialism" (73). To introduce these radio histories, Moorman provides a detailed narrative of the war of independence; Portuguese imperialism and the military in Angola; the FNLA, MPLA and UNITA liberation groups; the deadly severity of colonial retaliation against popular uprising; and the declaration of independence and MPLA rule.[4] Unlike the familiar narrative of radio as a project of the colonial state, broadcasting began in Angola through amateur radio clubs from 1931 and it was not until the mid-1960s that the colonial authorities entered the radio scene as part of their counterinsurgency project.[5] Moorman characterises the sound of early Angolan radio as presenting a "whiteness [that] was loud, bold and dangerous" (22). Small, battery-operated, inexpensive radios gave thousands of listeners access to the utterings of Portuguese doctors, engineers, army captains and municipal governors whose amateur programmes defined "a narrow 'we' in a distant land" (35). Radio had been in Angola for almost 30 years before the first programme was made for an African audience. Angolan-born professional broadcaster Sebastião Coelho produced a programme in Umbundu which included Angolan music, folktales and oral traditions alongside features about urban life in Huambo. Despite PIDE arresting Coelho for fear of his motives, Moorman states that the programme continued (43).[6]

Chapters two and three cover the period 1961–1974 to explore the way in which liberation groups and the colonial state fought their opposing campaigns on air. Whilst police scoured the country looking for guerrilla cells, Angolans were listening to exiled freedom fighters broadcasting from Brazzaville and Kinshasa as well as through the external services of recently independent countries such as Ghana. Listening to these stations was illegal and so, as Moorman explains, the common listening practice was to have one radio in the back of the home tuned to *Angola Combatente* and one in the front room tuned to the state broadcaster. "Sonically under siege, nervous, and rattled, the colonial state needed to broadcast its own message" (73). However, the voices that

delivered messages of compliance on the front room radio were not always recognisably of the state. Moorman speaks in detail about *Voz de Angola*, an unofficial station that almost neighboured EOA's broadcasting house, where Angolan presenters played "authentic, local cultural sounds to support a mendacious politics" (92).[7] *Voz de Angola* was conceived by the Portuguese to broadcast propaganda to African listeners and convince them of the state's commitment to economic development whilst remaining silent on issues of white racism and massacres enacted by the colonial regime. Despite MPLA efforts to label *Voz de Angola* presenters as liars and traitors, Moorman explains that the station "had an audience among Africans, some of whom wrote to celebrate and encourage them" as the sound was so persuasively Angolan (92).

As *Powerful Frequencies* continues into independence, Moorman narrates how the MPLA integrated the amateur clubs into the state service, took full control of radio and created a truly national radio network to shape Angolan political orientation during the enduring years of civil war and Cold War relations. In chapters four, five and six, historical events often sit at the forefront of the narrative with radio as a character. The tone is set through a speech outlining media guidelines given a month after independence, in which the Information Minister, João Filipe Martins, called for greater government control over information: "[The] media should serve the working masses, fight bourgeois customs and habits and the addictions of colonialism and capitalism, and respond positively to the generalized popular resistance. They should fight against the divisiveness of tribalism, racism, and triumphalism" (99–100).

Two years later, President Neto visited the state radio station on 5 October 1977, which continues to be commemorated nationally as "Day of the Radio." His intention was to further highlight the key role that broadcasting was expected to play as a "technopolitical necessity" in educating Angolans about national politics (105). Neto's visit took place five months after the attempted coup of 27 May, and Moorman argues that "5 October unwittingly folds the history of the 27 de Maio into the history of national broadcasting" (103). The Angolan mass media strategy also included professional training provided by Eastern Bloc allies, regular newscasts calling for diplomacy in the face of war, censorship, and socialist solutions to the welfare of radio employees. During her archival research Moorman found no tapes of *Angola Combatente* broadcasts, but only PIDE transcriptions of broadcasts that concerned the Portuguese; "sonic censorship" in the form of "deep, intentional scratches in vinyl disks produced in the early 1970s" (113); and evidence that whilst no mention was made of the Cold War the RNA call sign was "Here, Angola the firm trench of the revolution in Africa!" (134). In her final chapter, Moorman employs oral history to great effect in narrating the engaging history of UNITA's Radio Vorgan. As one former Vorgan reporter informed her, the station enabled UNITA to fight with radio as well as arms. *Powerful Frequencies* depicts Vorgan's broadcasts as war reportage, propaganda and "true lies," which created a paranoia amongst UNITA members, painted a hostile picture of the ruling MPLA, and made both the Angolan state and international listeners nervous about the possibilities of peace.

Moorman's epilogue is titled "Jamming," which she first speaks of in chapter two when she narrates Portuguese attempts to block guerrilla frequencies in the latter years of colonial rule. In her epilogue, new popular forms of media are considered for their role in the "ongoing politics of communication in Angola" (165). In the twenty-first century, modernity is created through television, music videos and social media posts, but, as

both Gunner and Moorman articulate, colonial and postcolonial states in Southern African countries have used radio as a symbol of modernity throughout their history. These texts insist that we view black modernity through an African lens rather than a colonial or postcolonial one that favours perspectives from the global north. We are shown how the imported technology of radio has been appropriated by programme makers and listeners to create a uniquely African aural space. In *Radio Soundings* and *Powerful Frequencies* we are reminded that radio is an accessible technology that harnesses language's ability to express culture; that possesses a far-reaching ability to address the concerns of mass audiences; and that provokes change, reflects reality and provides a familiar comfort in the most volatile times.

Notes

1. Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. "50 Years of Broadcasting in Ghana: Jubilee Celebration Brochure," 6. Hodson also established the first radio station in Sierra Leone in 1934.
2. BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation.
3. SABC: South African Broadcasting Corporation.
4. FNLA: Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola/National Front for the Liberation of Angola; MPLA: Movimento Popular para a Libertação de Angola/Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola; UNITA: União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola/National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.
5. Other exceptions include stations established by religious groups, such as the Jesuit Fathers who established radio in Zaire in 1937, and the American group Sudan Interior Mission, who did the same in Liberia in 1954.
6. PIDE: Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado/International Police for the Defense of the State.
7. EOA: Emissora Oficial de Angola/Official Angolan Broadcaster (colonial broadcaster).

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