



“The earth is completely submerged within a magnetic field analogous to that which would be generated by a magnetic ribbon resting on its rotational axis. Within this magnetic field is the world of machines, the world of the composer, of the artist who is situated concretely in the present time. Outside of that field, there only exists the pusillanimous, the one who does not decide to participate in our struggle.”

—Jacqueline Nova, “El Mundo Maravilloso de las Máquinas” (1966)



Jacqueline Nova in Buenos Aires, circa 1970s. Courtesy of Ana María Romano G.

Jacqueline Nova: *Creación de la Tierra*

In 1972, at the phonology laboratory of the Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires in Argentina, Jacqueline Nova (1935-1975) completed what many consider as her crowning achievement: her work for tape, *Creación de la Tierra*. In this 19-minute piece, originally recorded in stereo but presented at Blaffer as a visually spare but immersive sound installation, Nova explores the sonic boundaries between machine-like noises and the human voice. By altering a series of recordings of creation story chants by the indigenous U'wa community in Northeastern Colombia, she creates an aural space where the politics behind the intelligibility of speech vis-à-vis history and place come into question. What are the implications of being (mis)understood by the representational machine of modernity? How do the taxonomical ears of the modern/colonial state sanction what is human and nonhuman? What does it mean to be heard by others, as an “other,” or as a machine, at a time when indigenous grassroots movements began to challenge the hegemony of the Colombian nation-state?

Creación de la Tierra begins with electronically-generated pulses that sluggishly fill up the aural space but which never come to fully occupy it. Like a stage curtain swiftly raised, this amorphous, quasi-pointillistic texture dissolves into a wave-like sound mass, heralding the first appearance of a recognizable human voice, albeit presented as a sonic specter. Nova follows this by alternating sections that feature distorted U'wa ritual chants that she modified in the studio, with segments where she uses noise to construct what one could interpret as a primitivist landscape made out of metal-wiring and square-wave generators. But this sonic trade-off between the intelligible (the human voice) and the unintelligible (studio-generated noise) is not clear-cut nor the development of the compositional material is linear. Is it noise that we are hearing as a voice? Or is it the deconstruction of a voice that we are confusing for noise? It is as if Nova invites the listener to simultaneously take part, be witness, and cast doubt on the prolonged persistence of colonial systems of classification and

ethnographic techniques based on the acoustic. Indeed, it was through these theories and mechanisms of sonic entextualization (e.g., transcriptions, travel writing, and in the early twentieth-century, wax-cylinder recordings), that colonial and republican elites created a typology of sound in which the “other” (the indigenous, in this case) became inseparable from the notion of “orality”; that is, a form of communication that is distinct and in opposition to the technology of writing. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Nova created this piece as a critique of such mechanisms. And what is more, this presumed link between the oral and the “other,” we ought to consider as well, creates an epistemological trap through which “the subaltern is simultaneously named as having a voice, yet such a voice is subordinated by the very same principles through which it is epistemically identified as other.”¹

The piece comes to an end when Nova introduces samples of unaltered ritual chants that are conspicuously intelligible, functioning akin to a reverse variation form—a technique in which music composers present variations on a particular melody before we can hear the original melody itself. Nevertheless, whereas such gesture could signal a nostalgia for an unmediated and so-called “authentic” chant, it concomitantly casts doubt on the idea of the supposed authenticity of the “other”: is it simulacra what Nova presents to us?

This ontological dilemma becomes more revealing if we place *Creación de la Tierra* within the political context of Latin American nation-building processes, particularly when we consider how the Colombian nation-state has dealt with issues of personhood and citizenship through sounding and listening practices. Indeed, immediately after gaining independence from the Spanish crown, creoles elites in Colombia (the descendants of Spanish citizens born in American soil) made the written word into the privileged medium for political administration and legitimized Spanish as the defacto language of the nation through which citizenship was conferred. What these elites conceived as the proper use of Spanish then served them as a political tool to classify non-European language systems and vocalizations as “other.” This ultimately limited the involvement of afro-descendant and indigenous communities in the political life of Colombia. The concentration of power, and its unequal distribution in the nineteenth-century Colombian public sphere, therefore, depended upon the privileging of the gaze over other senses. Cartographies, chorographies, ethnographic and travel writing, folklore collections, novels, and studies about colonial indigenous grammars

quickly followed suit; and even philologists known as the “grammarians presidents” came to occupy the highest seats in the Colombian government.²

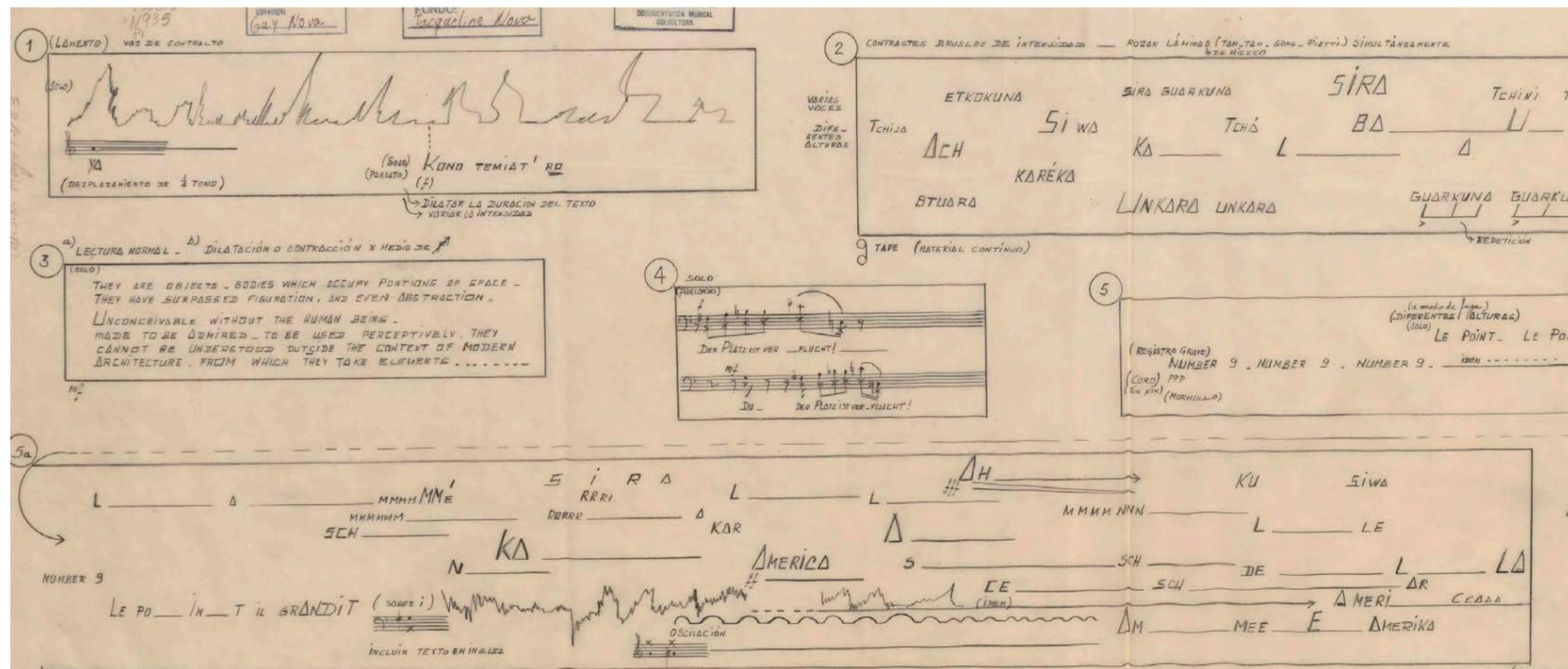
But whereas such a linguistic maneuvering granted creoles with juridical and bureaucratic power—which is why the literary critic Ángel Rama refers to state elites in Latin America as a priestly caste comprised of “lettered elites”—it is also important to realize that the visual, and along with it, the written word, did not stand on its own; they were not autonomous experiential domains.³ The failure of creoles to “faithfully” inscribe so-called “non-Western” sounds and music into written text, for example, as the ethnomusicologist Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier has brilliantly explored, questioned the very authority of the technology of writing. This casted an ontological doubt on the capacity of lettered elites to rule, allowing other elites as well as marginalized groups to contest these mechanisms of recognition—ones that often relied on Western epistemologies to sanction what the “local” should sound like.⁴ Noteworthy as well is the fact that among these debates surrounding aural modernity, the voice became a primary site of contestation, at time used

to subvert the very link between the oral and indigeneity. After all, despite the presumed direct relation between the voice and body, they do not always coincide: animals can emulate human sounds; humans can ventriloquize other humans; or in the case of Nova’s work, voices can be made to sound like machines and vice versa.

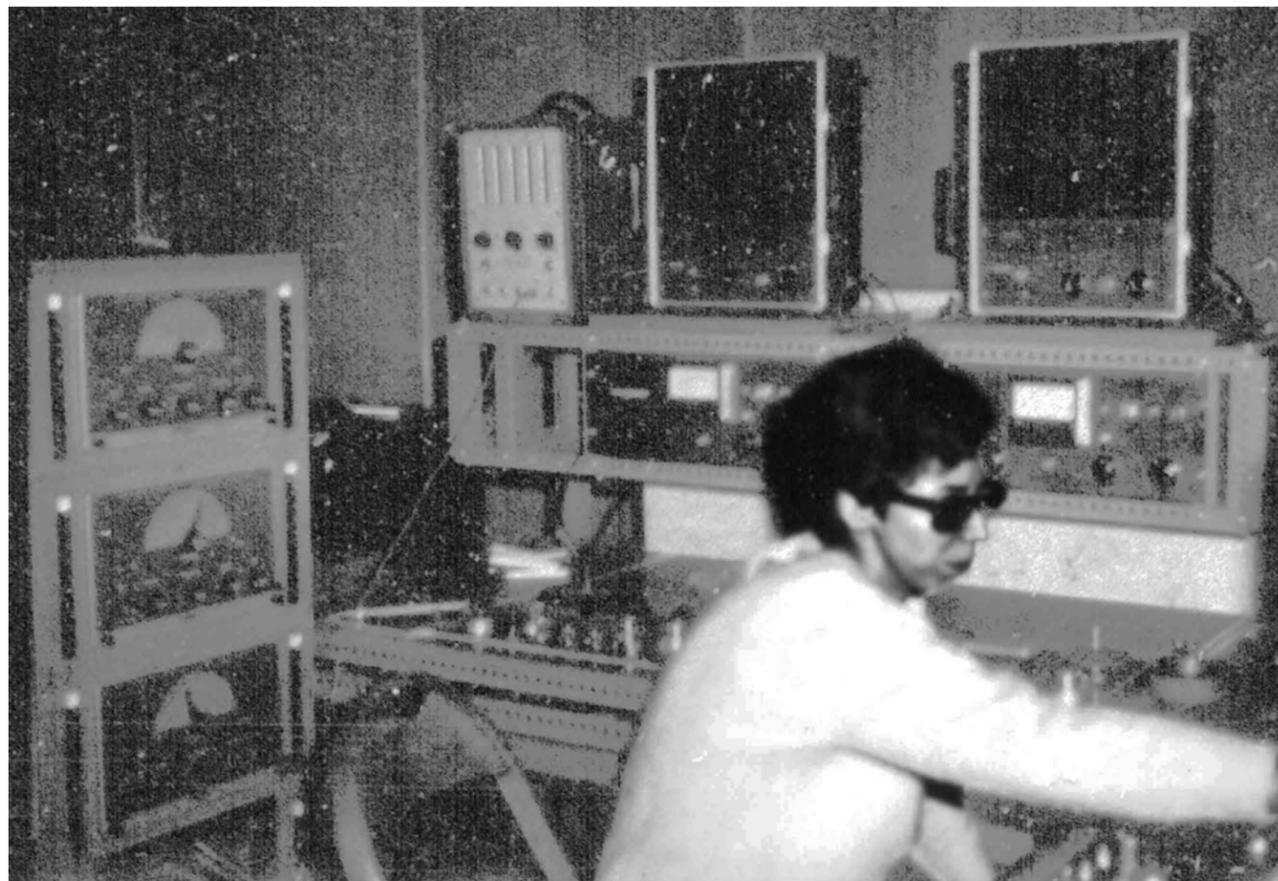
Furthermore, beginning with the constitution of 1886 (which remained in effect until 1991), state elites began to redefine the national identity through mestizaje, a theory and practice of cultural and biological mixing. State elites during the first half of the twentieth century constructed the nation based upon “a positive vision of generative cultural fluidity.”⁵ But whereas mestizo/as actively celebrated indigenous expressions in the national culture, this apparent push for inclusivity was largely predicated upon the revalorization of indigenous expressions by non-indigenous peoples who continued to view indigenous peoples as inferior and in need of guidance. At the center of early-twentieth century mestizaje was an artistic and intellectual movement known as indigenismo, whose participants (mainly mestizo/a artists and intellectuals) began to reframe

indigenous expressions as the nation’s past, while ignoring the presence and voice of living indigenous social actors with whom they rarely collaborated. This legitimated mestizo/a settlement in indigenous territories, which quickly became a state practice, fueling political violence in the region. And while in 1936, the Colombian government allowed men who were older than 21 to vote (regardless of race, class, literacy, etc.), the representation of indigenous expressions in the public sphere remained largely in the hands non-indigenous social actors—a practice that occurs even today. As a composer of mixed-descent, Nova’s *Creación de la Tierra* cannot be divorced from this socio-political context, despite her attempt to use “real” chants (and not an imagined indigenous sound world as her predecessors had done in the past) as compositional material.⁶

But *Creación de la Tierra* deals not only with the complicated relationship between indigeneity and the mestizo/a nation-state, but with Nova’s active challenge to the status quo, artistic and otherwise, during a period of political and social turmoil in Colombia and Latin America. Nova found herself in a dynamic yet repressive



Detail of graphic score for *Pitecanthropus*, 1971. Courtesy of Ana María Romano G.



Jacqueline Nova at the Electronic Music Laboratory of Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (CLAEM), Buenos Aires, 1967 or 1968. Courtesy of Ana María Romano G.

scene that followed a period of violent bipartisan struggle known as La Violencia, women's suffrage in 1957, the rise of Marxist-inspired guerrillas, and the beginning of an era of restricted political participation where the two main political parties agreed to rotate presidential terms. Within this political context, Nova's work, which is based on the idea that electroacoustic music and noise function as a disruptive aesthetic, deliberately defied the perceived expectations of the performance of classical music, including the ritual of the concert hall. As the epigraph to this short essay shows, Nova embodied the idea of experimentalism as a emancipatory way to be in the world, leaving a mark in an otherwise predominantly male music scene centered around a European/Anglo-American soundscape that claimed experimentalism to itself. Furthermore, because of her involvement in the experimental and avant-garde scenes not only as a composer, but as a radio host, cultural organizer, music technology researcher, and performer, her work

encourages us to explore the subjectivities of a Latin American cosmopolitan artist, who was a woman and self-identified lesbian, and examine the musical labor of women beyond mainstream historiographical models (i.e., as performers, teachers, or muses).

To conclude, Nova's life and work foregrounds the complex negotiation of difference and sameness (gendered, ethnic, and otherwise) in a cosmopolitan-yet-marginal community of artists. Despite her capacity to decenter colonial sonic epistemologies and challenge gendered musicological narratives, Nova's still treated indigenous peoples as sound materials and as aural others, but not as fellow collaborators.⁷ Ultimately, *Creación de la Tierra* is an open invitation to think about the limits of the politics of sound, speech, and the ear, and how these intervene in the creation of spaces: as sonic sites where the boundaries between inclusivity and exclusivity appear to be actively negotiated by its participants.

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¹Here, Ochoa Gautier uses the term "subaltern" to denote a social group that is excluded from the hierarchy of power. Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

²See Nancy P Appelbaum, *Mapping the Country of Regions: The Chorographic Commission of Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Chapel Hill, N.C: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

³Angel Rama, *The Lettered City*, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁴Ochoa Gautier, 26.

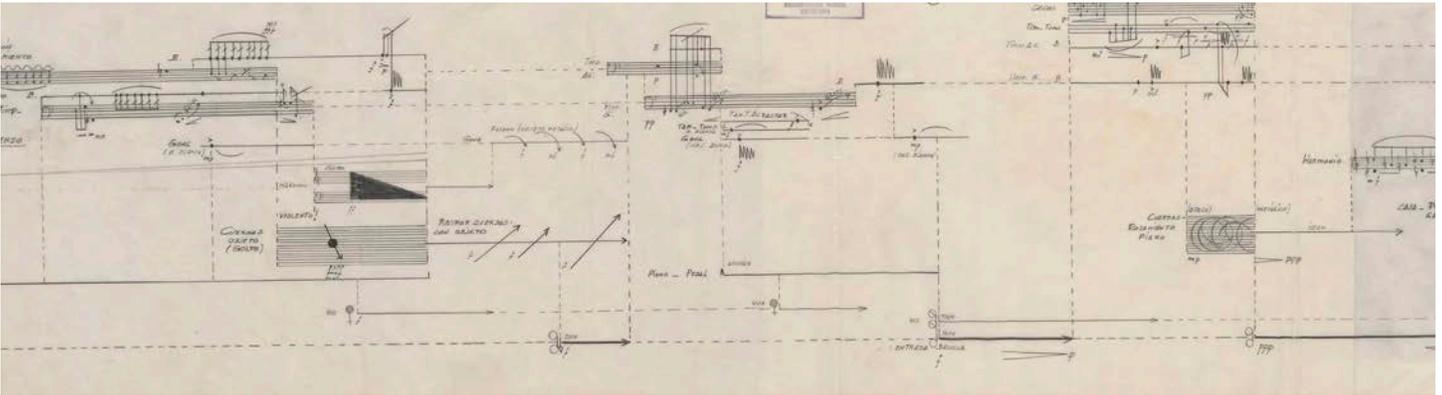
⁵Joshua Tucker, *Making Music Indigenous. Popular Music in the Peruvian Andes*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 5.

⁶It was not until the 1970s, when indigenous grassroots movements and indigenous guerrillas began to effectively negotiate political and cultural participation in the state in their own terms. Such political and armed mobilizations eventually allowed indigenous groups to secure political representation in the congress based on ethnic identity (and not political affiliation) under the new constitution of 1991, which redefined Colombia as a multilingual and pluricultural nation. Paradoxically, it was during the outset of the new multicultural nation when the relation between the state and the U'wa deteriorated at an exponential rate as a result of the government's decision in 1992 to grant licenses to foreign oil companies who wanted to drill in U'wa sacred territory.

⁷Susan Campos Fonseca cites a similar case among the current "noise community" in Costa Rica who in the name of decolonization end up reifying forms of colonial epistemic violence, and which Campos Fonseca sees as a form of "microcolonialism." See Susan Campos Fonseca, "Noise, Sonic Experimentation, and Interior Coloniality in Costa Rica," in Ana R Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L Madrid, eds., *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 161–85.

⁸For a detailed biographical entry and analyses of some of Nova's work, see Romano Gómez, Ana María, "Jacqueline Nova, Recorrido Biográfico," *Contratiempo* 12 (2002): 28–42; Romano Gómez, Ana María "Jacqueline Nova: De la Exploración a la Experimentación de La libertad" in Alejandra Quintana Martínez and Carmen Millán de Benavides, eds., *Mujeres En La Música En Colombia: El Género de Los Géneros* (Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2012), 48–99.

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Detail of graphic score for *Omaggio a Catullus*, 1972-74. Courtesy of Ana María Romano G.

About Jacqueline Nova

Nova was born in 1935 in Ghent, Belgium but was raised in the region of Santander, Colombia, where a number of U'wa peoples live. She became the first woman to graduate from the Colombian National Conservatory of Music with a degree in composition, having studied under composer Fabio González Zuleta. A year before graduating from the conservatory, in 1966, she won a prestigious award at the Third Festival of Latin American Music held in Venezuela for her piece *Doce Móviles para Conjunto de Cámara*, which was later published by the Pan-American Union in collaboration with the Organization of American States. This early success brought her to the prominent Torcuato di Tella's Latin American Center for Advanced Musical studies (known by the acronym CLAEM) in Argentina, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. From 1967 to 1969, at the CLAEM she joined forces with other Latin American composers in search of new sounds and compositional procedures, and which counted with towering figures such as Alberto Ginastera, Luigi Nono, Francisco Kröpfl, Aaron Copland, Iannis Xenakis and Olivier Messiaen among their faculty and composers-in-residence. It is at this institution where Nova began first to dive deep into the world of electroacoustic music, a practice that she continued upon her return to Colombia in 1969.

During her time at CLAEM, Nova began to mix together electronic sounds, acoustic instruments, and indigenous voices and chants, creating a sort of hybrid music that pushed the expected boundaries of what a musician could do at the time. Her piece *Uerjayas. Invocación a los dioses* (1967), which also uses U'wa chants, is an example of this. Nova also composed for a variety of mediums, including modular pieces for small chamber orchestra; music for film and theater; and even created what is considered to be the first interactive installation for museum audiences in Colombia in collaboration with the visual artist Julia Acuña, a piece entitled *Luz-Sonido-Movimiento* (1969). Other works that received wide acclaim at the time and which explore the sonic possibilities of the voice vis-à-vis electronic music include: *Pitecanthropus* (1971), *Hiroshima* (1973), and *Omaggio a Catullus* (1972; revised 1974). The latter, a work written for percussion, piano, harmonium, spoken text, and electronic sounds, was her last composition, premiered a few months before her tragic passing in June of 1975 as a result of bone cancer. Her tenacious capacity to challenge the status quo continues to inspire many artists while actively challenging the myth of absence of women in experimental music common in scholarly narratives. To say the least, in Colombia and in much of Latin America, she is regarded by her contemporaries and successors as a pioneer of electroacoustic music in the region, many of whom consider her to have single-handedly built the experimental and avant-garde music scene in Colombia from the ground up.⁸