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History is a songbook for anyone who would listen to it.


But the most upsetting thing is the barbarous, lustful, ululating and angry shouting, which is sometimes like a lament and sometimes joyful; at other times full of blasphemous expressions through which these men seek to handle their muscular effort... Thus, the heavier the work, the more angry the screaming of the bogas.


Within each visible city stood another, figurative one, that controlled and directed it, and this less tangible “lettered city” was not less girded by defensive walls nor less aggressively bent on a certain kind of redemption. The lettered city acted upon the order of signs, and the high priority of its function lent it a sacred aspect...

--Angel Rama, *The Lettered City*, 1984

What do R. Murray Schafer’s songbook of history, Alexander von Humboldt’s travel diaries, and Angel Rama’s lettered city have in common? What connection links Schafer’s “open ears” epistemology, the 17th-century *bogas* (boat rowers) of Colombia’s Magdalena River, and the broad establishment of an urban, educated elite? The somewhat surprising entanglements suggested by these questions summon a proposition that is both compelling and, until now, largely unexamined: a politics of aurality. To me, this is the groundbreaking contribution of Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier’s 2014 monograph, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth Century Colombia*. In this skillful arrangement of historical materials and trajectories, Ochoa Gautier illuminates the shared political paradigm that undergirds, and thus connects, the genre of popular song, the creation of cities, Spanish colonial legacies in Latin America, and the sciences of phonetics, physiology, and philol-
ogy. Along the way, it becomes clear that this is not a politics of representation, but something more subtle and thus more tenacious: a “spectral politics” (Ludueña 2010) through which boundaries between person and nonperson, culture and nature, modern and colonial condense through (the modulation of) the relationship between listening and vocalization. Ochoa Gautier argues that this politics of the voice (and not just the human voice) operates by simultaneously recognizing differences (of timbre, cadence, pronunciation) and Othering the bodies that utter aurally unintelligible sounds (by naming them animal-like or uncivilized). Such judgments attempted to protect the sacredness of the voice (i.e. “of the people”) while also seeking to “purify” or sanitize its diversity of forms (20; Latour 1993). As such, aurality becomes a key mode of interrogating histories of modernity and modernization.

But, what is “aurality”?—a term notably not featured in Novak and Sakakeeny’s recent compilation of “keywords in sound,” but variously tucked away in discussions of other terms such as acoustics, hearing, and transduction (Novak and Sakakeeny, eds. 2015). In its most basic sense, aurality implies “what is heard or references the ear” (Ochoa Gautier 140). The term is suggestive of not only what is audible or perceived, but other modes of relating to or “referencing” the ear as well, including that which may be written, inaudible, disregarded, felt but not heard, just barely noticed, or silenced. In praise of Aurality, then, I want to draw attention to the ways in which Ochoa Gautier demonstrates that aurality conceives both a relationship (rather than an object) through which these affective, political as well as communicative ties are established and the means through which this relationship becomes recognized. As I elaborate below, part and parcel to aurality, as a concept, is the historical formation of audile techniques (Ochoa Gautier 210; Sterne 2012) used for disciplining the relationship between listening and vocalization. Such aural disciplining, or “immunization,” as Ochoa Gautier discusses in Chapter 4, is predicated on incorporation rather than exclusion, actively mobilizing the voice for particular ends (i.e. constituting political or expressive subjectivity) while attempting to mask its more-animal affinities and contain its radical potential to dethrone the rational, enlightened, secular modern subject.

In so doing, Ochoa Gautier powerfully upends tendencies to conceive orality vis-a-vis its affinities with and in contradistinction to the literary so that its acousticity remains obscured by its linguistic attributes (6, see also Feld [2004] 2006). In other words, orality has primarily been understood as what the literary is not. Here we can think of the comparative projects of Jack Goody (1987) or the presumed progression from orality to literacy apparent in the work of Walter J. Ong (1982). Or, as Jonathan Sterne (2003) so aptly calls it, the “audiovisual litany” which has, almost universally, poised vision and hearing against each other. Both orality and literacy, however—and this, I think, is the crux of Ochoa Gautier’s contribution—are grounded, in part, in the aural. Defenders of oral cultures tend to take up orality as a means to champion a modern politics of alterity. And yet, conceived as tradition and/or as a form of alterity, orality becomes ahistorical. As such, orality becomes a political mechanism that works through a dual operation: simultaneously championing “the
voice” while also abiding by a notion of ‘voice’ that evacuates its diversity of forms. This instrumentalized or utilitarian conception of orality is central to the constitution of modernity itself, evident through efforts to train the ear and the voice into their proper uses (vis-a-vis etymology, orthography, and elocution) as a means for the clear and mechanical transmission of information.

Aurality is not the “complementary other” of orality (20) just as it is not the romanticized modality of tradition from which urban, lettered elites seek to dissociate. As Ochoa Gautier writes: “the aural is not the other of the lettered city but rather a formation and a force that seeps through its crevices demanding the attention of its listeners, sometimes questioning and sometimes upholding, explicitly or implicitly, its [the lettered city’s] very foundations” (5). Accordingly, not only are writing and orality modes of aurality—of relating to the ear—and of politics, but the aural also becomes part of the material architecture of the city, indeed “a formation and a force.” As such, aurality creates enduring relationships through and against those made vis-a-vis other sensorial modalities. Rather than existing merely ephemerally, sound endures not only in memory, but materially in the bodies (human and nonhuman) in and with which we live. As such, aurality, as a concept, is closely affiliated with what Ochoa Gautier terms “acoustic assemblages,” understood as “the mutually constitutive and transformative relation between the given and the made” (22). As such an assemblage, aurality reveals that there is not “given” and “made,” listener and listened-to, nature and culture, but sets of relations and processes through which history unfolds.

Above all, then, Ochoa Gautier’s *Aurality* is a history of how what is “given” and what is “made” becomes acoustically designated and sedimented. Putting her ear to the pulse of 19th-century Colombia, Ochoa Gautier effectively lays bare the immense labor that went into establishing paradigms for what counts as music, language, or sound during this period and sustained into the present. She does so by making palpable the entanglement of “proper” expressive forms (or lack thereof, as in the case of Colombian folklore) and the production of knowledge and notions of being realized through classifications of personhood, race, and civilization. It is worth quoting her in full here: “What is needed in altering our ways of relating the given, the made, and the sensorial is not just unsettling the history of representations but approaching the underlying relation between nature (as the given) and culture (as the made) implicit in the distinction between music and sound” (21). Her concern—and mine—is less with any representation of the “reality” of sound than it is with the sorts of relationships that become established with and through sound.

Each chapter attunes to a different verse of this song. As readers, we come to appreciate that it was with much effort that various “regimes of the ear” (164) attempted to establish the contours of voice and noise (of the human versus the animal); to distill popular song from Music as such; to create a unified Colombian nation by privileging “linguistic uniformity” over “expressive diversity,” reifying culture through a notion of orality-as-tradition in the process; to locate and stabilize acoustic difference through orthography; and to cultivate “appropriate forms of vocality” (of voice and ear) through eloquence, etymology, and orthography. Each
effort, and the ontological affiliation it administered, met with success, but also with excess: recurrently, the ear and the voice frustrated attempts to govern, domesticate, or contain them. Take, for example, Ochoa Gautier’s focus in Chapter 1 on various 19th-century travel writing that narrates encounters with the singing of las bogas. Repeatedly, these travelers interpreted the unfamiliar vocalizations, unable to cleanly slot them into prefabricated aural taxonomies, as noise, as barbaric and animal-like. The fact that these vocalizations inspired intense loathing reveals not only radically different modes of aurality, but the capacity of sounds to endure or “leave a mark” affectively and bodily.

Yet, I want to underscore that this is not only a history of Colombia, nor even just of Latin America. As Ochoa Gautier makes clear, *Aurality* speaks to a history of global enterprising, the ramifications of which are directly tied to movements of global capital, to the enclaving of disciplines, and to particular notions of nation and democratic participation that tend to efface the diversity of expressions and practices that compose a region, and indeed humanity. The parceled-out acoustic qualities and differentially-assigned expressive roles that comprise modern, human history are not merely a factor of cultural difference, but have been produced through global, imperial processes of knowledge production. To a certain extent, then, Ochoa Gautier echoes media studies scholar Jonathan Sterne who points out that, “Capitalism, cities, industries, the medicalization of the human body, colonialism, the emergence of a new middle class, and a host of other phenomena turn out to be a vital element of the history of sound—and sound turns out to be a vital element of their history” (2003: 343).

In drawing these connections, *Aurality* effectively shifts the nebulous “sound studies”—which has predominantly been produced vis-à-vis European and North American settings—to new terrain. The resounding result: contrary to Euro-Western disciplinary conventions, the aural cannot be so decidedly inscribed into distinct spheres of knowledge. And to call sound studies interdisciplinary misses the point. Instead, Ochoa Gautier writes, “the multiple temporalities that accrue (biological and cultural, geophysical and social, economic and material) in the fact that listening is simultaneously a physiological, a sensorial, and an interpretive cultural practice… [open] up our understanding of the global histories of the colonial/modern not just to a geopolitics of knowledge and economy but also to its relation with the geophysical and ontological” (25, my emphasis). The idea that acts of listening, like other sensory modalities, involves multiple temporalities, demands a fundamental openness to processes of variation that are not anchored in repetition or sequence. And here I must pause to emphasize that, however serpentine or baroque Ochoa Gautier’s writing style, it is likely best considered as a sort of re-education of readerly sensibilities that have grown accustomed to the persistence of Cartesian-cartographical and linear-historical narratives.

As I have alluded, this book isn’t just about aurality, but about how certain aural practices bolster a politics of difference and, in turn, attempt to purify or discipline what isn’t modern, human, civilized, etc—that is, to modernize, humanize, or civilize. In this way, distinctions between sound and music, silence and noise, illiterate and
literate, rural and urban, human and animal became established in 19th and 20th century interactions between indigenous and colonial forms of vocalization. Critically, these interactions contributed to the parsing of “the modern” from the “uncivilized” as well as of “nature” and “culture” that anchor orthodox Western metaphysics and political theory. Diverging from deconstructivist- and phenomenologically-inclined approaches to the senses, Ochoa Gautier insists that sound be treated ontologically and historically— or, to extend this further, as I am inclined to— that these various approaches need not be mutually exclusive. As such, she retells the history of colonialism, not as a story of encounter of (cultural) difference so much as interactions of “mutual equivocation” or “transduction” (24) through which incommensurate differences or modes of being became translated, classified, and distilled into recognizable forms. By thus putting the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of hearing, voicing, writing, and urbanizing in historical perspective, Ochoa Gautier instigates further dialogue between the theoretical premises of thinkers like Bruno Latour, regarding the project of modernity, and an empirical history of the senses. The result not only evidences an intricate interwovenness of things, but urges the need to continue tracing the connections between ostensibly separate, irreconcilable bodies of knowledge.

1 Notably, this is the only epigraph used by Ochoa Gautier in her monograph (2014: 77).
2 Humboldt is quoted in longer form by Ochoa Gautier (2014: 32).