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Assembling the Pieces of Personhood in Anne Carson’s *Nox*

Anne Carson is an author not widely acknowledged for her prose, but has more frequently been cited for her poetry, including *Autobiography of Red*, and for her scholarly works such as the translation of *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. While *Nox* is certainly not her first published work, it may be one of her most fascinating. I seek to contextualize here how this life writing text functions as a collection of artifacts meant to embody her deceased brother, and how her unique formatting allows readers of *Nox* to explore their grief.

*Nox* is a replica of a scrapbook that contained mementos Carson had of her brother after their childhood and his move to Europe. Her publication serves as an epitaph, meant to hold the memories and (literal) pieces her brother has given her of his life in his absence. There are postage stamps, recreated conversations, and fragmented letters scanned onto the pages, often serving as his “presence” in the text throughout this absent period. The artifacts found throughout the original scrapbook can be seen in the reproduced work; however, these images from the original are not the actual pieces. The images of the images appear to be the authentic, as they possess the same colors and have the same shadows on the blank page as an actual photograph would if laid on paper. Further markings lead the reader to believe that items are glued or stapled to pages. To make the text appear as genuine as possible, Robert Currie, Carson’s partner, had the idea of “scanning it [*Nox*] and then Xeroxing the scans” while lifting the lid of the copy machine “so a little light gets in, so it has three-dimensionality” (Teicher). By
doing so, the original artifacts from the scrapbook are able to maintain a sense of authenticity while being representations of the artifact as it exists in the original scrapbook.

*Nox* has limited places where the text is not marked, such as the opening pages with the publishing company, copyright statement, and ISBN code. Rather than creating a remix of how it would have looked if written on a word processor with digital images, Carson incorporates the marked pages of text throughout her work to make it a “genuine reproduction” of the original manuscript. Even lexical entries, which we see with translations of Catullus 101, are unmarked texts on marked pages. Section 2.1, for example, is a marked page because of the inclusion of not only the separate pieces of paper with text on them situated on the page, but also the impressions of the words “WHO WERE YOU” shaded over in pencil. These impressions continue on for several pages, giving each subsequent fold their own set of markings. This text, as a whole, functions as an epitaph due to what these artifacts signify.

An epitaph, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is the engraving on a tomb; in this case, it could be “a brief composition characterizing a deceased person.” Carson’s composition fulfills this expectation by characterizing Michael based on the information she has at her disposal. He is embodied through the text and its images rather than words etched onto a headstone. Because his body is no longer with us—Michael’s widow dispersed the ashes into the sea (Carson 5.5)—he has no physical being left other than the presence Carson creates of him through these artifacts. The text embodies what Michael is to Carson—a fragmented, faded collection of memories and conversations that no longer have a grounded backing in her mind. She writes his life through these artifacts and their constructed meanings through their material properties, which is aided by the construction of her text.
*Nox* is not bound like a conventional text, meaning many attributes a regular text possesses are absent. It is bound in an accordion style rather than as a codex, clearly breaking with the idea of functionality as a “normal” book. *Nox* is seemingly incomplete—it is one long page, stored within a separate vessel, and it contains images/lexical entries that appear to have been taped, stapled, or glued to the base page. We are unable to see what has been omitted in this version, suggesting there may be more in the original not being shown. The storage of the text also implies an incompleteness; instead of being able to take the text and open it between bound faces, *Nox* demands that the reader literally unpack it. One must open the box, remove the text and place it on a flat surface, and finally open the first “page,” which demands particular attentiveness to this need. This inherently draws attention to the fact that this text requires additional care, giving the reader the expectation that examining this piece will be different from picking up a standard text.

Carson also chooses to manipulate how she situates her text by using printing to her advantage. Her publication eliminates the need for chapters and page numbers; instead, the book is methodically arranged with images and text blocks that Carson had in her original scrapbook. Each “page” is depicted similarly to how it appears in the original, but merely by the fact of replication it has differences. The copy cannot capture everything in the original, but it gives Carson creative control to change how we are to see and read this alternate version. Section 2.2, which starts with the phrase, “My brother ran away in 1978,” is repeated four consecutive times. Because each printing follows the other, the difference—and cause for the repetition—is the placement of the folded note at the top of the page. The note is first depicted with incomplete phrases showing, including “who take advantage of” and “[s]ix days later she was.” As the pages continue to unfold, the note is flipped to three other perspectives, presumably so the reader can
see all sides of the note because they are unable to pick it up. The reader must rely on Carson’s printing for this, not only giving Carson all authorial control over what is visible, but also ensuring that the reader will never see the note as intimately as she does. By doing so, some of the secrets of her brother’s life remain shrouded.

Carson didn’t intend for her scrapbook to be published—she kept the manuscript mostly private, showing only a handful of people, before she concluded that it was possible to publish while having “a fiction of privacy maintained” (Teicher). By allowing the public to access the manuscript, that semblance of privacy can no longer be preserved. Publication invites the reader to begin interpreting the life laid out before them, which is something many life narrators welcome. Wolfgang Iser, a popular literary theorist and critic, states that after publishing a text, the document becomes free from the author’s control. Leitch et al. summarize Iser’s work: “Reading is not passive but a process of discovery; a reader questions, negates, and revises the expectations that the text establishes, filling in what Iser calls “blanks” or “gaps” in the text and continually modifying his or her interpretation” (1451). There is an ongoing relationship between text and reader where the coalescence of reader and manuscript allows for more complex understanding of the author’s emotions—in this case, grief. More perspectives allow for a myriad of interpretations of the grief felt by Carson, and by extension, the grief those readers have experienced in their lives. As such, a text that is open to the public is no longer under the author’s “control,” making that “privacy” invalid. The idea of questioning, negating, and revising a text is also something a reader can do with Nox because of the inclusion of another language and its fragmented translations.

In Nox, Carson gives a Latin definition and context for the words of Catullus 101 throughout the piece. She engages with the full Latin poem by dissecting each of the poem’s
words and contextualizing it through Michael’s life. These Latin words, as she indicates through her translations, have a variety of interpretations. While she could have chosen to translate the words literally (or in the context that fits her needs best), the fact of her diverse translations suggests that she sees the poem, and Michael by extension, as multi-faceted. By using the context of Catullus 101 to her advantage (as it focuses on a brother’s death and his subsequent burial), she is able to reframe the poem to mirror what she wants to say about her brother and explore the sadness she feels for his loss—in doing so, she translates his life through his artifacts and Catullus 101.

By laying out her grief in this text, Carson invites her readers to do the same as they create their own translations of Catullus 101. *Nox* seeks to sort out Carson’s grief over Michael’s passing, and as such, reflects on his life and works as an epitaph meant to characterize his life through use of these artifacts. The imagery and markings used denote a book where “life has taken place,” effectively embodying her brother in the narrative. Because the text requires intense reader interaction, the reader must construct a “final version” of *Nox* on their own and interpellate the images and translations in terms of what they signify for them. In turn, Carson is able to translate her grief, and the reader gains a deeper understanding of that mourning.
Works Cited


