

Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune (eds.). *Authorship Contested. Cultural Challenges to the Authentic Autonomous Author.* New York, and London: Routledge, 2015. 214 pp. £100.

As Chris Anson writes in his opening blurb, this collection deals with “forgeries, exclusions, silences, deceptive online personas, and denied authorship.” In other words, the editors and contributors inauspiciously focus on extreme cases and situations (a rather tricky corpus) in order to show what *contested/silenced/discouraged/ignored authorship* is. However, authorship has always been contested. I think it’s wise to start by recalling Richard Shusterman’s demonstration concerning the contested status of literary criticism and (even) literature itself (borrowing W. B. Gallie’s arguments about the essentially contested nature of art): contested concepts deliver value judgements; they have an internally complex character; their constituent elements are variously describable; their definition is open-ended and vague; they can be used in many different ways for very different purposes; and they have an acknowledged, authoritative origin (Homer). Let’s also not forget that, until the 16th century, authorship had been severely displaced: collective, anonymous, transcendent, always pointing to the muses, to God or to the gods, authorship was basically understood as a non-human undertaking—the writer functioning as a mere instrument of someone else’s (divine) will. After reading the volume, one thus remains curious about how exactly the notion of contested authorship could be utilized in framing discussions around non-radical forms of authorship or, to put it more simply, how does contestation actually redefine the (general) topic of authorship?

Admittedly, the contributors were more interested in the reasons and conditions preventing a subject from becoming an author in the first place. This, it must be immediately stated, is a work in rhetoric and composition: it examines the circumstances (rhetorical situations) surrounding the efforts (what motivates a “prospective audience to resist”) preventing writers from becoming “real” authors. In the foreword, Rebecca Moore Howard writes that the volume strives to examine “the naturalized structures” of authorship. Put differently, we could easily say this is a work of “critical rhetoric(s),” importing and applying the principles and methods of critical theory to rhetorical and composition studies.

Which is great. Nonetheless, one of the big problems with this is—as Rebecca Moore Howard defines authorship studies as being all about “who is and is not positioned to claim the status of ‘author’; whose voice is and isn’t heard; and what circumstances enable or prevent the claim”—that, in order to identify and analyse those positioned to claim the status of author, one also needs to step into sociological terrain or, at least, to have a firm grasp of the basic elements of field theory (which is more or less absent). Authorship, in its turn, is restrictively defined as a quality that inheres “in the rhetorical situation itself.” The project began in 2007 when Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune co-authored an article

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(*Toward a New Content for Writing Courses: Literary Forgery, Plagiarism, and the Production of Belief*) about these sites of contested authorship. They convincingly argued that the value of a text consists not only in the way it is written but also in external factors, focusing on the process of legitimation.

It is also interesting to note that, while Jenny Edbauder's work is invoked as an actual symbol of contemporary (at least rhetorical) thought, alongside that of Barbara Biesecker, there is absolutely no mention of John McCaid's "Toward an Ecology of Hypermedia" (even though his work mainly addresses digital media, the observation still holds true). Notwithstanding, I agree with Rebecca Moore Howard's proclamation that gone is "the structuralist or even poststructuralist pulling-apart of separable pieces, separate 'elements.' Gone is the notion of explanatory mechanism of authorship that transcends cultural and rhetorical context." This volume ("populated by multiple and often unpredictable agents"—which reminded me that Bernard Lahire's theories could have proved themselves very fruitful here) offers perspectives on authorship "that answer a contemporary desire to honour and enter into the ecologies of authorship." However, the biggest irony of all is that almost all contributors lean back on Barthes and Foucault's works for theoretical guidance (although theirs is "just one demonstration of the extent to which poststructuralism is implicated in the modernism it putatively corrects and replaces," as Howard contends). The contemporary field of authorship does indeed begin with Barthes and Foucault. For half a century now scholars have been debating authorship, "what it is, who can claim it, how attribution works or is supposed to work, why it matters," as Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune averred.

This book, however, significantly builds upon the work of scholars who have spent the last several decades deconstructing the idea of the modern author (Martha Woodmansee, Peter Jaszi, Jack Stillinger, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford). Another line of interrogation is represented by the postmodern perspective on plagiarism and intellectual property (legal studies), as exemplified by Lise Buranen, Elton Fukumoto, Mark Rose, and Alice M. Roy's work (or, outside legal studies, by Andrew Bennett or Seán Burke). In a sense, this volume could have easily passed as Feminist or Marxist: "Of the extraneous reasons used to contest authorship, the most widely studied include class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. All of these conditions are difference markers, and as many authors affected by these differences have learned, difference breeds contestation." Technology is, in its turn, playing an important role in triggering an audience's refusal to accept one's authorship. David Clark's view on the matter is to be cited: "we are adding 'restraints and restrictions in the patterns of communication to try to prevent bad things from happening'," just as we are witnessing a "gradual drawing back from the optimistic position that anyone should be able to communicate with us at will." Textual and technical (or outright technological) innovations can likewise beget contestation. The editors point out how Carolyn Guertin's work examined new forms of digital authorship while simultaneously describing the "forms of resistance that these models evoke."

Consequently, contestation depends on what readers or the audience believe an author or a text should be. The book is conveniently divided into four parts, each of them dedicated to a certain type of contested authorship: *contrived authorship* (the manufacturing of artificial authorship—ethical contestation), *distributed authorship* (the constraints of authorship—nominal resistance), *excluded authorship* (the consequences of rejected authorship—axiological denial), and *nascent authorship* (the perks of elitist authorship—frivolity challenge). No wonder “instability” quickly became a keyword in (recent) authorship studies: “What remains true in all cases of contested authorship is that contestation derives in large part from a cultural discomfort with shifting conceptions of what it means to write and what it means to be an author.”

In all fairness, the first section could unquestionably be construed as a (not so radical) departure from Foucault’s definition of the author function. Apparently, scholarship in rhetoric and composition has shown that we cannot, in fact, imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without an author. We still care about who is speaking. Contrived authorship, as Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune argue, is deceptive (characterized by careful planning and scheming), thus making readers nervous simply because their intelligence (and integrity) is put to the test. Playing this identity game, authors expose “the values that undergird our attributions of authorship.” The contestation of these forms of contrived authorship is fuelled by our wish to distance ourselves from having to recognize that we have been fooled. The essays in the first part could have richly benefited by looking at the so-called “Persona Studies.”

In the first text (“A Gay Girl in Damascus. Multi-vocal Construction and Refutation of Authorial Ethos”), Julie Marie Smith adroitly argued that *the authorship function* can sometimes be fortuitously handled by what she calls a *rhetorical chorus*. The rhetorical chorus is a mediator. A mediator is someone or something placed between the author and the audience: in this case, journalists, bloggers, and social activists. They use their skills (rhetorical and technical) in order to distribute the message or, in other cases, to build the author’s persona (or ethos) by modifying the shape of the rhetorical sphere. However, “the chorus neither participates in the act of invention nor functions as co-authoring collaborators,” as Smith precociously notes. At least some references to Douglas Eyman’s *Digital Rhetoric* and others (like life-writing experts—Max Saunders, for instance) would have certainly helped.

Kyle Jensen (“Writing in the Dead Zone: Authorship in the Age of Intelligent Machines”) examines the relationship between human anxiety and automated authorship, showing that writing and humans are, in the editors’ words, not coextensive. Jensen writes that the “loss of the human author is not a loss at all” and describes the contemporary author “as a result of printing technologies that have gone digital.” Ron Fortune (“Writers Who Forge: Forgery as a Response to Contested Authorship”) describes how writers turn to forgery as a means of counter-resistance to that which they encounter in their quest of becoming authors. *The authorship function* belongs to the extant to which a writer’s

forgery can create a keen sense of historical awareness. In a sense, “forgeries became a means of realizing his own identity as a writer, and questioning their authenticity amounted to questioning his existence as a writer.”

The second part of the book delves into situations in which distributed authorship connects with diverse forms of contestation. It would seem that readers experience intense anxiety when facing texts with *no author function* whatsoever. Erin Frost and Kellie Sharp-Hoskins (“Authorial Ethos as Location: How Technical Manuals Embody Authorial Ethos without Authors”) scrutinize corporate authorship, a form of contested authorship where the subjectivity of individual authorship is replaced with the objectivity and neutrality of official or technical documents. In other words, the authorless text displaces the authorship function (from the body of the writer to the body of the neutral, objective text), while allegedly illuminating our understanding of the processes of legitimation (we still care that some unacknowledged experts are speaking to our benefit). The following article in this section (“The *Kairos* of Authorship in Activist Rhetoric”) investigates the distributed authorship and rhetorics of activist groups and communities (or, more generally, of collective movements). Seth Kahn and Kevin Mahoney show how refusing to name the authors of certain documents (manifestoes) reflects the members’ degree of involvement: “in activist settings authorship has significant tactical value—so much that its rejection can speak as loudly as its proclamation.” Rachel Parish (“In the Author’s Hands: Contesting Authorship and Ownership in Fan Fiction”) focuses on fan fiction as a site of contestation, while also examining the definition of authorship in the light of new ways of thinking about texts and audiences. An insightful proposition can be read in the following: “the contesting of authorship begins, as the ‘birth’ of fan fiction writers is equated to the ‘death’ of the ‘original’ authors.”

The third section investigates how minority groups have long been excluded from participating in a culture of ownership. As Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune note, “excluded authorship is perhaps the one with which most scholars in the humanities are familiar” (feminist studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, gay studies—the return of the marginal). James Zebroski (“Writing after Stonewall: The Lost Forms of Gay Authorship”) studies the history of gay writing and, specifically, how new forms of gay writing faced resistance both inside and outside the gay community: “My claim is that only by recognizing the deeply political nature of gay life and writing and evoking the experiments of the post-Stonewall counterculture of the 1970s can one begin to do justice to the writing called retroactively gay literature and the writing that is not canonical or even literary but no less a witness to the dead.” Paul Butler (“The Sound of Silence: Defense of Marriage, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and Post-Authorship Theory”) shows how smeared groups overcame exclusion. He argues that using the rhetoric of those who would exclude marginalized groups represents an inclusive and effective strategy (his demonstration resembles Edbauer’s analysis of the *Keep Austin Weird* episode): “The process of transforming a clash of ideas into a discourse shared by opposing groups is what I have

called post-authorship theory. The concept implies a blending of dominant publics and counter publics, of discourses and counterdiscourses, and, in the words of Roland Barthes, of ‘mix[ing] writings, to counter the ones with the others.’” In her article, Amy E. Robillard (“The Emotional Contests of Peer Review”) analyses two forms of contested authorship resulting from a rhetorical situation that has (these are here own words) a built-in expectation of rejection. The academic points out to the crucial role of the editor in ensuring the proper functioning of the norm of attribution, fighting against what she calls “the incivility with which we are familiar.”

The last section of the book dwells on Howard’s work, which “jumpstarted an enduring interest in the cultural work performed by the concept of plagiarism” (the concept of *patchwriting* being rather famous). Robillard and Fortune poignantly indicate that nascent authorship contests the understanding of authorship as a product of expertise and autonomy. Jonathan Lethem’s 2007 *Harper* essay, “The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism” represents the main reference piece in this last chunk of essays, demonstrating that authors have always borrowed from the work of others (a rewording of the famous metaphor of “dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants”). Val Perry Rendel (“I Feel Like This is Fake’: Spontaneous Mediocrity and Studied Genius”) shows the importance of external factors in constructing an author’s ethos, deconstructing the image of the author as a genius by studying genre theory and the process of writing (in what the French would call *genetic criticism*). Matt Hollrah’s article (“Student Intellectual Property in an Age of Permissions: Fostering a Gift Economy in First-Year Writing Programs”) mimics Walter Benjamin’s essay by shifting the ground from a market economy to a gift economy (Lewis Hyde is constantly appealed to). Finally, Joseph Harris’s essay argues that originality should be viewed as “the stance a writer takes toward sources and materials.” One can also find an interesting discussion about Kenneth Goldsmith and the limits of conceptual writing (authorship is fittingly defined as *creative reuse*).

All in all, the book’s greatest merit resides in that it questions current forms of authorship (with a few exceptions), moving away from historical forms of archaeological investigation (in the Foucauldian sense). However, while trying to surpass poststructuralist thought, the contributors frequently fall back to safe places like the death of the author (Barthes) or the role of the author-function (Foucault). Unfortunately, *contested authorship* is far from representing the face of contemporary authorial theory (or practice, for that matter). *The ecology of authorship* is much more of a great sounding phrase than anything else - although concepts such as *the rhetorical chorus* or *post-authorship* are definitely here to stay. Nonetheless, *Authorship Contested* does indeed represent an essential piece of scholarly work—a breakthrough of sorts—in today’s fields of rhetoric and composition.

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