

Beyond the Death of the Author: Textual Authority, Oral Traditions, and the Ethics of Reading

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Abstract

This paper re-examines Roland Barthes' seminal essay *The Death of the Author* (1967) by situating it within the historically specific conditions of Western, text-centric literary culture. While Barthes' argument is often celebrated for liberating the text from authorial intention, it emerges from a tradition shaped by Romantic individualism, print capitalism, and the institutionalisation of the author as a figure of authority. By placing Barthes in dialogue with oral and indigenous narrative traditions—where authorship is collective, fluid, or culturally embedded—this study argues that Barthes' thesis is not a universal theoretical rupture but a contextual methodological critique. The paper further contends that an uncritical application of Barthesian anti-authorialism risks erasing marginalised voices for whom authorship functions as political presence and cultural self-representation. Re-reading Barthes through these alternative narrative epistemologies enables a more ethically attentive model of interpretation, one that balances textual plurality with cultural accountability.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, authorship, oral literature, post-structuralism, indigenous narratives, reader response theory

Introduction

Roland Barthes' proclamation of the "death of the author" remains one of the most influential interventions in twentieth-century literary theory. Rejecting the assumption that a

text's meaning is anchored in the intentions, psychology, or biography of its author, Barthes dismantles a critical tradition that privileges origin over process and authority over plurality (Barthes, 1977). Meaning, in his formulation, is not transmitted by the author but produced through language and activated in reading.

Yet despite its enduring influence, Barthes' thesis is frequently universalised without adequate attention to the cultural and literary conditions from which it emerges. The author figure Barthes seeks to dethrone is a distinctly modern, Western construction shaped by Romanticism, liberal individualism, and the rise of print capitalism (Foucault, 1977). This paper argues that when read beyond this context, the "death of the author" requires qualification rather than wholesale adoption.

By situating Barthes alongside oral and indigenous narrative traditions—where stories circulate without fixed authorship and meaning is sustained through communal memory—this study reframes the "death of the author" as a historically situated methodological critique rather than an ontological truth. Such a reorientation not only deepens Barthes' relevance but also exposes the ethical risks of applying his theory to marginalised literary cultures.

The Author as Authority: A Historically Produced Figure

The modern concept of the author is inseparable from Western literary history. Romantic aesthetics elevated the writer to the status of creative genius, transforming literature into an expression of individual subjectivity. Subsequent biographical and intentionalist criticism reinforced this model by treating texts as decipherable extensions of the author's lived experience (Ong, 1982).

Barthes identifies this fixation as a critical constraint. By insisting on the author as the ultimate source of meaning, interpretation seeks closure and coherence, reducing the text to a

singular, authorised message. The author thus functions as what Barthes terms a “limit”—a stabilising figure that arrests the play of signification (Barthes, 1977).

Importantly, this critique presupposes a literary system in which authorship has already been naturalised as a position of power. Barthes’ intervention therefore responds to a specific epistemic formation rather than to narrative practices universally.

Language, Structure, and the Displacement of Origin

Barthes’ declaration of the author’s “death” is grounded in a structuralist understanding of language. Drawing on Saussure, he argues that meaning arises from differential relations within language rather than from the intentions of individual speakers (Saussure, 2011). The subject does not precede language; it is produced by it.

Within this framework, the author becomes a “scriptor”—a function rather than a source—who assembles pre-existing discourses rather than originating meaning. The text becomes a “tissue of quotations,” woven from cultural, linguistic, and ideological threads that exceed individual control (Barthes, 1977).

This reconceptualization transforms reading into an active practice. Meaning is not uncovered but produced, not inherited but negotiated. The reader, rather than the author, becomes the site where language is actualized.

Oral Traditions and the Author Who Never Lived

When read against oral and indigenous narrative traditions, Barthes’ thesis reveals its historical specificity. In many such traditions, storytelling is communal rather than individual, iterative rather than fixed, and performative rather than textual. Narratives evolve through retelling, and authority resides not in an identifiable author but in cultural memory, ritual context, and collective validation (Finnegan, 2012).

Contemporary indigenous and community-based journals increasingly document such traditions, offering archival visibility to narratives that historically circulated orally. These platforms demonstrate that authorship in many cultures is embedded in collective identity rather than individual ownership.

In these contexts, the “death of the author” does not mark a rupture because the author, as Barthes understands it, was never central to begin with. Meaning has always been dispersed across tellers, listeners, and situations. The act of narration itself foregrounds plurality, contradiction, and transformation.

This observation complicates the celebratory tone with which Barthes is often invoked. Rather than announcing a universal liberation of meaning, Barthes articulates a critique aimed at dismantling a particular literary hierarchy—one absent in many non-Western traditions.

The Ethical Limits of Authorial Erasure

While Barthes’ displacement of authorial authority has emancipatory potential, its uncritical application raises ethical concerns. For writers from historically marginalised communities, authorship often functions as a site of resistance, visibility, and self-representation. To declare the author “dead” in such contexts risks reinscribing silencing under the guise of theoretical sophistication (Spivak, 1988).

Recent linguistic studies also demonstrate that shifts in academic discourse—such as evolving politeness strategies, rhetorical positioning, and authorial stance—reflect broader cultural negotiations of authority and identity (Rathore, 2025). Visual and cinematic narratives further demonstrate how meaning emerges through interpretive frameworks shaped by cultural, ecological, and technological contexts rather than solely by authorial intention (Shams, 2022). Such research underscores that authorship is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived, evolving practice shaped by socio-cultural pressures.

Postcolonial and feminist critics have therefore questioned whether Barthesian anti-authorialism inadvertently aligns with structures that have long denied marginalised subjects narrative agency. Here, the author is not a tyrant of meaning but a necessary counter-presence against erasure (hooks, 1989).

This tension suggests that the question is not whether the author should live or die, but when, where, and for whom authorship matters.

Conclusion

“The death of the author” remains a transformative intervention not because it abolishes authorship, but because it compels a reconsideration of how meaning is produced, circulated, and controlled. When understood as a historically situated critique rather than a universal principle, Barthes’ argument becomes more—not less—relevant. Reading Barthes alongside oral and indigenous narrative traditions reveals that the centrality of the author is neither natural nor universal, but culturally constructed and unevenly distributed.

At the same time, the political stakes of authorship cannot be ignored. For marginalised communities, authorship is often a means of asserting presence against historical erasure. Any theory that dismisses the author must therefore be attentive to the contexts in which authorship functions as cultural survival rather than interpretive tyranny.

A more ethically responsive model of interpretation must hold these tensions together. It must recognise plurality without collapsing cultural specificity, and decentralise authority without silencing those who have only recently gained access to it. The author may no longer reign as the sovereign of meaning, but neither can authorship be uniformly dismissed. Interpretation must instead operate within a dynamic field where text, reader, culture, and history remain in productive, accountable tension.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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