

Carla Harryman's *Baby*: Listening In, Around, Through, and Out

By Christine Hume

"Let us leave theories there and return to here's hear." James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Language is first entirely sonic to any baby; it begins pre-birth and continues as a seamless part of the sensual world of infancy. Baby in Carla Harryman's work, *Baby*, enacts a sophisticated pleasure of active, attentive listening. As she takes up what Kristeva calls the listener's responsibility to "pluralize, pulverize, and musicate" what she hears (83), baby's concerns are emblematic of Harryman's obsession with language as performance and performative language. Through three decades of books and performances, the beginnings of language and self intermesh and extend in a parade of talking babies. In all of Harryman's work, texts are meant to be heard and voiced *and* performances are extremely textual; textual and oral economies in singular corpus collide, reinforcing and inhibiting each other. Throughout her oeuvre, Harryman's characters use an "inward ear" to speak within hearing,¹ but they also hear voraciously (hundred-eared, over-hearing), from roving points of audition, both public and private. This essays serves as a primer for the vividly multiple registers of listening that inform all of Harryman's work.

In *Baby*, listening relies not on stringing together singular voices in an unbroken sequence or in streamlining noise, but rather on trafficking in polyvocality. Harryman reinscribes listening with both somatic impact and ethical response. She endows listening

with the capacity to undo binary structures in the service of a relational model of identity.

By synthesizing two contradictory modes of audition, baby creates dialectical listening:

“The auditor, who we call baby, enjoyed both sensations: the sensation of being led into the surrounding comfort of a story, cradled as she was in the voice of the storyteller heralding the disappearance of the material world, and the sensation of abstraction, which required she situate herself within another kind of mental labyrinth, one that engaged the effects of the material world toward objective systems of thought” (13).

Listening is a cultural, rather than natural, practice, one which must be learned, and one with enormous social import. Listening informs *Baby*'s creation in every way, meshing internal and external worlds of the book. *Baby* springs forth via listening and in turn, asks that the reader engage it by listening as it triangulates with reading and speaking.

RECURSIVE LISTENING

As a comedic counterpoint to dialectical listening, Harryman offers us TV listening:

“While nutty adults in miniature did all sorts of things talking in odd theatrical voices as if they were talking to air and air could listen. The air has huge ears, thought baby” (35).

To be a listener is intrinsically to be located, it is *not* to be the air with ears. My term “dialectical listening” locates itself in relation to the following modes of listening, some discovered, some appropriated.

Mimetic listening: Mimetic activity occurs both in the production and the consumption of sounds. When speech has the power to conjure up and sustain in the listener previously heard speech—an aural grafting of past over present—we have mimetic listening. This kind of listening has both positive and negative value in *Baby*: on one hand, “all thinking

hears the indelible imprint of survival” (italic mine, 24); on the other hand, it is akin to the “adult prison,” an institutionalized listening that overhears “That baby is spoiled spoiled spoiled” (49), where the content (spoiled) indicates mimesis while the reiteration of that content highlights the colonizing process of mimesis. Mimetic listening might co-function with utopian listening—or what Roland Barthes calls listening *for* (247)—to create dialectical listening.

Negatively-capable listening: This might be an open quality of listening “able to rest in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason,” as John Keats put it, suggesting a practice equally creative and critical. The reader of *Baby* must feel comfortable with this kind of listening, but Harryman’s text is demanding and requires some “reaching after.” The ear must be protean enough to think-and-feel, wonder-and-anticipate, imagine-and-remember. If for Keats “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter” (“Ode on a Grecian Urn”), Harryman tunes her ears everywhere at once, inward as well as outward, never overtly distinguishing “heard melodies” from “unheard” ones. In an interview, Harryman says that the “reticence to speak,” which for my purposes I’m re-naming “listening,” “comes from having no comfortably identifiable place to speak from and the anxiety of the internal demand to invent a place to speak from.” (216). In this model, listening dilates a physical space responsive to the spatiality of sound; for baby the spaces are womb, garden, woods, mountains, tomb, TV, underworld, and cave, which she “speechified to herself all the way out of...” (40). A cave stuffed with words is an ear or a mouth, where listening and speaking echo until they are all reverb.

Gestalt Listening: Because listening is psychological (while hearing is physiological), we hear much more than we know or expect. Gestalt works from the assumption that the mind naturally perceives wholes out of incomplete information; gestalt listening is context-enriched and takes the relationality of listening as a given. This might also be termed “peripheral hearing” after Freud’s concept of peripheral consciousness, a level of subconscious awareness such as subliminal perception, where we register information that comes below the threshold of awareness. This includes registering half-heard or near-heard words, finishing elliptical statements or phrases, and recognition of a whole sound/idea based on a familiar part of that sound or idea. *Baby*’s half-oral, half-literary style, which privileges the unfinished, the unsaid, and the suggested, is a tribute to and validation of gestalt listening as a primary mode of communication. Three “cycles” in *Baby* emphasize orality as the language re-cycles and reprises a lyric feedback system inside an epic gesture. Gestalt listening often involves listening plurally, registering at least subconsciously multiple words and phrases at the same time. In Harryman’s text this plurality leads to a seemingly unlimited extension of language, by association and echo: “The language had a force and baby’s thoughts ran” (57).

Analytic Listening: A term used in psychoanalysis, analytic listening intends to evaluate, decide, and recall as it maintains an open inquisitiveness and a deep connection with the speaker. In *Baby*, analytic listening is played to the point of parody: “The teenager told baby that she and her friends had been listening to her weird thoughts for a couple of hours and they recommended she just keep going on her way, back toward the exit.” (39).

New Analytic Listening: Fred Moten coins this term to describe an amplification of both aspects of analytic listening. New analytic listening is an improvised listening “attuned to the ensemble of the work’s organization and production, the ensemble of the politico-economic structure in which it is produced and the ensemble of the senses from which it springs and which it stimulates” (67). Moten says this kind of listening isn’t a substitute for, but *is* seeing, *is* all the senses at once. Likewise, time’s arrow points in all directions, contracted and condensed. New analytic listening involves multiplicity, hearing multiply and simultaneously in a resonance chamber. As she is fashioned by Harryman into a new status of person, *Baby* calls for this new kind of listening with an extra metacognitive element. She is subject to and subject of constantly renuanced vocalities as well as the kind of synaesthetic listening that Moten attends. *Baby* engages a porousness between thought, gesture, and speech, and the capacity to effectively listen through every sense. Harryman puts Moten’s theory into practice (as well as directly addresses it) by engulfing the reader in listening techniques.

Structural Listening: Adorno’s theory of structural listening is fundamentally applicable to Western instrumental music in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but it might relate loosely to any artwork. Structural listening describes the process wherein a listener follows and comprehends a musical concept, with all its integrated inner relationships and unfolding temporal situation, opposed to bytes of sound or what he calls “atomized listening” inherent in “regressive listening.”² Adorno defines it best by example: “Structurally, one hears the first bar of a Beethoven symphonic movement only at the very moment when one hears the last bar” (255). *Baby* endorses the reciprocity that

Adorno promotes between part and whole, thereby more fully realizing both. *Baby* also takes on a resistant listening in complex relation to a resistant object, thereby divorcing epistemology from the aggressiveness of appropriation and assimilation. “Give me liberty or give me death had not history in baby’s breath. Here and then beginning of baby’s not. And not” (12). Both dialectic listening and structural listening bear the mark of an antagonistic social totality; they show us what’s wrong with standardized listening as a cultural habit full of consumerist compulsions. However, the hierarchies embedded in structural listening cannot translate into *Baby*. Nor do I see such a highly fragmented and elliptical text interested in laying claim to the autonomy principle critical to structural listening. *Baby* is in fact non-original, in that it suspends the concept of origin itself.

Compare the following:

Harryman: “Adults acted like children acting like babies quite frequently themselves.”

Adorno: “Regressive listeners behave like children” (307).

Harryman: “perfect mitten ears”

Adorno: “bad ears” (307).

Harryman: “The corner of everything was smitten with attentiveness” (7).

Adorno: “Deconcentrated listening makes the perception of the whole impossible” (305).

To listen dialectically, as *Baby* shows us, is both to comprehend and to suspend comprehension, and not to dawdle in the shiny intensity of revelation.

DIALECTICAL LISTENING

In *Baby*, dialectical listening refers to how (1) baby perceives the world (epistemology), (2) the reader perceives baby's world as interconnected, contradictory, and dynamic (ontology), as well as (3) Harryman's method of telling baby's story (discourse).

Dialectical listening lends speech nuance, correction, and flexibility. The aural/oral hauntings of writing participate with writing's reverberations in voice. By sublation, listening and speaking in *Baby* continually co-contaminate, cohabit, and infinitely hybridize in a shifting and ongoing process of self-relation. Listening and hearing are specifically named in over a dozen places in this short text; baby is named "the auditor" (13) to tiger's story, yet the functions of story-teller and listener have already been complicated. For one, tiger's story is titled "How Baby Invented Allegory," implying that the object or listener is also the subject or speaker of the story (11). Through listening, baby intersubjectively answers back: thus "*listening speaks*" (Barthes 150). In finding a negotiation between the value of speaking and listening, as each interpenetrates the other, Harryman's characters are not psychological portraits or personalities as much as they are rhetorical frames for the synaptic space between listening as a sensation and as an analytic process. Listening "between" requires synthesis and enables transcendence from formal dualism and monistic reductionism as it problematizes too-tidy symmetries and false alternatives embedded in an and/or system (baby or adult, male or female, self or other). Dialectical listening resolves ready-made binaries by suspending baby in a third kind of listening, where sensory life is present within imaginary life and vice-versa; one is not suppressed underneath the crushing weight of the other; they intertwine and internest. Everyone in the text is bound by their listening, related by "ears and accumulation" (29).

Conversely, looking is associated with binding binaries; baby in fact “has a preinclination toward seeing things in pairs” (14). Listening, however, involves hearing much more than expected or wished for, because the “technology of listening” is not so easily shut down as that of the eyes, which can be closed or averted. Sound seems to hit the consciousness—with its mergings of perception and memory, intimacy and spectacle, self and other—much more directly than seeing, and in this way, *Baby* palpably credits readers with as much a will and a right to uncoerced, direct, fluid experience as baby herself.

LISTENING AND IDENTITY

Baby’s dialectical listening is what creates the conditions for her privileged provisional status. Baby’s status engages and renders the conventional problematic; conflicting values of “baby” (cultural and internal) exist in unresolvable contradiction. As a concept and character, she confronts the “sponge” theory of infants. Baby here is equally receptive and perceptive: “This is my drawing and I can go where I want...” (40). As “baby” invokes “regression” (20) “tantrum,” “grabby,” “surprise,” (21) “havoc,” (22) she is also seeking to introduce an ideal realization of identity, not to report an existing one. Yet it isn’t until baby hears her appellation spoken with a “derogatory undertone” (40) for the first time that the hostile interpellation is capable of bouncing back against itself, thus blurring the territories of the psychological and the linguistic. Baby is a radical agent who has not become indoctrinated into the (ageist, sexist, racist) power structure of listening

and speaking, has not swallowed the bifurcation pill, has not fully entered the “adult prison” of “either me or you” (40).

Baby is more of a nascent neither-nor; baby is a condition or state that anyone might slip into, and is therefore essentially nongendered. That baby is often entangled in clothes is indicative of her need to change them, to try on and cast off identities. Dialectical listening exposes contingencies of the conventional—no longer to be perceived as the way baby *is*, but as the way baby has been made to *seem*. The conditions (and incomprehensions) of baby, child, teenager, and adult replace the binary of gender as a primary epistemological system. By this means convention releases its claim to the transcendental. That is, through dialectical listening convention is denaturalized, and rendered profoundly social and situational. Just as gender is malleable, chronology is kicked out of a fixed and fetishized history in favor of a modulating status of being.

The unfinalizability of baby depends on the ensemble of committed (in both senses of the word) listeners around her. Tiger (“I”), a somewhat merged parental figure, caught in baby’s internal life, appears “frantic to find baby” roughly midway through the book. Or has baby lost tiger?—either way is equally true. This comedic, archetypal scene is a send-up of autonomy and the unlocatability of baby on an epistemological and ontological level. “Someplace out there was the real, the reality principle, even reality and realism all tied up in a bundle.... That’s where baby could be found. But ‘I’ I was left here in the imagination” (27-28). Tiger’s insight is that subjectivity involves a play of multiple

contexts. At the same time, Baby is not a “team player,” in the game where to play is to “cut all others out” (47).

LISTENING AND UTOPIA

Tiger’s story enacts a form of subject-object reciprocity that lies at the heart of any imaginable form of social utopia. The improvisatory duet of baby and tiger recycle sounds and splinter digressions, both discursive and dramatic, familiar and farcical, in order to keep the text unfolding, to keep inventing worlds and possibilities. The sentence searches until it lands us to somewhere more accurate, more desirable, more liberating: where “perched on pee” becomes “swelling in glee” (10) and taking up the “p” and “g,” to become “primordial good” having “a sound: gee. The “g” in gee” becomes “Gee. Gee. Say it often enough and it’ll put you to sleep. Sleep sleep” (11), which returns to “primordial goo” (13) which then becomes “primordial good, the derivative of goo” (14).

“Baby, what are you going to do?” (18).

The auditor (baby) makes decisions in order to meet stories—the heard—halfway. Focused, active audition takes what *is* and refashions it into what *might be*, a path to new knowledge and perception. With baby’s ears full of her mother’s litany, “I feel that I should do something. I feel like I should get out more I feel I could use some adult company I feel I’ve forgotten how to think,” baby improvises a song out of its dominant grammar, paradoxically reducing the words and enlarging the meaning via rhythm: I feel I feel I feel I feel I feel I feel I feel” set to *Row Row Row Your Boat* (49). Mother and

baby cross-pollinate languages as they listen for the future. As baby listens out, she encounters what's possible through critique and recreation. The utopian potential that arises from the intersubjectivity of listening, where "I am listening" also means "listen to me." This assumed reciprocity overthrows implied power structures as it rattles the cages of desire and domination. Expressive-dynamic and rhythmic-spatial modes of listening (Adorno, *Philosophy* 197)—that is, vocal and percussive aspects—function like subject and object here. The first mode generates the second, which penetrates the first. In the course of *Baby*, thoughts are listened to and overheard; internal noise is rendered transparent, democratized, amidst the surrounding sonic carnival. Likewise the reader becomes a listener as well; if Harryman's highly intricate and charged sound patterns do not compel the reader to read aloud and listen (to) herself, she will nonetheless inevitably hear it in the mental arena, where the semiotics of tone happens internally. The text must be equally heard and thought, each facilitating the other.

Baby is full of listening that gets recycled and revised, a constant generation and regeneration of stories, words, ideas, sounds out of which baby creates her world in a collaborative, comparative gesture. Many punctuationless passages in *Baby* reinforce orality, or the experience of listening and the inevitability of hearing as it organizes by sound—phrasal units, syntax, and repetition. Listen up: "...it's the sound of the parent's voice you anticipate desire and suck in all at once through those perfect mitten ears and translucent and batted at things pulled red then formed into conch spindles then later shielded by hands from undesirable noise" (7). This opening passage suggests that sound is material—translucent, batted, red. It also highlights the ears' shape internally and

externally as important to the “technology of listening.” Outside, the ears are mittens with shielding and batting qualities. In other words, the ear’s ability to block out sound is as necessary as its ability to make contact with it and hit it around. Listening involves judgment, a process of selection in addition to an ability to decode obscured or transgressive sounds. Internally ears here are envisioned as conch shells, spiraling canals. Harryman exploits the fact that hearing happens digressively and circuitously and within our bones, muscles, and cavities; it circulates and echoes within us literally. Baby anticipates, desires, and sucks in the sound—listening is an active force of creation, where desirable voice and undesirable noise chase each other around and around toward heterotopia.

Harryman highlights the intersubjective relation that active listening establishes between the subject (listener) and the object (composition), where both respond to history, which is itself (dialectically) intersubjective. Through the act of listening *to* and listening *for*, Harryman shows us language’s best nature, its utopian character. Dialectical listening restores language’s capacity to live within culture and history self-reflexively and with some measure of self-scrutiny.

LISTENING AND ORIGINS

In the opening passage, baby listens out for the parent’s voice, which is the persistently previous sound; what she hears is tiger opening a file “claiming, this is the beginning of a long story,” which later is the “The Beginning of a Long Story Titled How Baby Invented Allegory by the Tiger,” which later is “not your typical mythic story about various

atavistic gods in the form of animals and avatars seeming to take form from mud and mist” (13). Beginnings beget beginnings, which slip past and future into more beginnings. Baby herself has no name and so is nominally originless. Baby loses her original referent, but she is determined biologically and ideologically by parents, a family. She contests a taxonomic universe, not only because she parades assumed identities with playful authority and frightening celerity, but also because she cannot be kept separate. Alas baby cannot be understood in the context of her genesis, but she cannot be understood outside it either.

Harryman’s focus on the conceptual and epistemological ramifications of listening asks us to reconsider notions of identity, origin, and autonomy. There is no nostalgia for origins here because there is no place or time where there was nothing to respond to, nothing to be responsible for. Origin’s claim of no previousness intersects with autonomy’s claim of no relation, crashing and collapsing both. “Baby” is a status unlikely to be anchored to identity via psychological assumptions about origin and causality, yet likely to be considered relationally. Harryman describes her distrust of autonomy in several publications; in “Wild Mothers” she says “autonomous impulses exist within a site of dialogue and disruption” (*Moving Borders* 689). Listening, as she conceives it, exists by a negotiation between expectation and materiality, between imagination and perception, and between mishearing and selective hearing. There is always a prior-listening even if it is a listening out for. Listening is constructed by, instructed by speaking and vice-versa, just as writing and reading are often conceptually indistinguishable; a quandary which suggests critical aporia.

Baby's listening attends to both irreducible phonetic parts and narrative such as allegory and origin story, challenging meaning on both micro and macro levels.³ She listens out for her story and invents it as she goes. Sonic repetition metonymically suggests other words, other ways of meaning, in an "infinity under construction" (13). Consider phonic materiality that reconstitutes and rehears itself, that mishears and mischievously misleads:

Baby heard the singer singing in my sin. Sin was a good word, fun to say and say wrong for sin and thin were close. Very close. Sin was halfway between thin and fin. Baby's friend Finn was sailing with the sharks but baby knew the difference between fin and Finnian, the formal name of Finn. Although sin sounded close to fin and thin, it was abstract. Baby didn't know the meaning of sin except as a sound associated with other sounds, sounds that meant things. Abstraction caused baby to babble in my thin fin in my fin sin Finnian's in thin fin's sin. Sin was nonsense, a kind of nonsense associated with things that made meaning. And so being in one's sin was being in everything and everything was the same as being in the world. Baby was in the world and it through sin, or singing. (52)

Voice is where language connects to fundamental vibrations and modalities of the body and universe; it is how baby explores the world's on-going shift and shuffle. The myth of origin begins with sound but does not sound its beginnings—original sin or Nina Simone singing "Gin House Blues" ("stay away from me cos I'm in my sin"). In a passage this dense with repetition, the ear also starts to play, to re-nounce and repronounce. "In my sin" might be peripherally heard or misheard as "in my skin," especially after in initial invitation: "Sin was...fun to say and say wrong."⁴ Our ears shadow and sharpen to sounds always already there; we listen historically, psychologically, physically, culturally. And we have always been listening.

LISTENING AND PERFORMATIVITY

The language in Harryman's *Baby* is character and context, and as such, it performs relationships. Spoken language requires a listener, a co-participant; as a functionary of the necessary binary of communication I-and-you, tiger-and-baby agitate each other out of their exclusive roles. By its mobility, dialectical listening circulates, permutates, disaggregates the fixed network of speech roles. When tiger tells the allegory, baby performs it, she interrupts and dislodges it, but she also is the co-participant in the action, its subject and its co-creator. Dialectical listening is performative in several ways: it builds in recursion; it consistently draws our attention to spoken language and the sounds of language (we hear it); and it identifies with the other—the speaker—breaking the bondage of submissive or passive listening (it makes things happen). It also performs philosophical inquiry: “Pain isn't hurting she cries when nobody's listening” (57).

Echoing the well-know proposition about a tree falling in the woods, Harryman changes the terms to prioritize auditory instead of visual witness. In this case, Harryman also suggests the cathartic implications of being heard as well as the ethical responsibility of the listener. *Baby* suggests that it is not possible to imagine listening as an improvisational interface if we preserve “the old modes of listening: those of the believer, the disciple, and the patient” (Barthes 152). Listening in the text is reflective and reflexive, often involving mutual transformation. What defines a fundamental aspect of the politicized domestic space that is *Baby*'s context is the embedded presence of others, an audience, and the necessity of cooperation and communication. Baby's listening performs fundamental connections; a fact made literal at one point when baby notices a ball of string—a string of words?—hanging from tiger's mouth: “She began to tug at the

string. The string uncoiled easily. Baby then wraps each plant in the garden with string, “connecting them all to each other” (18). This scene recalls the tongue in Harryman’s play *Performing Objects*, which becomes a ribbon wrapped around things on stage: an ensemble of listeners joined by a common tongue.⁵

LISTENING AND REPETITION

Baby is a catalogue of strategies and effects of repetition; prolific doubling in *Baby* is phonetic, auditory, imagistic, linguistic, and conceptual. Dualities, rhyming couplets, dyads riddle the text as do reiteration, phonetic and linguistic echoes, yet “stable concepts” dissolve into “webs of knowledge systems.” These systems take “hold in the mind, which reproduced them in variations that indicated an infinity under construction” (13). Thus the dialectic action of doubles ultimately breaks down the binary system; its perpetual splintering engenders ensembles that listeners must hear through. Doubling acts not as an antagonistic duality, but as dynamic, developmental relationship *between* seeming pairs, investigating the interstices, and as that relationship resounds *outward*, collecting new relationships, new doublings on its way to finding new synthesis in a dialectical process. Repetition also builds in the recursive act of listening in much the same way Stein does with reading. It makes the act of listening a performance, to be rehearsed and replayed itself. Because sounds, words, and concepts happen twice, dialectical listening demands listening twice:

“Baby was going to sing and then sing twice...Experience. Experience. She sang. She sang divided and then twice feeling the lungs of the forest as her own and then stepping back to observe herself as much phenomenon springing into readymade...She thought she was going to taste tings. Then she thought again and thus was thinking twice.”(45).

As Barthes claims, we derive pleasure from repetition both by fulfillment of expectations (pattern) and from transgression of expectations (disruption of pattern); repetition suspends the listener in a state of anticipation. A rehearsed word gets wrenched into novel sense or nonsense; or more accurately, somewhere in limbo. A rehearsed word is made strange by the brute fact of its pre-presentation or because the planks have been yanked out of its context. Repetition highlights materiality, it doesn't promote inertia—the sound re-composes and decomposes, it exaggerates itself vertiginously. Recombinant propulsion and reiterative compulsion work not only for accrual of meaning and sparks of difference (Baraka's "the changing same"), but also offer the possibility of slippages, mistakes, mishearings, failures of listening. Fruitful failure might be thought of as a motivation for repetition. Repeated sounds are intrinsic to *Baby*'s humor: double meanings, negation, multiple uses of the same word, homophony, semantic shuffling brought on by eccentric inference—each highlights the aporia and insistent paradoxes in relationship between listening and speaking. Humor here is a meaningful discourse about the crisis of signification and the unbridgeable distances between the semantic, sensual, and semiotic. The constructed nature of listening—institutionalized listening—is freed up by repetition in *Baby*.

LISTENING AND SILENCE

Baby associates silence with the "product of an unaffected poise" and the sagacity (22) of teenagers. On the penultimate page of the book, she learns how to silence parents and adults—something akin to swatting a fly—which is by agreeing with them when they least expect it. In both cases silence is a method of unsettling surprise. Often associated

with origin, silence is never a precondition with Harryman. “In the beginning, there was nothing,” Harryman mythologizes in “Fish Speech” from *There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn*, “. . . Silence was neither dominant nor peaceful nor silent.” Likewise, in *Baby*, silence is just as ethically demanding and multiple as listening. When baby “doesn’t want an imposition,” she silences tiger by “sealing tiger’s mouth with her wet tongue” (29). When “the other baby” abandons her, she does so by soothing her “with tongue and a special silence” (50); silence is always underneath the tongue, often the motivation for words, reflecting the paradoxical nature of consciousness. Harryman negotiates an undefined condition between sound and silence—speaking and listening—in a state of reciprocal struggle, never reconciled nor relieved. Intimacy and violence attend speech and silence. They are a “torn unity” (Blanchot) fueling communication: “The poet speaks by listening” and “likewise, he who listens, the ‘reader,’ is he by whom the work is spoken anew” (226). That is, meaning relies on ethical allegiance to listen dialectically.

The story-frame of *Baby* becomes a fictional space that allows indirect experience of listening to someone else, creating a kind of auditory voyeurism. Baby, the auditor, is listening to tiger, but her listening is full of distractions and “noise” inherently faithful to the circumstances of the story. Though we are listening to the story of the story, we cannot absorb into the scene. We therefore experience our own absence from the scene. The listener cannot hear the story, but only its representation, and cannot hear the documentation, but rather only its transduction. Noting noisiness and disruptions, Joan Retallack characterizes Harryman’s work as “full of the formal/verbal articulation of

silence” (142). Noise is a powerful mechanism for establishing and reconfiguring subjectivity. Listening mimics language here in that it does not “replicate sciences of perspective as we’ve known them” (143). Instead, baby oscillates among quick scenes, sensory moments, analytic musings, and language sources outside herself, advocating a flexible and scattered ear. Even in virtual silence, there is anticipation, which holds final conclusion at bay. By keeping listening, *Baby* and its reader continue to explore multiplicity and blurred dimensions of communication. “If there had been silence, silence would have been pierced but the room was always humming” (42).

¹ The first half of this sentence paraphrases an observation made by Peter Quartermain, quoting Don Wellman, about John Donne, in “Sound Reading,” *Close Listening: Poetry on the Performed Word*.

² Atomized and regressive listening are the enemies of structural listening, according to Adorno. Among other things, both involve hearing merely a series of disconnected episodes. Adorno’s typology articulates fundamental social impediments to the forms of listening and listeners whose ears are socially scarred.

³ How to listen in doubly, with ears tuned, in Adorno’s terms, to both atomized listening and structural listening? How does our attention unconsciously or unintentionally decide what’s audible? How does it organize and hierarchize that information? How do we account for silences (taxonomized by Cage) and auditory habits of perception?

⁴ Indeed, and humorously, *sin is* meant to be wrong. This passage resonates with last line of the book: “This religion of skin for which there was no titular value” (63) which brings us back to baby as the book’s skin or title and the fallacy of origins.

⁵ This connectivity might be figured as a Deleuzian assemblage where subject and object form a series of flows and intensities, linked in heterogeneous ways. Elizabeth Grosz understands orality as “creating linkages with other surfaces, other places, other objects or assemblages. The child’s lips, for example, form connections (or in Deleuzian terms, machines, assemblages) with the beast or bottle” (116). It also revels in and resists the recurrent image in literature, art, and performance of a filled (and spilling) female mouth. Caryl Churchill and David Lan’s play *A Mouthful of Birds* features a female character who feels her mouth is stuffed with birds. By connecting orality with community, Harryman’s image reclaims the common female character of chatterboxes and blather-mouths.

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