

*Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*, by Ana María Ochoa Gautier. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014. xiii, 266 pp.

In this book aurality is both the subject matter and the methodology for scrutinizing the sonic history of nineteenth-century Colombia. More broadly, this two-pronged aurality is aimed at the “colonial archive,” a phrase frequently employed by Ochoa Gautier to encompass not only the material archive of travel writing, poetry, songs and song collections, grammars, and so on but also the political institutions and ideologies that produced or constrained those materials. The book includes numerous accounts of the kinds of listening practices that emerged in that period, ranging from those of Alexander von Humboldt to those of the novelist, grammarian, and politician Jorge Isaacs. But perhaps more strikingly Ochoa Gautier brings these disparate sources together through a kind of sonification of archival data, revealing a sonorous archive transformed into musicological scholarship not so much by analyzing notated music (although the history of musical notation itself plays an important role here) but rather by recognizing and drawing attention to the sonic qualities latent in less obvious sources of audible history such as linguistics texts. This sonification is not simply a question of expanding music studies to include sonic phenomena that are not typically considered to be music, though it does that too. It goes further, questioning the systems of inscription, codification, and listening—ideas such as pitch and the musical work—that have not only played foundational roles in musicology but also actively excluded other relations to sound. The book thus simultaneously brings considerable value to current musicological discourse on the voice, archives, the history of music theory, and the musical anthropocene, while also moving beyond the Euro-Americanism of the majority of sound studies.

The central concerns of *Aurality* might be summed up as follows: in accounting for the relationship between colony and postcolony in the context of nineteenth-century Colombia (then part of New Granada), the book considers a variety of sonic practices—listening, speaking, singing, and, crucially, the writing down of such practices—that bring about critical distinctions between human and nonhuman, culture and nature, voice and ear, European and non-European, and so on. Ochoa Gautier calls these dense networks of difference-making “acoustic assemblages” (pp. 22–23), a set of relations between entities that simultaneously listen, theorize about other forms of listening, and produce new political relations through that listening and that theorizing about listening. But these assemblages are not simply conceptual; they also entail a substantial materiality, namely writing. Indeed, the entire book could be considered a sonic history of writing or inscriptions, or an exploration of “how the uses of the *ear* in relation to the *voice* imbued the *technology of writing* with the traces and excesses of the acoustic” (p. 7). This

emphasis on writing as a technology draws its inspiration (as well as fodder for some of its sharpest critique) more often from figures such as Ángel Rama and his idea of “the lettered city” in the development of postcolonial Latin America than from the usual suspects of contemporary Western media theory.<sup>1</sup> The resulting archive of “legible aural inscription” (p. 6) serves to interrogate the many ways in which personhood was granted or denied to certain groups of individuals according to their ability (or lack thereof) to perform the proper sonic roles as listening, speaking, and singing beings. Given the title of the book it is hardly surprising that this fixation on writing and a written archive neither celebrates writing nor valorizes orality, its perpetual other, but rather draws attention to all the sonic traces that exceed and leak out from the inscriptive capacity of writing. Such leakages become all the more pronounced when the writing is sanctioned by the state, whether colonial or postcolonial.

Ochoa Gautier suggests that each chapter explores a different aspect of the “zoopolitics of the voice”—that is, how the voice generates difference with respect to lives that are included or excluded from citizenship and personhood. While that emphasis on voice, not to mention its zoopolitics, is not always noticeable, it nonetheless provides a useful scaffolding for thinking about each of the chapters. The first chapter considers the vocalizations of *boga* boat rowers, who would sing (or, more often in European sources, howl, scream, or shout) from atop their boats during the course of their voyages. Their relationship to other sonic practices—the sounds of animals along the river, the prayers of devout Catholics, or, more recognizably, melodic song—gave rise to considerable speculation about how imitative their vocalizations were. Alexander von Humboldt’s travels and subsequent writings played an especially important role in the transmission of these ideas back to Europe, while also illustrating some of the idiosyncrasies of his listening practices.

In the second chapter the author turns to popular song. She is particularly interested in the ways the collection and transcription of song participated in the “lettered city” by reflecting and producing certain understandings of race, as well as creating a standardized form of literacy. Popular song, in this narrative, is especially important for what Ochoa Gautier calls “the historical process of constituting ‘orality’ as tradition” (p. 15), a theme that recurs throughout the later chapters. Indeed, if there is a secret villain to this story—besides the obvious evils of colonialism and racism—it would seem to be the notion of orality, and particularly the ways in which it has been used politically to reduce vocal difference to a simple binary distinction between speech (or sometimes voice) and writing.

1. Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). Originally published as *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1984).

The final two chapters deal with several interconnected issues, including orthography, phonetics, grammar, and other systems of ethnographic descriptions or government-sanctioned prescriptions about proper forms of vocalization, including speech and song. Chapter 3, “On the Ethnographic Ear,” focuses in particular on “a debate centered on the disjuncture between hearing and inscribing indigenous tongues as central to the emergence of ethnographic thinking.” This debate has significant political stakes, including “the juridico-political status of indigenous persons in the emerging nation” (p. 127). Chapter 4 examines “specific dispositives” (p. 165) that rendered the voice a meaningful part of certain political and pedagogical agendas. As Ochoa Gautier shows, a number of politically powerful philologists were especially active in these projects, which amounted to an “anthropotechnology” intended to ensure that a certain kind of humanness emerged from the populace at large with an attendant “voice of the people” (p. 171).

Throughout its narrative *Aurality* presents a number of brief excursions that touch on issues such as mimesis, race and the notion of *mestizaje*, magic as resistance, theories of voice (especially orality), Darwinism, the writings of Helmholtz, and so on. While some readers may find such excursions to be too digressive, they allow for deeper engagement with particular disciplines and audiences on some key points. For example, one of the most significant of these micro-explorations for musicologists comes in Chapter 1, where Ochoa Gautier considers how colonial-era descriptions of the vocalizations of the *bogas* (mentioned above) by figures such as Alexander von Humboldt played a critical role in the formation of musicology and ethnomusicology (pp. 42–50). For both disciplines in their early stages the presence of clear, measurable pitch was a central characteristic of music, especially in contrast to “nature.” The “howling” of the *bogas*, which defied the ability of European listeners to make sense of it because of its ostensible lack of melody or harmony, thus served as a foil for musicological definitions of sonic arts: instead of being “musical and human” these were “natural sounds” more closely related to the animalistic (p. 49). This distinction, especially (if not exclusively) from colonial Spanish America, played a crucial role in formulating musicology as a discipline.

In contrast, whereas Europeans interpreted the sound of these *boga* boatmen with their animal-like singing as extensions of nature, Ochoa Gautier suggests that they “purposefully sounded like animals because they were deliberately imitating such sounds in their vocalizations” (p. 50). Some of her most intriguing accounts of the *bogas* come from Colombian writers but unfortunately appear only quite a bit later in the book. These examples suggest that the *bogas* could even be understood as musical, or perhaps even proto-musicological, experts (pp. 114–18). But for better or worse, rather than pursuing this line of discussion further—is there a full-fledged history of

musicology or music theory to be traced entirely from the colonial archive?—the author channels her main discussion of the *bogás* into a broader argument about the way Europeans listened to and imagined colonized voices.

If this aural reinterpretation of the *bogás* flirts with a complete reappraisal and critique of musicology from a postcolonial perspective, other sections of the book offer more tempered observations about the ways in which music and musicology have fashioned themselves in opposition to sound practices from European colonies. In her discussion of popular song in Chapter 2, for instance, Ochoa Gautier suggests that the concept of the musical work emerged as a self-conscious differentiation from the kinds of orality and popular song that were so abundant in the colonial archive. This simultaneous appearance of the work-concept and orality was no coincidence: “Different musical ontologies and epistemologies were split between the (irrational) othered quasi-objects and quasi-bodies of Afro-derived musicalities, silenced/t Amerindians (or indigenities), and transcendent Western art musics as different types of embodiment of the soul or the spirit” (p. 102). These different embodiments of soul quickly became the basis for a European theory of art music.

This theme of the intertwining of orality and aurality—the production of the voice and the variety of ways such a voice could be heard in the Spanish colonies or Europe (or both)—functions as one of the key through-lines of the book and offers a useful intervention in the nascent field of voice studies. Not only does Ochoa Gautier’s depiction of voice keep questions of race and colonial power front and center, it also construes the voice as being in constant dialog with (and often in resistance to) the ear. This oral-aural interplay is exemplified in her discussions of Candelario Obeso’s *Cantos populares de mi tierra* (1877), a book that contains poetic transcriptions of popular language that the author made without the aid of a phonograph. Obeso’s book also appears in discussions of linguistic projects involving phonetics and orthography, as detailed in Chapters 3 and 4. In another striking example we read of the politician-philologist Miguel Antonio Caro citing Helmholtz’s *On the Sensations of Tone* in his 1881 “Manual de elocución,” as part of a broader effort to reconfigure listening as a tool for reasoning and a site of pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> For Caro and his collaborators the ear was “at once instrumental and educable” (p. 201), capable of being trained by music “to figure an appropriate moral subject” (p. 202). Meanwhile, the voice “becomes the site of enacting a proper moral relation between different dimensions of the

2. Miguel Antonio Caro, “Manual de elocución” (1881), in *Obras, estudios lingüísticos, gramaticales y filológicos*, ed. Carlos Valderrama Andrade (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1980), 3:429–66.

acoustic”—that is, those dimensions perceived by the ear (p. 203). More generally, Ochoa Gautier sees orality as a “historical mode of audibility” (p. 190) in which the voice and vocality are carefully constrained and policed by governmental forms of aurality. This aurality is in turn disseminated through “orthography as a technology of inscription” (pp. 190–91). A cultural technique as seemingly innocuous as orthography becomes an instance of an “auditory regime” (p. 149), deploying state power in and through the intersection of voice and ear to define personhood, sovereignty, and the notion of the public against the specter of “a tower of Babel” of improper pronunciation—and by extension, of improper personhood (pp. 173–74).

For the most part *Aurality* makes a striking contribution to music and sound studies that should resonate strongly across disciplinary boundaries. Despite its sometimes dense prose, it should facilitate significant scholarly conversations between historical musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory, anthropology, and sound studies. It seems likely to foster a space for renewed dialog at the intersection of history, theory, and ethnography. At the same time, however, the book fixates perhaps too strongly on sound as a communicative medium. All sound, it suggests, must produce or transmit knowledge—it must be legible, or be able to be made so, as implied by the book’s subtitle, “Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia.” Perhaps this emphasis on knowledge, commonplace in a certain vintage of sound studies, is the legacy of Steven Feld’s seminal work on acoustemology,<sup>3</sup> but such emphasis risks overlooking other sonic outcomes such as pleasure and temporality, concerns that have played a major part in queer, “drastic,” and process-oriented musicology in recent years. Indeed, given the book’s compelling accounts of the sonic contestations of personhood, it would seem to be a narrative of “listening and being” or perhaps “listening and voice,” rather than “listening and knowledge.” Whatever the case may be, the book stakes out important new ground and raises a number of timely issues for music and sound studies that call for further inquiry, not least about the history and political foundations of these disciplines themselves.

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3. Steven Feld, “Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea,” in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 91–135, and “Acoustemology,” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 12–21. Scholars such as Tomie Hahn have similarly argued for sound-as-knowledge but with very different methodologies: Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).