

The *Scriptor* on Holiday: 'The Death of the Author' and Contemporary American Poetry

Calum Gardner

University of Leeds
E-mail: c.gardner1@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

The influence of Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' is generally supposed to be supreme – it is quoted, in abbreviated and sometimes distorted forms, at every level of literary studies, in the prosecution of all kinds of argument from the general to the particular and from theory to practice, and its reputation and importance has arguably been greater in the Anglophone world. This essay looks at the importance of 'The Death of the Author' for English-language avant-garde poetics, considering how successful poets have been at functioning as 'modern scriptors' rather than authors and how far they accept this position. The article takes a range of examples: Ron Silliman, and his practice within the context of Language poetry; prose poet Dodie Bellamy, and with her the 'New Narrative' writers, often considered as standing opposed to Language poetry; and Harryette Mullen, whose work in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) and *Recyclopedia* (2006) seems to enact Barthes's description of an 'immense dictionary [...] a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely postponed'. Synthesizing these disparate approaches, the article will offer an account of the state of post-Barthes poetics and consider if – and if so, in what ways – the contemporary poet is still an author.

Keywords: *Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', Silliman, Dodie Bellamy, Harryette Mullen, language poetry, New Narrative, experimental poetry*

writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates [...] something like the *I declare* of kings or the *I sing* of very ancient poets. (Roland Barthes)¹

What was 'The Death of the Author' to poetry, and to poets? Roland Barthes's 1967 essay has become, for many, the introduction to literary theory. It is hardly possible to take a university English literature class without reading it, and yet little has been written about its implications and consequences for poetry, and for poets. I propose to consider here texts by three American poets, and how their relationship to criticism and their poetic practice are affected by the prominent positioning of what once seemed a minor polemical essay.

Poetry, it is true, is not the obvious target of the polemic. Most of Barthes's examples in that text are about prose – Valéry, Proust – and even when he considers

¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 146; hereafter cited as *DA*, followed by page number.

Mallarmé, he gives no direct textual examples. However, in the final third of the twentieth century, poets began to read Barthes in a variety of ways. It is well documented that the ‘Language poetry’ movement was inaugurated, not once but twice, under the sign of Barthes’s essay ‘Is There Any Poetic Writing?’, from *Writing Degree Zero* (orig. 1953).² One of the driving influences behind that engagement was the poet Ron Silliman; here, I want to expand on Silliman’s reading of Barthes, and how his concept of the ‘New Sentence’, an influential poetics of the experimental prose poem, is linked to ‘The Death of the Author’. Language poetry had a rival or sibling movement known as New Narrative, and Barthes was relevant here too. I want to take as a test case New Narrative prose poet Dodie Bellamy and consider whether Barthes is relevant to her projects *Cunt-Ups* and *Cunt Norton*, which combine questions of the author and a feminist critique of linguistic normativity. Finally, I will consider Harryette Mullen, whose early collections *S*PeRM*K*T* and *Trimnings* have been described as a cross between Barthes’s *Mythologies* and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*.³ Concerning ‘The Death of the Author’, however, I will look at her 2002 book *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, which seems to enact Barthes’s description of an ‘immense dictionary [...] a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely postponed’. (*DA*, 147) Considering these three poets, we will acquire a broad perspective on what ‘The Death of the Author’ has meant, and means today, to American poetry. First, however, I want to ask a broader question about the history of the infamous essay.

What Was ‘The Death of the Author’?

I ask the question in this way because today, at least in the Anglophone world, ‘The Death of the Author’ is, variously, the major text of a major theorist, Barthes; the watchword of postmodernism; 1950s New Criticism followed to its logical conclusion; everything that is wrong with literary studies; or just one of the great variety of critical methodologies with which students may spice their essays. But this is not what it *was* in 1967, or indeed for many years after. Although now ubiquitous in such contexts, it is in many ways not an obvious anthology piece. Susan Sontag omits it from her selection for the otherwise canonical *A Roland Barthes Reader* (1983), and it did not appear in any book-length publication in French in Barthes’s lifetime; it waited to be included in the fourth volume of his critical essays, *Le Bruissement de la langue*, in 1984. It appeared in the Marseilles-based journal *Mantéia* in 1968, but never captured much critical imagination. Its debut, in Richard Howard’s English translation, was similarly unremarkable; it appeared in the multimedia magazine *Aspen* in 1967, in a booklet alongside essays by Sontag and George Kubler, in circumstances which have recently been meticulously documented and analysed in John Logie.⁴ What is notable is that afterwards, it seems to have gone largely uncommented upon for ten years. This changed, however, when in 1977 *Image Music Text* was published, a collection of translations of Barthes’s essays by the English scholar of contemporary French literature Stephen Heath. Heath’s earlier book *The Nouveau Roman* was notable for having introduced the postwar experimental novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie

² Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968), 41-54.

³ Jonathan Monroe, ‘Syntextural Investigations’, *Diacritics* 26.3-4 (1996): 137.

⁴ John Logie, ‘1967: The Birth of “The Death of the Author”’, *College English* 75.5 (2013): 493-512.

Sarraute, and others to a British audience.⁵ However, his use of the work of Barthes and Julia Kristeva in his analyses was equally ground-breaking, if not more so; the poet and critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson, in her review of the book in the *Times Literary Supplement*, said that because of it there would be 'a revolution in this country' in literary criticism.⁶ Even there, however, Heath does not cite 'The Death of the Author', as he does several of the essays he was later to include in *Image Music Text*. Forrest-Thomson was deeply engaged in French criticism, and appears to be the first Anglophone poet to have written about Barthes in any way at all, but nothing written before her death in April 1975 indicates that she knew 'The Death of the Author'. This offers some small indication of how great the impact of *Image Music Text* must have been. 'The Death of the Author' went on to be published in both Heath's and Howard's translations in a wide variety of anthologies of 'theory' in the following decades, far outstripping the impact of other influential essays from Heath's volume on visual art and film, such as 'Rhetoric of the Image' and 'The Third Meaning'. It prompted reactions of outrage and solidarity, has been linked to the political upheaval of May 1968 (even though it predates those events), and for many readers has come to characterize Barthes's work.

To those who know Barthes's *oeuvre* well, this seems in retrospect rather bizarre. 'The Death of the Author' is not typical Barthes. It lacks the keen contemporary engagement of *Mythologies* and, undermining the already anachronistic May '68 connection often inferred, the political urgency of *Writing Degree Zero*. It most properly belongs with his fairly prolific period in the early 1960s of brief, bold, incisive critical essays, often in dialogue with avant-garde writers, which urged a new criticism. This *nouvelle critique* (not the equivalent to the English New Criticism of the 1950s) was to lay some of the groundwork from literary studies for poststructuralism, even if not all of its authors were, strictly speaking, structuralists in the first place. Its most prominent example is the short monograph *On Racine*, the controversial text where Barthes writes that the 'university criticism' which pursues the 'genesis' of the work is coming to be replaced, and must be replaced, with a 'criticism of signification'.⁷ The leap made by 'The Death of the Author' is to imagine the kind of writer who anticipates such a criticism. There are shades of this in his criticism of Alain Robbe-Grillet, but even then he finds Robbe-Grillet in the 'error' of assuming objects have an essence outside language.⁸ So who are the poets who do not (at least in their practice) make such an 'error', and instead do 'modern writing' that reverses the relationship between language and writer, 'substitute[s] language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner'? (*DA*, 143) Barthes's unsatisfying examples of

⁵ It is worth noting that Heath's *Vertige du déplacement: Lecture de Barthes* (Paris: Fayard, 1974) was the first book written entirely on Barthes by an English scholar, although the book only appeared in French.

⁶ Veronica Forrest-Thomson, 'New Novels and New Critics', *Times Higher Education Supplement* (2 February 1973), 17.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 163. This was the text which attracted the ire of traditionalists and led to Barthes being embroiled in the *affaire Picard* in the mid-1960s, catapulting him to notoriety. See Raymond Picard, *New Criticism or New Fraud?*, trans. Frank Towne (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1969).

⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Last Word on Robbe-Grillet?', in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 197-203 (204). See also 'Objective Literature', *Critical Essays*, 13-24.

Valéry and Proust can be replaced in this analysis by three of the the American poets who have risen to the challenge in the last half century.

Ron Silliman on Holiday

Ron Silliman considers that, since 1974, he has been writing the same poem, the ‘serial life work’ of *Ketjak*. All of his poems since then, including the eponymous shorter section *Ketjak*, can persuasively be read as a semiautobiographical key to the rest of the work.⁹ However, the long *Ketjak*’s constituent parts vary widely in form and function. The ‘life-poem’ divides into four major works: *The Age of Huts* (four early books: *Sunset Debris*, 2197, *The Chinese Notebook*, and the short *Ketjak*); *Tjanting* (the only one not further subdivided, its paragraph structures constructed after the Fibonacci sequence); *The Alphabet* (the longest, comprising twenty-six projects); and *Universe* (Silliman’s tongue-in-cheek projection is that this will be made up of 360 volumes). Some take on eccentric forms, such as *Sunset Debris*, made up entirely of questions, or philosophy in Wittgensteinian numbered statements as in *The Chinese Notebook* (which claims that ‘When I return here to ideas previously stated, that’s rhyme.’).¹⁰ What unites the long *Ketjak* together, therefore, is not a form or a set of thematic concerns – unless only, in the most general sense, those of writing about (everyday) life – but the fact that it was written, and is being written, by one person. It therefore has, incontrovertibly, an Author. We shall see by examination of that shorter *Ketjak* how this can be reconciled with Silliman’s taking-up of Barthes’s ideas.

Silliman’s most famous essay and the key to most of his prose poetry is ‘The New Sentence’, a theory of poetry where the main structural principle is parataxis. Sentences stand alone, becoming the main structural unit of the text, yet how the sentences are arranged in relationship to others is still relevant. Twice in the course of *Ketjak*, we find this sentence: ‘On holiday, I read Barthes’ “The Writer on Holiday.”’ I give it here in both contexts, to show the contrast between the two arrangements:

A blue flame. Drop City. All talk. On holiday, I read Barthes’ ‘The Writer on Holiday.’ Western movies.

A blue flame. This is a test. Drop City. All this only lately translated from the Korean. All talk. Face of a clown colored in. On holiday, I read Barthes’ ‘The Writer on Holiday.’ The function of the paragraph is visual, to break the page into units, pre-logical intent. Western movies. Embedding.¹¹

The second time around, a new sentence is inserted – ‘embedded’, as is metapoetically explained to us at the end of the selection quoted – between each of the pre-existing sentences. The sentence referencing Barthes appears both times. ‘The Writer on Holiday’ is one of Barthes’s *Mythologies* and an early forerunner of ‘The Death of the Author’ in thinking about the author within cultural hegemony; it shows how literary production is cast by bourgeois culture as ‘involuntary’ and ‘superhuman’. As a

⁹ Joel Duncan, ‘Ron Silliman’s *Ketjak* beyond Programmatism’, *Textual Practice* (28 November 2016), 1-19; available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1256909> [accessed 11 June 2017].

¹⁰ Ron Silliman, *The Chinese Notebook*, in *The Age of Huts (Compleat)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 147-77 (176).

¹¹ Silliman, *Ketjak*, in *The Age of Huts (Compleat)*, 1-102 (36-7, 70). Underlining indicates my emphasis.

'language poet', Silliman is resistant to this view. Language poetry in general owes a more general intellectual debt to Barthes, and particularly to the essay 'Is There Any Poetic Writing?' from *Writing Degree Zero*.¹² In that essay, Barthes writes that 'in classical art, a ready-made thought generates an utterance which "expresses" or "translates" it' – the view Silliman opposes, and the one Barthes takes apart in 'The Death of the Author' (the author to the text 'as a father to his child').¹³ All of these texts oppose the notion of the author as a special class of speaking subject:

First, this treats literary production as a sort of involuntary secretion, which is taboo, since it escapes human determinations: to speak more decorously, the writer is the prey of an inner god who speaks at all times[.] [...] I cannot but ascribe to some superhumanity the existence of beings vast enough to wear blue pyjamas at the very moment when they manifest themselves as universal conscience.¹⁴

However, this is where we run into difficulty, because despite his stated opposition to this model of authorship, Silliman often appears to be playing into it. The vast majority of the collections of sentences give every appearance of being drawn from his own everyday life; *Ketjak*, and Silliman's other writings of this kind, are veined with 'blue pyjamas'-like details, from references to '[w]riting on the can' to those that seem to expose the writing practice: 'I looked up from my duties at the sink [...] to see her reading my green pocket notebook, smiling at lines she herself had said'.¹⁵ This appears to describe what Silliman reports as the process for writing these texts: taking a notebook everywhere and writing down sentences said by other people or which occurred to him in a given moment, like the 'involuntary secretion' of 'The Writer on Holiday'. The grammar of the sentence that references the essay casts the 'I' as a writer: 'On holiday, I' and "'The Writer on Holiday'" create a chiasmus. 'I' is Barthes's 'writer'. It is a knowing adoption of the pose, but this does not make Silliman any less of an author. The specialness of the author's mind and activity is deconstructed by admitting miscellaneous matter, but the processes described in the texts, even if they are as mundane as '[w]riting on the can', are still processes, still responses to the 'god who speaks at all times'. The speaking relationship is horizontalized and multiplied; Silliman's 'god who speaks at all times' is all around him. This fulfils Barthes's vision of the *scriptor* as agent of a 'multiple' writing, an animist to the Author's monotheist.¹⁶

To return to my epigraph: Barthes claims that writing must 'now', in our modern mode or informed by our modern understanding, always be considered as what the 'Oxford philosophers' call a 'performative'. (*DA*, 145) All 'modern' writing is a kind of saying which *does*, being divorced from all of its other functions. It can no longer be considered as a means of 'recording, notation, representation'. And yet we still record, make notes, represent by means of writing. Should Silliman's practice be regarded as authorial or *scriptor*-ial? Indeed, it has elements of both. Barthes writes that the *scriptor*, 'making a law of necessity, [...] must emphasize this delay and indefinitely

¹² I have demonstrated this in detail in 'The Dwelling-Place: Roland Barthes and the Birth of Language Poetry', *Barthes Studies* 2 (2016): 4-22.

¹³ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 43; *DA*, 145.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 28-9.

¹⁵ Ron Silliman, *Tjanting* (Cambridge: Salt, 2002), 55, 114.

¹⁶ '[A] text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation', which is brought into focus by 'the reader, not, is was hitherto said, the author'. (*DA*, 148.)

“polish” his [*sic*] form.’ (*DA*, 146) Andrew Epstein has argued that *Ketjak* is Silliman’s attempt to hone a new practice of observation that can see through what Walter Benjamin calls the ‘dream sleep’ of capitalist society, of what Barthes calls ‘myth’.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Barthes’s wording suggests that the state of being a *scriptor* is a limit case, the work on form being ‘indefinite’; one can only ever be a *scriptor* in the moment, and to claim it as one’s stable, fixed identity would miss the point. And yet *scriptors* act in relationship to their identities – to the identities they claim, and to those assigned to them. Let us now look at a writing practice that addresses this marginalization.

Dodie Bellamy Cu(n)ts Up the Author

In San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s, a group of avant-garde writers developed who stood counter to the language poets in their desire to make a renewed return to representation and consideration of identity and narratives. Codified in key member Robert Glück’s ‘Long Note on the New Narrative’, they felt they could not ignore what was being done in language by turning away from it and creating something entirely new, as they saw language poetry’s ‘formalist fireworks’ and ‘idealism’.¹⁸ Instead, says Glück, the depiction of gay identity in the dominant culture was ‘an image so unjust that it amounted to a tyranny that I could not turn my back on’.¹⁹ Although the New Narrative did not seek to abolish conventions around authorship or the connection between authors and texts, it did introduce a key formal element: the ‘text-metatext’. This was a principle whereby a narrative is constantly questioning itself, which undermines the projection of authorial power in general while still allowing a subject-position to be identified – indeed, a marginalized position can be better defended by questioning dominant narratives. This is the ultimate goal of ‘The Death of the Author’ as well, setting aside the ‘arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society’. (*DA*, 146) Barthes gives no examples, but for Glück it is clear that his reflexive examination of narratives aims to challenge dominant homophobic narratives that language writing retreated from addressing, but that he felt bound to tackle as a ‘theory-based’ gay writer. Bellamy was a key member of the group, her most significant early contribution being *The Letters of Mina Harker*, which originated as semi-fictionalized gossip exchange with writer Sam D’Alessandro. Bellamy merges her San Francisco queer poetry community with the ‘Gang of Light’ from *Dracula* to create a text that merges fiction, fact, and theory, and where ‘the theoretical is presented as intimately bound up with the bodily and vice versa’.²⁰ Since then, her writing has straddled the literary, the essayistic, and the personal, and it is perhaps for this reason that she has been called ‘America’s answer to Roland Barthes’.²¹

¹⁷ Andrew Epstein, “‘There Is No Content Here, Only Dailiness’: Poetry as Critique of Everyday Life in Ron Silliman’s *Ketjak*”, *Contemporary Literature* 51.4 (Winter 2010): 770.

¹⁸ Robert Glück, ‘Long Note on New Narrative’, in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, ed. Mary Burger et al., (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004), 25.

¹⁹ Glück, ‘Long Note’, 26.

²⁰ Christopher Breu, ‘Disinterring the Real: Dodie Bellamy’s *The Letters of Mina Harker* and the Late-Capitalist Literature of Materiality’, *Textual Practice* 26.2 (2012): 271.

²¹ Steven Shaviro, review of Dodie Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*; available at <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/Dodie.html> [accessed 9 June 2017].

Another of Bellamy's key influences and points of comparison is Kathy Acker. Acker was associated with New Narrative writing, and in particular served as a model for its pornographic strategies. Glück writes that New Narrative 'used porn, where information saturates narrative, [...] to arrive at ecstasy and loss of narration as the self sheds its social identities'.²² This is certainly the case in Acker, in whose texts long pornographic passages blend with appropriations of other writers. Bellamy writes that '[i]nspired by Kathy, in [*The Letters of Mina Harker*] I stole from anything and everything that crossed my path'.²³ It is through Acker and Barthes together that we can best come to understand the radical breakdown of authorship that takes place in Bellamy's cut-up projects *Cunt-Ups* (2001) and *Cunt Norton* (2013). *Cunt-Ups* is a combination of the Burroughsian cut-up method, taught to Acker by David Antin and hence passed to a new generation of experimentalists, and a New Narrative-inspired selection of texts that deal frankly with gender and sexual identity. Combining Glück's information saturation of pornography is combined with relatively little continuity between sentences; genital configuration changes from sentence to sentence, like an all-sex version of the 'New Sentence' of *Ketjak* and *Tjanting*:

there's a landslide along my clit, which is responsive to light. I'm rubbing my cock up against you, intensified by darkness. No language will ever fit, will give light to the mysteries of my overwhelming need to tell you that I want.²⁴

If Silliman employs parataxis to reveal the mythologizing or dominating potential of narrative, Bellamy aligns it against the expectations of the pornographic text. In pornography 'information saturates narrative', here the text is just as saturated, but is broken up by the characteristic New Narrative self-narration of text-metatext. The interchangeable bodies of the characters in cut-up writing reflect, as Robin Lydenberg argues, the interchangeable identities of author and reader.²⁵ Through parataxis – the topic word in successive sentences shifting from 'clit' to 'cock' to 'language' – it is indicated that bodies and sexual identities change, and so do subject-positions. Articulating this in one text, we can see how it might be applicable across the whole activities of writing and reading.

This is further foregrounded in a successor project, *Cunt Norton* (2013). Playing both on the name of the source of the cut-ups, the canonical *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, and T. S. Eliot's poem 'Burnt Norton' from *Four Quartets*, Bellamy's text challenges the legitimacy of established literary forms and institutions. It is easy to argue that all cut-up supports the ideas of 'The Death of the Author', and indeed it does – most clearly, it demonstrates that 'a text is made of multiple writings'. (*DA*, 148) However, Bellamy's framing in *Cunt Norton* is unique, and moreover the results it produces are too. There is a temptation merely to highlight felicitous or amusing passages – like 'Kubla Khan the stately is ready to pleasure thee' from 'Cunt Coleridge'²⁶ – but what is more notable is Bellamy's production of style. Charles Altieri writes:

²² Glück, 'Long Note on the New Narrative', 31.

²³ Dodie Bellamy, *When the Sick Rule the World* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2015), 128.

²⁴ Dodie Bellamy, 'from *Cunt-Ups*', in *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*, ed. Caroline Bergvall et al. (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2012), 335.

²⁵ Robin Lydenberg, 'Cut-up: Negative Poetics in William Burroughs and Roland Barthes', *Comparative Literature Studies* 15.4 (Dec 1978): 414-30.

²⁶ Dodie Bellamy, *Cunt Norton* (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2013), 24.

In Bellamy's text the erotic imagination at its wildest depends for its permissions and intensities on the multiple stances afforded by examples drawn from a quite traditional canon, some of whose basic powers are gloriously made visible.²⁷

Mia You notes that in the more modern authors, their own style is lost (this is partly due to period language rather than any intrinsically enduring qualities of Chaucer and Shakespeare).²⁸ However, it is not just replaced with a single cut-up aesthetic or idiom. There are distinctions between, for instance, 'Cunt Crane' and 'Cunt Stevens'. 'Cunt Stevens', using the texts of the cold, ironic Wallace Stevens, is decorous to the point of euphemism, even in a sentence that contains that anti-euphemism, 'cunt' itself: 'what reason do I have a cunt if not to fill it with your veritable ocean'.²⁹ By contrast, 'Cunt Crane' is explicit: 'fill me with gallons of Carib fire'; 'my cunt won't stop exclaiming as I receive your secret oar'.³⁰ Both use oceanic metaphors, reflecting well-known poems by their originals; the 'Carib fire' and 'bridge' in 'Cunt Crane' are immediately recognisable to any reader familiar with Hart Crane's 'Voyages'.³¹ The tone will also be recognisable to those familiar with his letters and personal life; Crane's sex life revolved around the cruising sites of the Brooklyn Bridge and he had many partners who were sailors, including the man for whom 'Voyages' was written, Emil Opffer. Wallace Stevens, so neatly separating his poetry career from his career at the insurance company, gives a neat contrast to this, and indeed the most enduring critical comment on the relationship between his poetry and his life is one of abstraction.³² Style is the product of sources, and changing and foregrounding the sources makes possible an alchemy of styles. Even as the text is altered and moved away from the author-written source, a 'genetic' stylistic resemblance remains, suggesting that style does not derive from the text alone. These readings, in drawing on 'the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions', contradict what is commonly understood as the 'Death of the Author' approach; indeed, Bellamy's text depends on drawing attention to criticism's 'tyrannical' focus on this. (*DA*, 143) With Stevens's and Crane's stylistic flourishes recontextualized as pornography, we see how the connection between poets' lives and their style is not yet dead. Her text is called 'Cunt Crane', not 'Cunt Voyages', showing how our (cultural, critical) *idea* of a poet's style is not wholly derived from the texts in the way that we imagine, but floats around the poet. In the next author we shall consider, we see again that what looks like the reading of texts is often the reading of the cultural operations whereby we come by our language – and the poet explores and enacts them so that her readers may understand this principle.

²⁷ Charles Altieri, *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 145.

²⁸ Mia You, 'Good Fucks: A Review of Dodie Bellamy's *Cunt Norton*', *Jacket 2* (18 March 2014); available at <http://jacket2.org/reviews/good-fucks> [accessed 11 July 2017].

²⁹ Bellamy, *Cunt Norton*, 44-5.

³⁰ Bellamy, *Cunt Norton*, 52, 53.

³¹ Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2006), 25, 27. The references are from prominent parts of the poem: 'The secret oar and petals of all love' is the final line of Part IV, and 'Carib fire' recalls the title of a later poem, 'O Carib Isle!' (77).

³² Edward Ragg has shown that when Stevens stopped writing, partly because of work commitments, he only returned having acquired an increased interest in the abstract. Ragg, *Wallace Stevens and the Poetry and Abstraction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 35.

Harryette Mullen: Sleeping with the Tissue of Signs

Succeeding the Author, the *scriptor* no longer bears within him [*sic*] passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. (*DA*, 147)

In her 2002 collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Harryette Mullen assembles a series of Oulipian and other experiments with language of the kind familiar to readers of the language poets, but which address a wider set of questions about the cultural uses to which language is put. Mullen's 'dictionary' is the *American Heritage Dictionary*, which as Amy Moorman Robbins has shown demonstrates 'her interest in language as defined by black and feminist intellectuals and artists'.³³ Mullen has spoken about the stark divisions in audience between her early works; in contrast to her first book, *Tree Tall Woman*, which attracted a diverse audience, those who came to hear her read from the experimental *Trimnings* and *S*PeRM*k*t* were mostly white: 'I would be the one black person in the room, reading my poetry'.³⁴ She later hoped to combine audiences and traditions with *Muse & Drudge*, whose wide range of appropriated literary and verbal sources mark a clear turn in her trajectory towards the style and concerns of *Sleeping with the Dictionary*.

In this way, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* illuminates additional obstacles to the formation of a *scriptor*, which is that not every writer's access to every source is recognized by readers and listeners. As Peter Middleton writes of Language poetry's response to Barthes's and Foucault's interrogation of authorship, 'collaborative authorship does have room for subjects to relocate themselves, but only within certain limits', because 'hegemonic identities [still] inflect authorship'.³⁵ Although *Ketjak* does know this, where it is least successful is where it believes its operations to be irrelevant to Silliman. In order to combat this, both Silliman and Mullen make use of what seems like device equally open to all who use a given language: alphabetical order. Like Silliman's *The Alphabet* and various Barthes texts such as *The Pleasure of the Text* and *A Lover's Discourse*, the poems of Mullen's collection are arranged in alphabetical order; in this case, by the titles of individual poems, from 'All She Wrote' to 'Zombie Hat'. In this way, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* becomes itself a dictionary, albeit a slim one, which is relevant to the title (prose) poem. This text plays on the evocative title by creating a series of sexual innuendoes where sex with the dictionary itself is insinuated:

To go through all these motions and procedures, groping in the dark for an alluring word, is the poet's nocturnal mission. Aroused by myriad possibilities, we try out the most perverse positions in the practice of our nightly act, the penetration of the denotative body of the work.³⁶

³³ Amy Moorman Robbins, 'Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* and Race in Language/Writing', *Contemporary Literature* 51.2 (Summer 2010): 356.

³⁴ Harryette Mullen, quoted in Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 98-9.

³⁵ Peter Middleton, 'When L=A: Language, Friendship and Equality in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine', in *Among Friends: Engendering the Social Site of Poetry*, ed. Anne Dewey and Libbie Rifkin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 95-6.

³⁶ Harryette Mullen, 'Sleeping with the Dictionary', in *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 67.

Many parts of the poem can be taken either to refer to sex, or to reading in the active, creative way Barthes would call ‘writerly’ – ‘the practice of our nightly act’. Where a full double entendre is not completed, the vocabulary is even more suggestive: in everyday speech, ‘aroused’ and ‘penetration’ are used more in sexual contexts than not, and ‘nocturnal mission’ is an uncommon phrase whose use can only be explained by its reference to emission. In the case of ‘perverse positions’, there are three meanings: sexual (possibly ‘perverted’) positions, rhetorical or philosophical positions; and sleeping positions, if trying to get comfortable in bed with a large book, which even if also figurative brings vividly to mind the process of writerly ordering, of managing large amount of text and textual possibilities. But, as with *The Pleasure of the Text*, for instance, if we work our readerly way through *Sleeping with the Dictionary* in alphabetical order, we will have the earlier examples of alphabetic poems (‘Blah-blah’ and ‘Jinglejingle’) and list poems which otherwise make use of alliteration, like ‘Any Lit’, to help us make sense of the strategy to which the title poem gestures.

‘Any Lit’ is a poem each of whose lines can be expressed by the formula ‘You are a X beyond my Y’ where X is a word beginning with the syllable /ju/ (irrespective of spelling), and Y is a word beginning with the syllable /maɪ/. There are four kinds of connection in this poem: (1) where X and Y are thematically linked, or linked by a pun; (2) where the X of one line is linked to Y of the next, and/or vice versa; (3) where X of one line is linked to X of the next, or the same with Y; or (4) where X and Y are linked by a common resemblance (as in one of the most straightforward lines to interpret, ‘You are a euphoria beyond my myalgia’ – you are [extreme] pleasure beyond my [physical] pain).³⁷ To demonstrate the first three kinds of connection, let us look at the following lines from the middle of the poem.

You are a Euripides beyond my mime troupe
 You are a Utah beyond my microcosm
 You are a Uranus beyond my Miami
 [...]
 You are a eugenics beyond my Mayan
 You are a U-boat beyond my mind control³⁸

John C. Stout writes that both Silliman (in his 2008 collection of collections *The Alphabet*) and Mullen ‘transform the alphabet—that is, language – from a transparent “window” through which to understand the world into, on the contrary, a most problematic and non-transparent medium’.³⁹ We might say the same of Barthes in his alphabetic texts, although more subtly. The ways texts have of ordering their elements are no more natural than the alphabet. Alphabetical order is so prior that it looks natural, although there is no particular cultural meaning attached to it – the arbitrary is an empty myth. By making letter-patterns like the sentence formula of ‘Any Lit’, Mullen extends this arbitrariness to texts. As Samantha Pinto has written, ‘Mullen’s “I’s” are never easy, clear expressions of authentic identities, even when posed as such by authors and critical discourse, nor are they as aesthetically bounded as one might initially assign

³⁷ Mullen, ‘Any Lit’, in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, 6-7 (6).

³⁸ Mullen, ‘Any Lit’, 6-7.

³⁹ John C. Stout, ‘Experimenting with Letters: Alphabetical Sequences in Contemporary Innovative Poetry. Bök, Silliman, Mullen, and Christensen’, *The Modern Language Review* 111.3 (July 2016): 632.

their seeming individualism.’⁴⁰ Her ‘you’s and ‘my’s are evidently closely related, with this poem being founded on their lack of clarity or authenticity; as long as it conforms to the sound, it can enter into the poem. And yet the arbitrariness is not total, because it has to bear one of these various kinds of association.

Mullen here has in common with Barthes – and inherits from him – the acknowledgement that even when we seek to provide ‘clear expressions of authentic identities’, in Pinto’s phrase, we are only ever consulting ‘a ready-formed dictionary’. (DA, 146) However, we form relationships of feeling and identification with the dictionary’s elements, so it is not neutral or opaque to us.

Conclusion

The ‘ready-formed dictionary’ from which writing derives consists not only of denotations and connotations, but also of individual associations. Barthes refines the idea of textual ‘tissue’ in *The Pleasure of the Text*: ‘lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web’.⁴¹ Adding to that the ‘involuntary secretions’ of the literary genius in ‘The Writer on Holiday’ to the constructive secretions of the text, Barthes promotes a view of text as a bodily substance, and one connected with human bodies – from Silliman’s borrowing and challenging of the bodily functions of ‘The Writer on Holiday’ ‘on the can’, through Bellamy’s ‘cunting-up’ of poetic texts, to Mullen’s quasi-sexualized account of wordplay.

Each poet’s work, therefore, can be read as a response to a different moment in ‘The Death of the Author’, a different moment in the modern ‘history of writing’ (which Barthes wrote might one day replace ‘literature’).⁴² There is Silliman’s negotiation of the category of the *scriptor*, Bellamy’s feminist revision of the project of Bouvard and Pécuchet, and Mullen’s critical examination of the ‘ready-formed dictionary’ we all consult as we write. In the light of this variety of responses, it is worth considering that the category of the Author might apply in a particular way to the Poet. Although poets have sometimes been the most eager of all writers to encode themselves and their practices as the ultimate creators of their works – and with the lyric pose demanding voices “‘confiding” in us’ – (DA, 143), they have also been willing and able to participate in the questioning of this. By working their experiences and their bodies into the compositional and processual forms of their texts, they make it so that the doubts Barthes sought to raise about the nature of the author-text relationship are examined anew. The Poet therefore may not have to die the death of the Author, but only to adjust the terms on which she lives with and in the text.

Bibliography

1. Altieri, Charles. *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.
2. Barthes, Roland. *Critical Essays*. Translated by Richard Howard. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972.

⁴⁰ Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 184.

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), 64.

⁴² Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 6.

3. Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author'. In *Image Music Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977. 142-8.
4. Barthes, Roland. *On Racine*. Translated by Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
5. Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill & Wang, 1974.
6. Barthes, Roland. *Writing Degree Zero*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill & Wang, 1968.
7. Bellamy, Dodie. *Cunt Norton*. Los Angeles: Les Fignes Press, 2013.
8. Bellamy, Dodie. 'From *Cunt-Ups*'. In *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*. Edited by Caroline Bergvall et al. Los Angeles: Les Fignes Press, 2012. 334-9.
9. Bellamy, Dodie. *When the Sick Rule the World*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2015.
10. Breu, Christopher. 'Disinterring the Real: Dodie Bellamy's *The Letters of Mina Harker* and the Late-Capitalist Literature of Materiality'. *Textual Practice* 26.2 (2012): 263-91.
11. Crane, Hart. *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*. New York: Library of America, 2006.
12. Duncan, Joel. 'Ron Silliman's *Ketjak* beyond Programmatism'. *Textual Practice* (28 November 2016): 1-19. Available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1256909>. Accessed 11 June 2017.
13. Epstein, Andrew. "'There Is No Content Here, Only Dailiness": Poetry as Critique of Everyday Life in Ron Silliman's *Ketjak*'. *Contemporary Literature* 51.4 (Winter 2010): 736-76.
14. Forrest-Thomson, Veronica. 'New Novels and New Critics'. *Times Higher Education Supplement* (2 February 1973): 17.
15. Gardner, Calum. 'The Dwelling-Place: Roland Barthes and the Birth of Language Poetry'. *Barthes Studies* 2 (2016): 4-22.
16. Glück, Robert. 'Long Note on New Narrative'. In *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*. Edited by Mary Burger et al. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2004. 25-34.
17. Heath, Stephen. *Vertige du déplacement: Lecture de Barthes*. Paris: Fayard, 1974.
18. Logie, John. '1967: The Birth of "The Death of the Author"'. *College English* 75.5 (2013): 493-512.
19. Lydenberg, Robin. 'Cut-up: Negative Poetics in William Burroughs and Roland Barthes'. *Comparative Literature Studies* 15.4 (December 1978): 414-30.
20. Middleton, Peter. 'When L=A: Language, Friendship and Equality in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine'. *Among Friends: Engendering the Social Site of Poetry*. Edited by Anne Dewey and Libbie Rifkin. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013. 87-105.
21. Monroe, Jonathan. 'Syntextural Investigations'. *Diacritics* 26.3-4 (1996): 126-41.
22. Mullen, Harryette. *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
23. Picard, Raymond. *New Criticism or New Fraud?* Translated by Frank Towne. Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1969.
24. Pinto, Samantha. *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.
25. Ragg, Edward. *Wallace Stevens and the Poetry and Abstraction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
26. Robbins, Amy Moorman. 'Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* and Race in Language/Writing'. *Contemporary Literature* 51.2 (Summer 2010): 341-70.
27. Shaviro, Steven. Review of Dodie Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*. Available at <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/Dodie.html>. Accessed 9 June 2017.
28. Silliman, Ron. *The Age of Huts (Compleat)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
29. Silliman, Ron. *Tjanting*. Cambridge: Salt, 2002.

30. Spahr, Juliana. *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2001.
31. Stout, John C. 'Experimenting with Letters: Alphabetical Sequences in Contemporary Innovative Poetry. Bök, Silliman, Mullen, and Christensen'. *The Modern Language Review* 111.3 (July 2016): 613-32.
32. You, Mia. 'Good Fucks: A Review of Dodie Bellamy's *Cunt Norton*'. *Jacket 2* (18 March 2014). Available at <http://jacket2.org/reviews/good-fucks>. Accessed 11 July 2017.

***Scriptor-ul* în vacanță. „Moartea autorului” și poezia americană contemporană**

Rezumat

În general, influența textului lui Barthes „Moartea autorului” se presupune că a fost foarte mare: textul este citat, uneori pe scurt și alteori cu erori de interpretare, în aproape orice studiu de text literar, în numeroase studii argumentative teoretice sau practice, de la cele generale la cele concentrate pe un subiect mai particular, iar reputația și importanța acestui text au fost mai mari în lumea anglofonă. Acest articol punctează importanța textului „Moartea autorului” pentru poetica de avangardă și privește modalitatea prin care poeții de succes au avut rolul de „scriptori moderni” mai degrabă decât de autori, punctând de asemenea modul în care aceștia și-au acceptat acest statut. Se folosește o serie întreagă de exemple: Ron Silliman și practica lui în contextul mișcării numită 'Language poetry'; poeta-prozator Dodie Bellamy și mișcarea acesteia numită 'New Narrative', adesea considerată opusul lui 'Language poetry'; și Harryette Mullen, a cărei operă poetică din *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) și *Recyclopedia* (2006) pare a adopta descrierea lui Barthes a „unui imens dicționar [...] o țesătură de semne, o imitație fără sfârșit, amânată la infinit.” Sintetizând aceste abordări disparate, articolul oferă un punct de vedere asupra stării poeticii post-barthiene și pune problema dacă – și dacă da, în ce fel – poetul contemporan este încă un autor.