

Ana María Ochoa (2014)

Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia

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Ochoa's recent book¹ title *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* does not express everything the book is about. It does investigate practices of listening during the nineteenth century in Colombia through an acoustic exploration of travel journals, novels, songbooks, literary histories, ethnographies and political writings on indigenous languages, and orthographic and philological compilations, among others. It also explores how these listening practices, their inscription in writing, and its knowledge production were crossed by unequal power relations in the post-independence period in Colombia. However, this book is much more than that. It offers a careful, detailed, and in depth analysis of nineteenth century aural perceptions that unsettles categories of thought that are at the core of dominant ideologies of our time.

Ochoa destabilizes modernity's notions of nature and culture, sound and music, and human and nonhuman "through the

examination of different modes of relating alterity and the voice" (21) in Latin America after independence, a key moment in the encounter between "the colonial and the modern," revealing also through her reflections a different relationship between the two. For example, in chapter 1, Ochoa suggests that musicology, comparative musicology, and comparative linguistics as disciplines were developed through the colonial exchange of ideas and data (12). Major ideas about "nature" and "culture" emerged and were reconsidered through nineteenth century explorations of Central and South America, and the Caribbean redefining the relationship between the human and the non-human, and nature and culture. Her work also engages the long-standing Latin American academic debate about the gaze, print culture, orality, and the lettered word "as central to the insertion of the region into the global construction of modern capitalism" (7).

In this book, Ochoa puts into dialogue the history of sound studies – which has been mainly produced in European and North American contexts – and a long

1 Forthcoming version in Spanish with a working title: *El oído en la letra: escucha y conocimiento acústico en el siglo XIX en América Latina*.

Latin American history of studies centered in the oppositions, the tensions, and the complementarity of orality and literacy. As a contribution to the growing field of the intellectual history of listening, her work is part of the recent “auditory turn” in critical theory. This turn centers its analysis in the aural and the acoustic and explores practices of listening throughout history, the materiality and immateriality of the voice in different historical and geographical contexts, the significance of recording and sound machines, the inscription of sound before and after the emergence of digital and mechanical machines of sound reproduction, among others. Many of these works call attention to the different practices of aural inscription before the invention of recording and reproduction of sound machines.

Thus, in this work, the author undertakes a careful listening to Colombia’s nineteenth century’s archive and gives ear to the lettered men’s inscription of sound in writing. In this very act, as she states, “the aural is not the other of the lettered city but rather a formation and a force that seeps through its crevices” (5). Aurality, for Ochoa, is the exploration of how the ear was used in relation to the voice and how such relation “imbued the technology of writing with the traces and excesses of the acoustic” (7).

Following the works by Julio Ramos and Ángel Rama, Ochoa explores the constitution of “orality” as a technique and a disciplinary domain used to construct modernity and its social inequalities, and

one that it is at the base of modernity’s notions of alterity. However, Ochoa finds that the notion of orality is associated with the mouth and the production of language and overlooks the ear and the practices of listening. According to Ochoa, orality has been understood in its literacy dimensions and described as the other of writing, leaving its acoustic dimensions subsumed under other linguistic elements. On the contrary, Ochoa argues that aurality, orality, and literacy are equally and simultaneously constitutive among them and of Latin America’s social and political spheres in the nineteenth century.

In chapter 1, Ochoa examines travel diaries by Europeans and Creoles focusing on their descriptions of the “bogas” (boat rowers) of the Magdalena River. Here Ochoa examines both the interpretations that the Europeans and Creoles made of the bogas’ vocal sounds and what she speculates could have been the bogas’ own understandings of their vocalizations. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the production of knowledge about song and song collection by three very different intellectuals: José María Vergara y Vergara, Jorge Isaacs, and Candelario Obeso. By examining these scholars’ way of inscribing song in writing through “orthographic manipulation of sound” (78), Ochoa shows how each one of their works took form and constituted a very distinct political project that intersected in various ways with race, religion, and attempts to construct a nation.

In chapter 3, Ochoa studies Ezequiel Uricoechea's *Collection Linguistique Américaine* and Jorge Isaacs's *Estudio sobre las tribus indígenas del Magdalena*. The first is a critical edition of indigenous grammars collected by missionaries during the colonial period. The second is an ethnographic writing based on Isaacs's research in the Magdalena region. In this section, Ochoa gives ear to the disjuncture between hearing and writing indigenous languages, exploring the writers' frustration with the limitations of alphabetical writing to inscribe indigenous languages' sounds. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the analysis of what the author names "anthropotechnologies of the voice." Eloquence, etymology, and orthographies here emerge as the means for training the voice into propriety in order to suppress the animal nature of the human. In this section, the author delves in the constitution of alterity as based on the construction of orality and tradition as autonomous and on the creation of the binaries orality/written text, tradition/modernity.

This study will be useful for academics both in Sound Studies as well as Latin American and Caribbean Studies. For the first group, it opens up fields of investigation on the central role of Latin America and of the exchange between the colonial and the modern to the constitution of notions such as music, sound, and silence, key concepts for the aural as method. Additional studies of such role and exchange will advance current conceptions of the region's contributions to the sound studies field

and of the role of sound and the voice in the constitution of the region.

For Latin Americanists, Ochoa's questioning of Rama's lettered city to include aurality unsettles current ways of defining relationships of power and alterity in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ochoa's redefinition of these relationships yield a deeper and more layered understanding of social inequalities at the time, and any study of the region will highly benefit from taking this comprehension into account. Furthermore, Ochoa's exploration of the tensions and interactions between the written word and the aural during the nineteenth century period proposes a methodological approach that enriches archival studies in any historical period and in various fields of study.