

# Aphasic Poetry: Making sense of it with Katharina Fuerholzer

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It seems appropriate that Dr. Katharina Fuerholzer would recommend the soundtrack to the hit series *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World*, considering the state of the world, but more too, her work on aphasic poetry in Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. The songs are fitting—romantic and unnerving—in the way that Mullen's dictionary—“In the dark night's insomnia, the book is a stimulating sedative, awakening my tired imagination to the hypnagogic trance of language”—is. Listen to the [soundtrack](#) while you read the following interview (and, let it spill into your other work), where I talk to Katharina about aphasic poetry, interdisciplinarity, and the *femme aphasique*. Here, we consider aphasia's varied metaphoric, medicinal, and literary meanings.

**Happy to talk, Katharina! Thanks for participating in our SPOKENBLOG Research Symposium Profile.**

Thank you for having me, Emma!

**I mostly want to ask about your current, exciting research. In the proposal for your planned paper for the conference, you suggest a 'striking' resemblance between Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002) and the clinical symptoms of Wernicke's aphasia. Quite evocatively, you coin the term 'aphasic poetry' to describe the imitation of these symptoms in her writing. Could you speak more about 'aphasic poetry'? How did you arrive at this concept?**

I would say that in distinction to literature written by patients suffering from aphasia – an acquired language disorder that can impair all language modalities and linguistic levels (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) – I use the term 'aphasic' poetry in a metaphorical sense to refer to a spectrum of poetic texts concerned with the loss and limits of language and reacting to it in an, as I would call it, aphasic-like disruption of prevalent patterns of saying and seeing the world. As I would argue, 'aphasic' poetry can this way make us not only aware of the curtailing restrictions defining the human language but also, and this is what I am most interested in, of the creative potentials within the poetic destructions of the familiar. In Harryette Mullen's outstanding poetic collection *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, one can see, f. ex., how a Wernickean-like language or technique results in an interruption and destruction of common notions of norms and abnorms, of sense and nonsense, and, not least, of the (often unnoted) segregation of a marginalized 'other' in quotidian, poetic, and academic language and culture.

**I'm interested in how your background and research in the philosophy and ethics of medicine informs your study, specifically in the context of this project, which intersects clinical research with literary studies. What are the methods—the thinking, really—involved in this type of inquiry and rich sort of interdisciplinary questioning?**

As a literary scholar who has also worked in the History, Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine, I was lucky enough to approximate my research field, the Medical Humanities, from quite different angles. What I learned to appreciate most in this regard is that interdisciplinary fields such as the Medical Humanities are inevitably accompanied by a confrontation of different, at times

contradicting, maybe even allegedly abhorrent ways of saying and seeing – which can, ideally, foster the (empathic) acceptance of other perspectives, this way leading to an enriched stance on the equally heterogeneous challenges and unique experiences of both being ill and caring for the ill.

The relationship between medicine and the humanities can be fruitful for both sides. Literary theory's praise for the subjective and individual may, e. g., serve as a reminder of the uniqueness defining each approach towards illness and health – be it with regard to that of a patient, physician, relative, writer, society, culture ... Next to that, literary theory's knowledge about the complexities of human communication is also of worth for those working in the medical field. Conversely, an art-based field such as literary theory can profit a lot from medicine's pronounced awareness for the ethical dimensions of human life and death – dimensions also central when dealing with literary representations of these core topics of the human condition.

**I wonder then, what are the possibilities invoked in the conceptual mixing of the language of medicine and of literary criticism? For example, you suggest heteroglossia, a literary concept, in the use of aphasia as poetic technique. How does this work in Mullen's poems?**

As Mullen once pointed out, "poetry is full of rules, since poetry has its own specific guidelines, plus all the conventions of literature and rhetoric, and all the linguistic rules that apply. By breaking those rules selectively and systematically we create alternate meanings in poetry" (Henning and Mullen). In Mullen's work, this breaking of rules can be construed as a poetic pointer to the artificiality of familiar language conventions and their effects on categories such as 'race.' This can, f. ex., impressively be observed in her poem Denigration: In an almost Wernickean logorrhea, a broad spectrum of terms from the stems 'nig-' and 'neg-' usually unrelated in everyday language, are joined together in a common text. The resulting de- and re-contextualization of semantically diversely charged terms such as "niggling," "nigrescence," "niggardly," "negligible," "negate," "negotiate," "renegades," or "reneege" unmistakably demonstrates the chasm between the initially neutral etymological roots and their current, highly valued connotations that emerged over time.

At first glance, Mullen's accumulation of reputedly unrelated, often also obscure terms seems like the poetic epitome of an incomprehensible, nonsensical language disorder such as Wernicke's aphasia. However, when taking a closer look, her poetry turns out to be a highly elaborate, thoroughly meaningful, heterogeneous mixture of different, e.g., African and Afro-American languages. Thus, the poems' aphasic-like disturbances and destructions not least lead to an integration of primarily oral languages into the written discourse of standard English. In overcoming "aesthetic apartheid" (Mullen 12), her poetic mastery of disordered language makes us aware of the exclusive nature of apparently self-evident linguistic and social norms. Interestingly enough, Mullen's poetry is itself not exempt from the risk of exclusion: While its hybrid aesthetics include different – all too often marginalized – languages and cultures, the poems' highly elaborate, eclectic technique can make them also incomprehensible and inaccessible to readers. In this context, Mullen's 'aphasic' writing ultimately shows the unpreventable simultaneity of these processes: Inclusion is exclusion, a 'we' not possible without a delimiting 'other.'

**This is such a convincing reading of Mullen's poetic disruptions. Are there other literary or sonic examples of aphasia in art making that you have identified and might use for comparative purposes?**

In abundance! When delving deeper into the history of literature, one can find an astonishing array of poetic examples resembling the aphasic disordering of language that put prevailing ways of speaking and hearing into question. While I compare Mullen's poetry to fluent forms of aphasia (such as Wernicke's aphasia), which are, e.g., characterized by an almost logorrheic torrent of syntactically or semantically 'faulty' terms (paraphasias) and almost nonsensical neologisms, I am also looking at poetry reminiscent of non-fluent forms of aphasia (such as Broca's aphasia) that, in contrast, are coined by an overall difficulty in finding words (anomia), a heavily shortened style of speech that is often reduced to only one to two-word sentences, also consisting of phonetically or semantically 'incorrect' words

Emily Dickinson is an interesting writer in this regard: in her poetry, both aesthetical and sociocultural norms – e.g., with respect to categories such as 'sex' and 'gender' – are, as I would argue, subverted by an aphasic-like demolition of linguistic and poetic conventions. The poems are bursting with enigmatically charged figures and tropes, sentences are constantly broken off and asunder, verses end in an obscure naught of ellipses and dashes, all of which causes an ambiguous abeyance between language and silence. Quite different and nevertheless so similar to Mullen, the supposed deficit – i.e., the aphasic-like shattering of norms – is turned into a means of power: The lyrical speaker commences, only to immediately break off again, making aware

in what way sociocultural power structures (e.g., between the sexes) may lead to a loss of voice and language – an exclusion from communication and, consequently, community, by the way, not unknown to those suffering from aphasia. However, at the very same time, the poems' broken language also eludes the reader and hides the speaker's voice and perspective from the outside world. As Dickinson once said: "True Poems flee" (1879) – and by doing so, they protect the lyrical speaker from interpretations claiming a truth that, in the end, cannot be known by anyone other but the self. Along these lines, Dickinson presents herself as a *femme aphasique*, as I would call this conjunction of 'aphasic' poetry and women writers, which – in contrast to archetypes such as the *femme fatale* or *fragile* mostly constructed by a male-dominated discourse – can be understood as a form of female empowerment.

**I love that, the empowered *femme aphasique*. Such a striking formulation to invoke the creative potential of the language and naming of aphasic poetry— and which considers the ethical stakes of listening, I think, so central to your work. How do you see an ethics of listening at play in aphasic poetry? What do you hear?**

A very intriguing question, Emma! Aphasic communication requires time and effort and is both challenging for the speaker and for the listener. The aphasic struggle for words is, in a way, intertwined with the struggle for autonomy. Even though the risk that one is spoken for instead of being given the time and room to speak for oneself is particularly pronounced in communications with interlocutors unacquainted with aphasia, this can also happen in 'professional' interactions, e.g., between patients and physicians. I would not go so far as to say that I am sure, but I still very much hope that a poetic mastery of an aphasic-like breaking off and out of familiar norms of saying and seeing the world may call attention to the struggles that can be faced when confronted with the limits of language— which is not least a question of empathy. At the same time, 'aphasic' poetry might also show that an apparently 'deficient' way of expressing oneself can nevertheless be filled with meaning, thinking, saying, seeing. What I hope for is that 'aphasic' poetry may teach us to listen anew and to comprehend the inherent ethical value that comes with truly listening. After all, accepting the role of the listener is essential for a person struggling with the limits of language to engage in words and worlds, and can make the difference between being spoken for and speaking for oneself

**Concerning listening more generally, what are you listening to these days?**

Does music count?

**Always!**

I have to admit to being a lover of 1960s' music and am currently hooked to the mind-blowing soundtrack of the equally mind-blowing first season of *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World*. Regarding my research, I am presently listening to audio clips of Gert Westphal's recitations of Rainer Maria Rilke's Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies) to broaden my own – paper-based – reading by another medium, voice, and perspective.

**Thanks for this intelligent teaser, Katharina. I'm eager to hear more about this at our Symposium!**

Thank you for this wonderful talk! I'm looking forward to the Symposium!

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**Dr. Katharina Fuerholzer** is a postdoctoral visiting scholar in the Program of Comparative Literature & Literary Theory at the University of Pennsylvania. As a translator and literary scholar who has also worked in the field of the History, Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine, she is particularly interested in exploring the intersections between literature and medicine. She is currently working on her second book which is focused on aphasic poetry and has been supported by a fellowship from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation.

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### **Emma Telaro**

Emma Telaro is an MA student in English at Concordia University, and a research assistant for SpokenWeb. She is interested in the creative and interdisciplinary potentials of literature, sound studies and the humanities more broadly. At the moment, her research centres on Diane Di Prima's experimental beat poetics and politics. She is an assistant editor for SPOKENWEBLOG.

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