

Introduction

Voice, race, radio

Sounds within: a visit, June 1999

As the radio dramas pressed on in the new dispensation within the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and in the country, Patrick Masonto Buthelezi, choirmaster and drama lover, younger brother of Alexius Buthelezi, continued in his post as head of drama at Ukhozi FM at the Durban SABC station, then still known as 100 Old Fort Road. This was the address to which listeners of the dramas (those produced from the Durban studios) were invited to send their comments, complaints, or requests at the end of every long serial drama. The visit in 1999 by Wiseman Masango and myself found Masonto Buthelezi seated in a large office with piles upon piles of documents lining the sides of the walls. They were, he informed us, radio plays sent in by eager writers who wished to find a space for themselves and their characters' voices in the prestigious drama slots of *imidlalo yomoya* (plays of the air). There was no evidence of any of the careful passing of memos between editors, including the vetting of scripts, stern requests for revisions, doubts, sometimes scorn, and so on, which, I would later discover, marked the era of BBC radio drama from the 1960s to the 1980s in which Bloke Modisane had a significant place. There was, however, an acute sense that Masonto Buthelezi knew what he was looking for in a good *umdlalo womoya*. And he also knew what he wanted.

Although there was no tangible evidence of listeners' views, there was a sense that, as he talked to us, they were present in his mind. The audiences of the dramas had, he said, an annoying habit of wanting a drama that they particularly liked or that seemed unresolved to continue to a second part. Buthelezi felt that the second parts of dramas requested in this way were rarely as successful as the original plays. Yet quite often he bowed to listeners' views and commissioned a second part. He was later to do just that with the riveting love story *Ebuhleni Nasebubini* (For Better and for Worse) by Dumisani Nkosi. So there was a sense, then, that even though a bureaucracy of drama production (so evident in the BBC files) was missing, in its place there was a constant knitting together of producer and receiver through the intimate passages of

2 Introduction: voice, race, radio

reception and reply that bound the community of listeners to those who brought the dramas into being, from Masonto Buthelezi himself, to the writers whose scripts were chosen, and to the producers, actors, and technical production team that together made the whole. Promising scripts that were considered not quite right were sent back by Masonto Buthelezi to their authors for further work, he told us.¹ New structures of feeling and the complex intimacies of writers, audience, and producers all combined to contribute to the mix of themes and treatments that were evident in the radio dramas of the closing years of the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Yet, the sense of continuity was also strong. Possibly what the dramas of the late 1990s did was provide a constant counterpoint to a number of possible ways of living. What was presented as established and known was often set against a serial drama crammed with turmoil and social confusion where there seemed to be no stability at all, only a menu of life choices that did not add up. Where was truth, the new dramas seemed to ask? Where was honesty, integrity, community? Where was pleasure? Where was the family? In some ways, as in the 27-episode serial drama by Mbuso Langa titled *Isiboshwa* (The Prisoner), the dilemmas of integrity versus wealth and corruption set out in quite an uncanny way what would be the national script a decade and a half later. Others captured a moment of life and then moved on.

Radio Soundings: South Africa and the Black Modern is in part about sound, radio sounds, and soundings. As Wiseman Masango and I sat in Masonto Buthelezi's office, with its piles of hopeful scripts, in a sense we were in a room full of sounds yet to be born, still to have a material presence within a serial radio drama. The scripts also contained a throng of voices still to be given material substance, a timbre, affect, a social life, and perhaps a death, through production within a play. In other words, we were in a room full of sounds. The somatic as well as the auditory nature of sound is a point well made by Charles Hirschkind in his profound study of ethics, the body, and social life linked to Islamic cassette sermons in Cairo (Hirschkind 2006: 8–9).

Voice

To link radio and sound, as this book does in its title, may seem banal and obvious. Yet there is a significant renewed critical interest in 'sound'. This has led to the theorising of political and cultural aspects of sound in relation to power and to global and colonial histories, interconnected with the local (Sterne 2003; 2011; 2012; Bloom 2014; Gautier 2014; see also Stoller 1984). Studies such as these put a different gloss on

¹ Interview with Patrick Masonto Buthelezi, 1999.

‘the modernist story of the ear’s decline’ (Hirschkind 2006: 26–7, discussing Walter Benjamin’s *The Storyteller* of 1969) and on ‘a modern ocularcentric epistemology’, which can be traced back to the late eighteenth-century thinking of the Enlightenment (ibid.: 13). All this makes the phenomenon of sound of key importance in any study of radio, a technology of the aural and the auditory rather than the visual and the ocular.

Because sound is unseen, its architectural and shaping qualities in the experiences of everyday life can be elusive. Sound can attune an individual to the dense lived texture of a modern city, such as downtown Cairo or the seething central business district (CBD) of Johannesburg. Repeated involvement as a listener in a particular kind of aural media, such as cassette sermons, so popular in many parts of the modern Islamic world, can hone particular affects and sensibilities. And with that ‘tuning’ can come an understanding of a moral code, a sense of where a person belongs or fits into a community. Sound can also have an intimate involvement with ethics, with the setting of bodily expressions and gestures that become part of a grammar of comportment linked to self-fashioning and identity (Hirschkind 2006: 8–9). Sound – and ‘radio soundings’, as the title suggests – is thus a concept to which the book attempts to give a particular meaning within the context of this study of radio, race, and identity in South Africa. The concept of voice is the particular frame within which I situate my radio analysis. The specific meanings of voice can shift: ‘voice’ can be set in a number of different registers, sometimes converging and sometimes remaining distinct, but central to this study are the ideas of giving voice and what it means to have a voice. These two questions are teased out by assessing the roles of particular broadcasters and writers – and, indeed, the radio dramas themselves – as mediating figures of voice. My text features a throng of characters, often multi-tasking, multivocal: unique programme hosts, DJs, drama writers, actors, and producers – they are all essential mediating figures. At once public celebrities and working artists of the radio voice, they have bridged the world of a dispersed listening community strung across the rural and urban spaces of the country, and the world enclosed in the dramas. Through an analysis of the radio drama genre within the broader theatre of Zulu-language radio, I ask what the mediation of the voice as sound meant in the context of the racially segregated South African state and its policies of black containment and subjugation. I then follow this question through into the post-1990 democratic era and further trace voice as part of the soundings of radio in isiZulu within a dramatically altered state and a differently convened public space.

As a setting for the above, I discuss, in brief, the wider political context of racial domination within which Zulu-language radio had its beginnings. I then complicate this picture by sketching the arena of black

4 Introduction: voice, race, radio

political thought and activism that existed contemporaneously within the segregationist and later ‘apartheid’ South African state of post-1948, when the Afrikaner nationalists first came to power. As I explore the idea of the black modern, part of my argument is that the long history of African-American entanglement with black South Africa, the mutual admiration, need, and succour of these two parts of the black world, became an essential component of black modern South African identity. In the main, through the radio soundings and the radio voices in this book, I attempt to pull together often submerged or fragmented stories and enhance understandings of hitherto perhaps half-perceived connections and narratives only half told.

In the book, I refer to orality as well as aurality. Both have a place. Recent studies have clarified the limitations of an approach to orality that sets it in the domain of the ‘other’ – in a ‘natural’ rather than a ‘civilised’ realm of order (see Sterne 2003; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Gautier 2014; Beecroft 2015). In the South African instance, orality – or orature, to adopt the term used by Ngugi wa Thiong’o – cannot be seen as ‘premodern’, a voice of alterity and the ‘other’. Widely used to express identity, both private and public, and to mark kinship and respect, in many cases its forms were simply transferred to new uses and into new media beyond the unmediated voice. Orality and aurality each became part of the new voice in the public sphere and in private intimacies sometimes publicly voiced – finding a place not only in print culture in the columns of African-language newspapers such as the *Ilanga laseNatal* (The Natal Sun) but also in performance at political meetings of the African National Congress (ANC), where the alternative view of a demand for black political presence and power in governing South Africa made use of political forms such as praise poetry and invocations of powerful black rulers of the past. Orality, as it has played out in South Africa, thus assumes a powerful and ambivalent status. It can be seen at some points in history as a subject of the creation of alterity. But it can also be read as an invocation of an alternative political and social order. One of the arguments in this book is that orality through the technology of radio has fed into aurality and ‘the mediatization of the voice as sound’ (Fisher 2016: 2). The figure of the voice – to use Lauren Kunreuther’s term – as it is played out in my analysis of a particular history of African-language radio takes many forms. Voice has shaped and been shaped by both urban and rural audiences. Voice also took on particular connotations: a range of affects largely linked – in the radio dramas that I follow as an emergent genre – to the family and also to conscience, ambition, greed, fear, and a range of social contexts. But within the frame of the family, the voice was ‘the black voice’. This was a voice that carved itself out, often painfully and in the face of resistance, as a counter-voice. A phrase still frequently used in the Zulu-language print media is ‘*isizwe*

esimpisholo' (the black nation) implying not a particular nation but a certain position, a certain consciousness. I argue that voice presents itself as a range of nuanced identities – both outside and within the dominant notion of the modern. Soundings thus points to a number of ways in which voice represents new subjectivities but also a new consciousness, and, in some cases, a defining of a new identity. Laura Kunreuther's study of radio voice and public intimacy in creating new modern democratic subjects in Nepal (2014) has echoes with the ways in which intimacy through radio dramas created new ways of negotiating a modern voice and self in the South African context. Daniel Fisher's studies of the mediated voice in north Australian radio among scattered indigenous communities shows how voice can mark identity as a counter-presence to stereotypical settler concepts of indigenous Australians, and, in fact, give voice to transnational identities of blackness (2016: 9, 16). Here, too, there are links with this study: the radio voices I follow create connections and affects that resonate with a particular world of colour, and a modern identity with transnational lines of connection. In this study, we sometimes see the heightened politics around the right to have a voice, and around racialised voices. Voice gives presence to writer-actors as mediating figures, and, almost invariably, through the dramas the domestic sphere becomes the site of the listening environment; love, complications, and a host of individuals within or around the family take centre stage. To a large extent, the prism of the family provides the way into probing modernity, or possible modernities. We see how, by its imaginative remove, a dramatic genre enabled writers and listeners to claim a space for debate, as voices entered houses and rooms, or sometimes filled an open space and swung from a small tree, and people listened – and later discussed so that the capillaries of listening could spread through a community and a region. All this is part of radio voice.

Fisher has shown in his study how radio voice can be an index of power and a site of empowerment. Voice, Fisher argues, can bring about a 'profound suturing and repair of ruptured social relations' among modern Australian aboriginal communities (Fisher 2016: 20). In a far wider, global sense, it can simultaneously hold for its listeners 'a cosmopolitan identification of shared subjugation', so that they see themselves within the antipodean 'double consciousness' that was marked by W. E. B. Du Bois (1996 [1903]) and later by Paul Gilroy (1993) as key to black identity in North America and the Black Atlantic (Fisher 2016: 16). The function of radio voice to repair, reshape, and reinvigorate can thus operate in diffuse local networks, as in the north Australian case and more widely in indigenous radio in Australia. But, as Fisher points out, it also contains this wider consciousness of a shared subjugation reaching beyond the Australian continent. The present study tracks a different embodiment of radio voice, one located in the history of South African

6 Introduction: voice, race, radio

radio, race, and identity. Here, too, networks of identity and race and moments of shared history make it impossible to understand the specifics of South African radio without seeing its wider entanglement in the history of empire and of the African continent. The ‘double consciousness’ coined by Du Bois to capture the experience of the American ‘Negro’ had its own particular expression in the history of race in South Africa. This study maintains that radio – and, in particular, Zulu-language radio, on which I focus – played a key role in undoing, or at the very least deflecting, the heavy hand of race oppression by the Afrikaner nationalist government as it attempted to keep a great section of the South African population away from fulfilment, happiness, and achievement as modern subjects, and instead press them into a state of permanent servitude.

The political context

The wider political context within which African-language radio came into being has links with the entanglement of race with both modernity and identity. Radio also became a critical tool of modern technology for achieving the ambitions of those who were determined to govern the black population by domination rather than consent. ‘Apartheid’ was ‘the electoral slogan which brought radical Afrikaner nationalism to power in South Africa in May 1948’ (Dubow 2014: 1) and it became the context within which radio in African languages was forced to exist, and to find and maintain a voice, a sound. In many ways, the beginnings were not promising. But the power of the medium itself was not easy either to control or to contain.

One crucial date for Zulu-language radio is December 1941, when King Edward Masinga first broadcast the World War Two news bulletin in isiZulu from the Durban studios of the SABC, in downtown Aliwal Street. Possibly the first broadcasts by Masinga were not formally within the SABC system, but by September 1943 the news slot had a more permanent place (Mhlambi 2008; 2015). A second key date is June 1960, when the Afrikaner nationalist government, by then in power for 12 years, inaugurated with much fanfare the SABC station to be known as Radio Bantu. Within what wider context of black politics and black presence were Masinga’s brief but quite revolutionary war broadcasts to be considered? Masinga, of course, would have been working from a carefully scripted wartime communiqué given to broadcasters by those monitoring war information. He could translate the script but change nothing. But he had his voice and he had ‘radio sound’, and with each of these he could confer on the Zulu language itself a new authority, even legitimacy. He did this with consummate flair. It was a kind of revolution (see Chapter 1).

Control of African movement and labour, masked by the benign term ‘trusteeship’, marked the early decades of white political rhetoric and

policy after the formation of the Union in 1910. Laws governing black life proliferated. Most deadly was the sweeping Natives Land Act of 1913. It outlawed with the stroke of a pen various systems of share cropping that had meant black families could live on land now in the ownership of white farmers, and formerly, in some cases, their ancestral land. The upheavals it caused were dramatically and painfully documented by Sol Plaatje, journalist, linguist, politician, and first secretary general in 1912 of the South African Native National Congress, which later changed its name to the African National Congress (Plaatje 1916). Not only did the Land Act turn many thousands off the land, it also abolished the right of Africans to buy land outside the already restricted reserve areas. Blacks in white-ruled South Africa were indeed exiles at home.

In spite of the bureaucratic restrictions of passes and permits on free movement, blacks continued to leave the rural areas and seek some form of employment in towns and cities. Whole families moved, often living in whatever meagre shelter they could find (Muriel Horrell cited in Gerhart 1978: 28). In many cases, though, continuing the pattern forced on Africans by the hut and poll taxes, it was men who travelled long distances from rural areas to cities, especially Johannesburg, often recruited for work in the gold mines, where they lived in single-sex hostels and spent their working lives moving between *'ekhaya'* (home) and city. Many maintained the culture of building a homestead and a family in their rural area, despite their own long absences. Oswald Mtshali's dystopic poem *'Amagoduka'* (Mtshali 1975: 128), for example, captures the harsh vibrancy of life between rural homes and the hostile environment of the mines.² Women, too, moved to the towns and cities, although in smaller numbers than men. Whereas in 1912 they made up only 19 per cent of all Africans in towns, by 1936 they comprised 36 per cent (Gerhart 1978: 27). There were many strands of black culture in this period. The new possibilities of modernity constantly absorbed into African languages, into poetry, song, and new vocabulary, meant that change shaped and reshaped the life of the everyday. And as advertisements in the black press show, there was a range of commodities and consumer goods that drew people into a changing world of taste, pleasure, and sensations. Alongside the harsh laws and often appalling living conditions there existed the capacity to make *'the new'* and to create different modes of being. Networks abounded and cut across rural areas and towns: church, sport, political affiliations, horse racing, jazz, and football were all part of life. These social and organisational capillaries and arteries were activated and newly intensified through sound and voice on the airwaves.

² See Moodie and Ndatshe (1994) and Carton, Laband, and Sithole (2008) for important historical analyses of life in the mines. See Coplan (1995) on the trope of the migrant in the print literature and orature of the Southern African region.

8 Introduction: voice, race, radio

The 1940s, the decade of Masinga's radio breakthrough, was momentous in many ways. It saw increased African urbanisation and more possibilities for African agency. Alongside drought and greater pressure on Africans living on white commercial farms, there were also more employment opportunities, particularly in the industrial Witwatersrand, and better-paid work outside mining employment. Africans migrated en masse to the cities, where they fought for their rights for subsistence, social life, and living space. All this put great pressure on the segregationist legislation that the South African state had painstakingly built up between World Wars One and Two (Shear 2012).

As World War Two began, the pressure to include South Africa's black population in the war effort against Germany through the use of the media must have been intense. The report of the Native Affairs Commission (NAC) of 1939–40, chaired by Deneys Reitz, covered the first 16 months of the war and was clear about the need for the communication of war news to 'the Natives':

News: the official news bulletin issued daily in the Native languages by the NAD [Native Affairs Department] which is a summary of the press cables reaching South Africa freely from all parts of the world, has been accepted by the Natives as a reasonably accurate statement of events. (NAC 1941: 5)

The NAC report also covered points of tension with regard to the 'Native intelligentsia . . . still thinking in terms of an assimilated citizenship with the Europeans', and mentioned in passing that Native trade unions were demanding recognition and stated firmly that they were 'a people just emerging from barbarism' (NAC 1941: 6–7).

It was in this atmosphere of national crisis and uncertainty, where the need to keep the population united behind the war effort coexisted with the belief in race separatism and the superiority of Western civilisation, that the first African attempt to breach the portals of the SABC was made (see Chapter 1).

In May 1942, with General Jan Smuts prime minister of a fragile pro-Allies government, Japan in the war against the Allies, support for Hitler from the Afrikaner organisation the Ossewabrandwag, and uncertainty over African loyalty, the hated pass laws, 'a fundamental instrument of white supremacist control', were relaxed in several major cities (Beinart 2005 [1994]: 130). The wider consequences of the entry of the Masinga voice into an African public space through radio could not yet be seen. His short war news bulletins read in isiZulu may at first have been followed by only a small number of listeners, although there was a huge African interest in the progress of the war. Black soldiers, although not allowed to carry arms – a point noted caustically in the black press – were seeing action in North Africa and in Europe. War news was covered by the black press, including in *Bantu World*, edited by Selope Thema, and

by the Zulu-language Durban paper *Ilanga lase Natal*. The keen awareness of world currents of power and influence, ideals of justice and racial equality, which clashed with segregationist politics within South Africa's borders, grew sharply in the period 1939–45. Also present was the strong conviction among black leaders such as Dr Alfred Xuma and John Dube, editor of *Ilanga lase Natal*, of the importance of American Negro aspirations and the similarities of race oppression in America and South Africa. Both Xuma and Dube had been educated in America, Xuma in Europe as well (Gerhart 1978: 46).

Black political thought

There were also changes afoot in the wider world of black politics within South Africa. The newly invigorated ANC, led from 1940 by Alfred Xuma as its president general, was put on a sound financial footing with new organisational structures in place. Dynamic young men such as Anton Lembede, Jordan Ngubane, and A. P. Mda brought into the formerly staid 'trusteeship' political ideology of the ANC a new tranche of radical ideas. Lembede was elected first president of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944 and was the 'principal architect of South Africa's first full-fledged ideology of African nationalism' (Gerhart 1978: 51).³ His vision was pan-Africanist, and also, in part, that of a cultural nationalist. Although it would find echoes in the later writings of Kwame Nkrumah and Cheikh Anta Diop in the 1950s, it was ahead of its time for South Africa. Lembede also attempted to 'devise a formula for the mental emancipation of the oppressed' by emphasising race consciousness and self-reliance (*ibid.*: 65, 90). This was a search for the Africanist modern rather than moving on a path that linked progress with Western assimilation. The Lembedist 'rebel' mix of romantic nationalism and visionary pan-Africanism was generally not followed up by the ANCYL leaders after his early death in 1947. Yet, the infusion of energy and idealism in the ANC that came from the ANCYL in the mid-war years, combined with the increasingly repressive measures of the Afrikaner nationalist government under D. F. Malan, which came to power in 1948, led the ANC to move to extra-parliamentary tactics and mass mobilisation. In 1952, the ANC began a nationwide campaign of passive resistance which it called the Defiance Campaign. They began this two years after the Afrikaner nationalists put on the statute books the sweeping Suppression of Communism Act, the Group Areas Act, which zoned people according to race, and the Nazi-style Population Registration Act, which classified people by race. In the years leading up to 1960,

³ For a fuller discussion on the Youth League, see Gerhart (1978: 44–83).

black resistance intensified and diversified, with Africanist radicals in the ANC breaking away in 1959 to form the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), led by Robert Sobukwe. The PAC anti-pass campaign of 21 March 1960 led to the Sharpeville massacre and to the almost immediate banning by the Afrikaner nationalist government of both the ANC and the PAC. This was a legislative ‘silencing’ of the black political voice that would remain in place until 1990. It occurred less than three months before the birth of Radio Bantu in June 1960, when, ironically, a space was made by the same legislators for the mediated ‘Bantu voice’.

The black modern, race, and radio

In order to grasp the enormity of the failure to silence ‘voice’, and specifically radio voice, in the broader context of African life, we need to understand the importance of the long cultural and historical dynamic of African-American-African interconnection in South Africa. K. E. Masinga, Lewis Nkosi, and Bloke Modisane, who each feature in this study as specific radio actors in the narrative of black modernity (see Chapters 1, 3, and 4), were deeply involved in the art, politics, and educational strivings of African-Americans, and the impact on their own creative work and world vision is evident. This was not a one-sided engagement. Rather, it was a recognition of mutual need and respect. Masinga’s 1950s translations for radio of nine Shakespeare plays earned him membership of the prestigious Mark Twain Society, a rare and valued honour repeated later in the decade when he was invited by the US state to lecture and tour in America. Modisane’s long literary friendship with Langston Hughes saw the inclusion of his poetry in Hughes’s 1960 anthology *An African Treasury*, and Lewis Nkosi, from his London radio base, drew on the acoustics, music, and rhetoric of the African south and of the black transatlantic. These three figures were playing their part, through radio, in a much larger conversation of blackness. For Nkosi and Modisane in particular, it was a triangular configuration, with London, the unpredictable heart of empire, as its centre point.

Generally, however, the important sources of the black modern are located in the long and enduring connection of African-American and African ties. These covered the fields of religious endeavour, expressive and popular culture, education, global black politics, and print. Robert Vinson argues convincingly that, as hopes of British intervention for racial equality and an end to segregation faded, ‘[m]any black South Africans glimpsed their modern futures not in the faces of Europeans but in the faces of American Negroes. The pathway to modernity was through African America, not a white Europe’ (2012: 6).

Song and expressive culture more broadly were essential elements of the African-American presence in South Africa. The first performances