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Artifact, Assemblage, and the Composite Work

What constitutes due diligence in today's scholarship? As scholars, we inhabit a culture of many 'isms'—New Formalism, New Materialism, New Historicism, etc—but we are often divided by these 'isms.' Adherents to a particular methodology tend to vote along party lines, that is, we tend to reinforce the methodologies we adhere to by establishing standards of success based on the methods of our inquiry, justifying that methodology through the very outcomes of our analysis. As a result, we tend to be less aware of, or at least less forthcoming, about method, bracketing off other disciplines and methodologies in the process as not useful or relevant to our own inquiry. The continuous disjunction between "theory" and bibliography in institutions of higher education is a testament to our strong party allegiances. To my mind, this not only isolates us as scholars along lines of method, discouraging collaboration. It also risks reinforcing sclerotic distinctions between methods, making us vulnerable to overlooking innovations and insights available to us from other methodologies, and ultimately foreclosing our relevance to other fields within the wider range of disciplines in the academy and beyond. Thus, this essay is, fundamentally, an experiment. I see it as an attempt to synthesize several methods without eliding their differences—an attempt at crosshatching several methods, which mutually reinforce and challenge each other, to inquire into three, often distinct, strata: the material, the theoretical, and the formal of a single work. If this experiment is successful, it will have done so by being inter-methodological. I draw together numerous methodologies in order to begin to outline a new genre, one that is yet to be articulated fully as a genre in its own right by scholars, but one that is of long-standing significance to our study of literature, one that I call the composite.

Before getting underway, I should say that there has been no one point of entry for me into this project, but instead a constellation of ideas and experiences between which I attempt to draw lines of connection. In this respect, my own eclectic scholarly background mirrors, and has informed, the methods I suggest and the texts I explore in this essay. Significant influences include a passion for novels that stress and beleaguer the one-volume book format, whether by being too big, too small, or too chaotic; an appreciation of the novelty and thrill of the experimental mode; numerous theory courses taken over the course of my years as a PhD student in English at the University of Virginia; an embarrassing (for me) encounter with materiality, in which I wrote a seminar paper on the significance of a preposition in *As I Lay Dying* only to find that this preposition does not exist in the manuscript at all;¹ and the 2016 Rare Book School course, *Printed Books since 1800: Description and Analysis*, taught by Peter Shillingsburg, who stressed the value of providing a narrative of the *trajectory* of work in order to give the reader a fair topography of the possible options in a work's trajectory of development. It is the goal of this essay to draw these various influences into intersection and to suggest that in order to do our 'due diligence' as scholars we need to, at the very least, *consider* all possible methodological options; synthesize these options while paying attention to their disjunctions; and foreground these chosen methods for our readers.

The through line of this project is the idea of the "composite" and the action of composition. I define the composite as a work composed constitutionally from the assembly and

¹ The sentence in question is as follows in the 1st edition of *As I Lay Dying*: "That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say *at*" (171, emphasis mine). 'At' does not appear in Faulkner's 1929 manuscript. Only three documents exist that are relevant to the editing of *As I Lay Dying*, two of which are currently in UVA's special collections: the holograph manuscript and the carbon typescript. The ribbon typesetting copy is currently housed at the University of Texas. 'At' appears in the carbon typescript, which Faulkner signed in January of 1930.

interplay of multiple genres and media, which mediates a reader's experience of the work through its experimentation with composition, generically and materially. As an approach to genre, instead of *dividing* poetry from fiction, for example, I am interested in analyzing contemporary works that experiment by being both in order to ask the central questions: How do contemporary writers innovate formally and speak aesthetically in order to re-imagine literature and its engagement with the world? What can contemporary art tell us about ourselves and the world in which we live? To begin to answer these questions, I argue that we must look at works theoretically, formally, *and* materially. The composite work, specifically, draws our attention back to the reality that any object is a collaborative venture, materially composed, and socially situated, by foregrounding formally the process of composition.

Jerome McGann has argued in *The Textual Condition* that poetry, specifically, takes textual activity as its main subject: "Poetical texts operate to display their own practices, to put them forward as the subject of attention" (10-11). I see composite works applying that same logic, the self-conscious representation of their form and composition through narrative play and formal features displaying the heterogeneity of their assembly. Thus, *composition* becomes an experimental technique in its own right, related to earlier 20th-century experiments in collage, multimedia, illustration, and typography, and later 20th-century experiments with metafiction and pastiche. If metafiction can be defined as a technique in which an author self-consciously draws attention to the text's status as a work of imagination, rather than reality, then composite works deploy this logic materially: they intentionally visibly represent their material features of composition. They are "artifactual."

To illuminate these ideas, I focus in this essay on Anne Carson's 2010 elegy, *Nox*, and draw our attention to three of its main formal features.² First is Carson's choice of materials, which she renders visibly as part of her project. *Nox* is a self-aware reflection on materiality; textured brushstrokes, shadows at the seams of the unbound book from Carson's copy machine, and hand-crafted assemblage vivify it. In this way, it is not just a linguistic feat. It is self-consciously material. Second, *Nox* is composite. Carson assembles her materials, both textual and visual, into the multi-media elegy. Finally, the result of Carson's choice of raw materials and her composition involves the reader in the aesthetic sensibility of *Nox*, which comes through in the fragmented framing of materials and the sparse telling of Michael's life. It is experiential. In this way, the contemporary literary assemblage, or composite work, which meditates on its form as a material object and experiments with the process of composition as a formal technique, is attuned to the strengths and limitations of the form and concept of the book as a technology, and is thus the result of the advent of digital media, both as a competitor and collaborator with print media, but also of a contemporary moment distinguished by theories of hybridity, networks, and assemblage and a return to our embeddedness in the material realities of book making, publishing, and composition.

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Anne Carson's elegy to her brother, Michael, comes in a box. It is plain and grey, with a strip of color and the flash of a ripped photo. An adolescent boy in swim trunks, goggles, and flippers looks out from the cover. Inside its encasement, bound accordion-like, *Nox* opens with the following warning: "1.0. I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes

² I first encountered Carson's *Nox* in a 2016 Rare Book School workshop, which was part of the English department's annual GESA Conference.

us stingy.” 1.0 is Carson’s entry point into her inquiry of mourning—of reconstructing a life through memory—and *Nox*’s aesthetic manifesto: ‘stingy.’ What does it mean to be ‘stingy,’ or reticent or sparing, in the context of grief? 1.0 continues: “There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he’s dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot alter it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I begin to think about history.” History, as Carson unwinds it almost forensically, appears as an exchange in *Nox* between the elements of the multi-media elegy. *Nox* is composed of photos; abstract renderings of color; fragments of Michael’s postcards to his family; and Carson’s unfurling of Catullus’ poem 101, written in memoriam of his own brother, which includes dictionary entries for Latin words and her own translation of the poem. The accretion of these materials, which Carson assembled herself in 2000, forms her elegy. In this way, *Nox* is tangible—the text is a facsimile of Carson’s original designs—and deeply composite.

But Carson is stingy with her unfolding of the story of Michael’s death and her rendering of the narrative, sparing. Transcriptions of her brother’s phone calls are truncated. Letters are ripped into fragments and presented piecemeal or covered over by what might be black charcoal and made half legible.³ The boy on the cover, whom we can presume to be Michael, looks askance at us from under the cover of his opaque goggles.⁴ ‘Stingy.’ Furthermore, Carson’s modes for weaving composition into *Nox* (I would highlight translation and collage foremost among these processes) act as both the process of making and as a metaphor for the process of grieving, specific to her relationship to her brother. “History and elegy are akin,” she writes. Therefore, the poet, as akin to the historian, is directly implicated in this process of making:

³ See Figures 1-2.

⁴ See Figure 3.

One who asks about things – about their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell – is an historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or *fashion* it into a thing that carries itself. (1.1, emphasis mine)

Nox displays this position of retrospection at an event or a person having been succeeded temporally, through its aesthetic sensibility: Carson subtly adjusts the Oxford Latin Dictionary entries for each word of Catullus' poem 101; she tears and fragments images and letters; she delays an English translation of 101 until near to the end of the elegy. The result is a work that could be read through quickly with ease—the margins of each page are wide in proportion to the amount of text per page—but *Nox*'s import would surely be lost if one were to read through quickly and without care. Carson's artistry is subtle, 'stingy,' both in the arrangement of her words and with the layout of each page. In that sense, we can take Carson in the section quoted above literally. *Nox* is very clearly made.

One explanation for *Nox*'s material emphasis is the fact that Carson actually did construct the book ten years prior to its publication by Directions in 2010. In an interview with Brick literary journal, interviewer, Wachtel, asks Carson about her rationale for presenting *Nox* as an "artefact":

Carson: Because I made the book myself at first. I bought an empty book and filled it with stuff, painted it, glued it, stapled it and so on... [Robert] Currie, my husband, said that the thing about this book is, because it's handmade, when you read it, you're pulled into these people and these thoughts and the thing that it is. If you want to reproduce it, it has to have that quality still. (Brick Literary Journal 89)

Given the care taken to present the crafted nature of the elegy, *Nox* is not only clearly handmade; it also gives the impression that, by being handmade, it is one of a kind, which spoke to Carson and Currie of the personal nature of the elegy. But *Nox* may not have seen the light of day as a public artefact were it not for a snafu related to one-of-a-kind objects: an unnamed German publisher lost Carson's original for almost three years. Carson recounts its rediscovery: "Then one day it showed up in a FedEx package. So I thought, Time to make this permanent" (Brick Literary Journal 89). In this case, permanent refers not to the material nature of *Nox*, but to its reproducibility.

I quote from Carson's interview with Brick Literary Journal at length because it is easy to conflate the formal arrangements of *Nox* and Carson's composition process since the two, in this case, *are* so closely aligned. But it is *because* they are so closely aligned that it is especially imperative to distinguish between the two. On the one hand, because Carson has discussed her composition process, we have access to authorial intent:

Wachtel: And the original process for you of making the book, what was that like? I mean, was it a way of working through grief? How did it engage you?

Carson: It was not so much grief . . . I mean, yes, grief partly, but more the puzzle of understanding him. Because actually, just before he died, he had telephoned me for the first time since 1978.

On the other hand, even without having access to Carson's interviews, we can examine a text that points us back formally through visible markers to its materiality, to its 'made-ness,' to Carson's act of composition. The elegy as a genre is self-reflexive, and so is *Nox*'s material construction.

Carson links history and elegy, which she then links to the material process of making a thing, “a thing which carries itself,” another way of describing an epitaph. But *Nox* is, as I hope to have articulated thus far, a very particular kind of made thing, in that the mode of its composition becomes part and parcel with its aesthetic sensibility and its affective appeal:

Carson: They call Herodotus the first historian when what he invented was a picture of history as all these chips of data that don't make sense. He collects them and hands them over.

Wachtel: And this reflected on what you felt you were doing [in *Nox*].

Carson: Yes, that sort of *assembling* without any final control of the sense. [emphasis mine] (Brick Literary Journal 89)

Carson's identification with Herodotus' methods for writing history are striking for numerous reasons. First, she relinquishes sole control over interpretation of the text, leaving a space for readers to collect and assemble in their own ways. Second, the analogy cements the relationship between the poet who composes and elegy and the historian who collects 'chips of data,' recalling *Nox*'s opening, 1.0: “No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I begin to think about history.” Thinking about history, in that sense, is also thinking about making, or the act of composition. Finally, the kind of composition Carson evokes, what she calls “assembling,” become crucial for this essay as a compositional mode, theoretical model, and specific artistic movement in the mid-20th century in the fine and plastic arts.⁵

Often used as a synonym for 'composite,' the assemblage and its multiple valances of meaning take on specific meaning for Carson's project. 'Assembly' is a constructive action (as

⁵ I seek in my larger dissertation project to address this topic more fully than is possible here.

opposed to a deconstructive stripping away from a whole, as a sculptor would subtract stone until she reached the desired form within), and in that sense, another form of making. In fine art, ‘assemblage’ was originally defined in 1961 by Museum of Modern Art, New York curator William Chapin Seitz as “a work of art made by fastening together cut or torn pieces of paper, clippings from newspapers, photographs, bits of cloth, fragments of wood, metal, or other such materials” etc (*The Art of Assemblage*, front jacket notes).⁶ Finally, assemblage is an ontological framework taken up by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to explain social complexities using a model that stresses heterogeneity, multiplicity, and meaning constructed through relation. Thus, the assemblage serves as a model by which we can theorize how *Nox*’s many parts act in a system of fragments gaining meaning through their “confrontation” and an artistic mode through which we can locate it historically in the 20th century.

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In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari pursue a positive expression of metaphysics through continuity, that is, a metaphysics that does away with the long tradition of separating the two properties of a thing—stability and flux—into discrete, *discontinuous* entities. Their theory of assemblage addresses the paradox of a thing in a radically different way: they replace the discontinuity of a thing with continuity. In other words, an assemblage possesses tendencies toward both stasis and change as abstract poles on a single continuum, whose orientations are always subject to change. Like Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage, the composite work is made up of contingent relationships between its myriad heterogeneous elements. *Nox*, as discussed, incorporates visual *art* (from abstract renderings of paint to black

⁶ Seitz also suggests that it is poet Stephane Mallarmé that first “suggested the confrontation of fragments as a literary method,” which tradition we can see *Nox* taking part in (13).

and white photographs) *and* print media (from dictionary entries to Carson's inquiring poetry). Carson has said the effect of the fragmented whole, or from another perspective, the *composite assemblage*, allowed her to puzzle with the enigma that she always saw in her brother and his estranged life (Brick Literary Journal 89). Carson's (and, by extension the reader's) vantage point shifts given the orientation of the various pieces.

Deleuze and Guattari's attempt to shift from a history of discontinuity to continuity, wherein parts are not ontologically different in kind, only in degree, can also affect how we read genre: instead of taxonomy and endless ontological categorization, any given assemblage has a different ratio of stasis and flux, which can change based on the orientation of the assemblage (Adkins 13-14). Derrida grapples with similar theoretical problems his 2011 essay, "The Law of Genre," in which he attempts to reinvigorate genre theory by focusing on how genre must be "open." "I shall attempt to formulate... what I shall call the law of the law of genre. It is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, an economy of the *parasite*" (221). Genres, Derrida argues, are ever recombining and altering themselves. Thus, literary genres are not ontologically different, but relationally different, and always subject to re-analysis given their historical orientation.

By reappraising genre in this way, I think we can move past hackneyed claims about the death of the novel, especially, which conceives of genre as sclerotic and ontologically fixed, and focus instead of the accretive and collaborative structures these fictions take as modeled by the structure of the assemblage. This theoretical vision of the assemblage risks explaining the phenomenon in too utopian a sense, however, by only connecting the formal aesthetics of a work like *Nox* to the theoretical, if it does not take into account the influences of the publishing industry and market forces on the formation of the composite work as well. These pressures

often equally determine the shape a composite work could take. Furthermore, experiment and artistic vision are often limited by the capabilities of the industry and technology on hand. For example, William Faulkner is known through correspondence with his literary agent, Ben Wasson, to have wishfully desired different colored inks to distinguish temporal shifts in *The Sound and the Fury*, instead of the extensive italics added at the proof stage (Meriwether 9-10). Because of the cost, however, Faulkner's editors deferred his request and the author settled for the use of italics to do the work of the multi-colored typography (Feisner 204).⁷

In the case of Jean Toomer's 1923 *Cane*, the demands of his publishers actually resulted in a work we might consider as composite: *Cane* is composed of both short stories and poems, and although critics have at times labeled the work a novel, most remain puzzled as to what its genre actually *is*, thus making it the perfect candidate for the composite. In fact, Turner notes in his 1975 introduction to *Cane* that Toomer specifically "did not conceive *Cane* as a novel" (xxi). *Cane*'s 'failure to identify' as any one genre is related to its publication history. In a letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer describes his original desire to publish the first and the third sections of *Cane*, but, Turner explains, in response to publisher complaints that "the proposed book was too brief, [Toomer] added the materials that constitute the second section" (xxi). Thus, *Cane*'s tripartite structure, moving geographically between the north and south, and generically between poetry, short fiction, and novella, resulted in part from the demands of Toomer's more mercenary publisher. A text, then, is the result of pressures coming from various channels prior to publication, just as it can be extended post publication by future editions, paratext, and even reader community operations like online message boards and reading groups. It is an assemblage

⁷ In 2012, the Folio Society recreated Faulkner's original design of the *The Sound and the Fury* with color. The two-volume set are limited edition and were originally priced at £225.

of material instantiations and temporal events. Like the idea of an event, which Deleuze and Guattari assert is an “ever-changing problem for thought” (Adkins 14), a text, as discussed by Jerome McGann, is a similarly constructed problem for critics.

McGann has argued in his watershed scholarly monograph, *The Textual Condition*, that it is the material features of the physical object that are, ultimately, the signs of a collaborative endeavor (60). Thus, McGann argues that a “text” is not a “material thing,” “but a material set of *events*, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (21, emphasis mine). Positioned next to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the assemblage, McGann’s influential work, exhorting us to pay attention to bibliographic codes as important signifying mechanisms in their own right, contributes a material dimension to the abstract one provided by the assemblage. Texts, as envisioned by McGann as social, collaborative ventures jives with Carson’s collaborative process with her partner Robert Currie, who experimented with Xeroxing the reproduction of Carson’s original *Nox*, and whom Carson describes as the “Randomizer” (“An Interview with Anne Carson and Robert Currie,” *Asymptote*).⁸

McGann goes so far as to claim that texts have “no absolute center,”—which resonates with the idea of the assemblage as rhizomatic—but that they instead “change under the pressure of immediate events” (74). Furthermore, unlike informational texts, whose sole purpose is to communicate information, a literary work is polyvocal—much like Russian literary theorist Bakhtin’s heteroglossia—and can contain a great deal of “noise,” or “literary thickness,” as McGann describes it (75-76). “Whereas “noise” is always a form of corruption for a channel of

⁸ Further research would require inquiry into the original *Nox* Carson created in 2000 and investigative research to determine whether the original, currently unnamed German publisher ever created proofs of Carson’s original before returning the manuscript.

information, it can be exploited in literary texts for positive results” (75). Carson replicates thickness materially in several of *Nox*’s formal features: For example, she refused traditional trade binding. *Nox*, instead, has accordion binding, without adhesive, staples, or string, which allows it to dissolve from the center spine. Carson and Currie also created the effect of age by soaking some of the typescript in tea to make it look like parchment (Brick Literary Journal 89).⁹ These techniques are not merely textual, that is isolated within the lexical or linguistic. They are mainly visual. As a result, they serve to draw a reader’s attention to *Nox*’s status as a hand-made object and Carson’s very tangible process of ‘making.’ *Nox*’s composition is also the practice of Carson’s grief. To return to McGann, these “poetical texts operate to display their own practices, to put them forward as the subject of attention” (10-11). In this way, composite works incorporate a logic of self-conscious composition into their formal fibers to highlight their “artificiality.” The effect is intentional.

Clement Greenberg first discussed this strategy within modernist art in visual terms in 1961: modernist art, instead of hiding the limitations of the medium of painting—“the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment”—openly acknowledged these limitations. “Modernism used art to call attention to art” (3). Modernism, for Greenberg, was a movement *defined* by its self-critical position. Similar preoccupations arose among modernist writers in the early 20th century, who mobilized the form and concept of ‘the book’ as “no longer merely a vehicle for the printed expression of ideas but as a material object to be manipulated as part of the experimentalism” (Hammill 2). Both Greenberg and Hammill locate the beginning of these experimental techniques—in print, specifically, these techniques include experiments with collage, multimedia, illustration, and typography—within the early 20th century and within the

⁹ See Figure 4.

aesthetic movement of modernism. Noteworthy advances during this period include the rise of small presses, which encouraged collaboration between artists, printers, and publishers; the transition from rag to wood papers; and the commercial marketing of modernist texts, all of which contributed to modernism's fascination with the logic of fragmentation, as Seitz put it, and the blurring of boundaries between media and genre (Hammill 2-3, 6).¹⁰

Johanna Drucker locates artistic energy in the early 20th century within the artist's book, which she claims were the first to take up experimentation with the form and concept of 'the book' intentionally: "it is in the 20th century that books became a major feature of experimental artistic vision, and a unique vehicle for its realization" (45). In her introduction to Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books*, Cotter writes:

Books have a debased status in the modern world. In their conventional design of stacked and bound pages, they are perfect things, the way eggs are a perfect food. Portable, storable, easily accessible, they pack a lot of energy in a clean, neat pleasing form... At the same time, as mass-market items, books as physical constructions are secondary rather than primary objects. Content matters more than form. (xi)

Artists' books complicate the status of books as secondary to content, pronouncing their artistic features within their physical conditions, announcing themselves as handmade, rare, and often innovative in their conceptual imaginings of the dimensions of the book. Additionally, early experiments of the historical avant-garde often exploited the highly visible nature of the book at this time, promoting increasing circulation alongside the burgeoning market for periodicals prior

¹⁰ Modernist formal innovations and experiments can also be linked to specific technological advances. For example, the typewriter became commercially successful in the 1860s. Stephane Mallarmé's "Un Coup d'idées," an early experiment with typography, is published in 1897. Typography will later become a Dadaist subject (Hammill 28).

to the second world war; scholarship delving into the explicitly commercial nature of the works of modernist writers has combated the commonly held belief that modernist writers were anti-commercial in their aesthetic sensibilities (Hammill 85). Thus, the early 20th century became the birthplace for experimentation with the book as a physical object, at a grand scale, capitalizing on new collaboration between artists, writers, publishers, and printers; advances in technology; a boom in the publishing industry of independent and commercial presses; and a new international network of artists that not only circulated across the Atlantic and the English Channel, but also saw it as their prerogative to do so.

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Given the strong foundations laid in the first half of the 20th century, how can we distinguish the innovations of the post-war period and project into the contemporary moment? Following the profound impact of the second world war, the industry saw a reduction in the number of magazine and small presses, and an increase in the number of independent presses in response to the corporatization of the publishing industry (Hammill 8). Simultaneously, digital media and the rise of computers revised materials, technology, and industry standards, expanding artistic horizons. The first computer is invented in 1943 and digital media becomes commonly used in the 1950s. Like modernist art, which responded to advances in photography and cinema,¹¹ post-war art has responded in similar kind to changes to technology and the rise of the digital. Walter Benjamin wrote as early as 1935 of the revolution of mechanical reproduction, which simultaneously liberated art for consumption by the masses while destroying its aura, that “strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be,” of

¹¹ The subject of Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting.”

the unique art object (23). How have literary works, in a period in which words have been “freed” from the limitations of the page and the confines of the book, responded?

To begin to answer this question, I return our attention to *Nox*, which counters this question by complicating Benjamin’s assertion that mechanical reproduction destroys an artwork’s aura. Benjamin’s relates the decay of art’s aura to the mass’s desires to get closer to art and to destroy the ‘uniqueness’ of the thing (23). As discussed, *Nox* began as a one-of-a-kind object, a collaged book that Carson made in 2000 in direct response to her brother Michael’s death. Benjamin would see this version of *Nox* as a pre-mechanical reproduction and not in contradiction with its auratic qualities: Carson’s original manuscript may only be viewed personally and never exhibited publicly. It is therefore not open to the masses, it is personally owned, and is therefore literally distant from consumption. It is, in that sense, authentic. But Carson turns the screw again by self-consciously representing the material processes of *Nox*’s composition formally, of making the book which New Directions markets commercially *look* one of a kind, while it is, at the same time, clearly mass produced. The shading from Currie’s Xerox machine is often clearly visible. Therefore, *Nox* may not be authentic in the sense that it is singular, but it nevertheless manages to maintains its aura.¹²

Carson plays with the form and concept of the book in the same way. It both is and is not a book. *Nox* also explicitly meets many of the requirements of the genre of the novel (it has a lengthy, if loose, narrative that is book-length), while explicitly breaking many of these rules (the binding, for one, the non-fictional subject matter, another). Like other of her works that identify

¹² Benjamin does not use authenticity and aura interchangeably in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” Authenticity implies value related to essence: “The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it” (22). Aura, on the other hand, implies value based on a viewer or an audience. It is relationally based.

as half scholarly and half poetry (*Eros the Bittersweet*) or half prose and half poetry (*Red Doc*>), she allows *Nox* to reside somewhere between the categories of 'book' and 'not book.' What is critical about her technique is that she does not subordinate the form of the book to its content, nor does she raise the form of book above the status of its content. Instead, the form and concept of the book are marshalled harmoniously into the discordant telling of *Nox*'s narrative, Carson's continuing inquiry into the puzzle of Michael's life, an act of composition linked closely with stingy fragmentation and careful translation. Carson offers us a narrative constituted by the accretion of forms, a composite.

In this way, a composite work of the post-war period will stress or beleaguer the form and concept of the book in unprecedented ways as an invaluable component of its narrative structure. David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* breaks its own spine at over 1,000 pages plus endnotes. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* cinematically draws us across a series of pages marked by a single word in order to typographically imitate suspense. This stressing of the book's form occurs in part, I think, because the efficacy of the book as a technology has never before been so called into question. Advances in computer technology and digital media make widely rhizomatic structures available in ways that print media cannot imitate. We can duplicate at the click of the button. Excise and reorganize. Unlike Faulkner, I could make this essay any font color I want, and for no cost (besides perhaps my readers' mental anguish) at all. But I think the contemporary composite work, instead of rejecting the digital and turning nostalgically back towards print, or alternatively, rejecting the book as an obviated form, will experiment by being both, by assembling a multitude of forms for its own purposes.

Furthermore, unlike Greenberg, who saw modernism's self-critical position as a way to justify the *autonomy* of art, I see the composite work as intricately *embedded* in its own aesthetic,

social, political, and economic strata. Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical model of the assemblage, we will recall, is predicated on the rejection of ontological difference and founded, instead, on degrees of difference that are always subject to change given an assemblage's orientation in the world. Thus, assemblages are "concrete collections of heterogeneous materials that tend towards both stability and change" (Adkins 14). As a result, these works deliver, delight, and deliquesce in the comparisons, networks, and narratives drawn from their various parts. It is not, after all, Shade's "Pale Fire" or Kinbote's commentary alone that make Nabokov's *Pale Fire* so electric, but the magnetic misfiring that occurs when they collide.¹³ These works mark a contemporary moment distinguished by theories of hybridity, networks, and assemblage. They synthesize the theoretical by being embedded in the material realities of book making, publishing, and composition. One might wonder, can the form and concept of a book contain reverberations of this scale and plenitude? It can and has, and will continue to do so, not by acting as a static and discrete object, but through its many, social, and collaborative connections; by acting as a meeting grounds for many minds, theories, and practices. In short, by acting as an assemblage.

¹³ Greenberg's essay aired in 1961, the same year that Seitz's exhibit "The Art of Assemblage" opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* was published in 1962.

Figures: All figures drawn from Carson's *Nox*.

Figure 1:

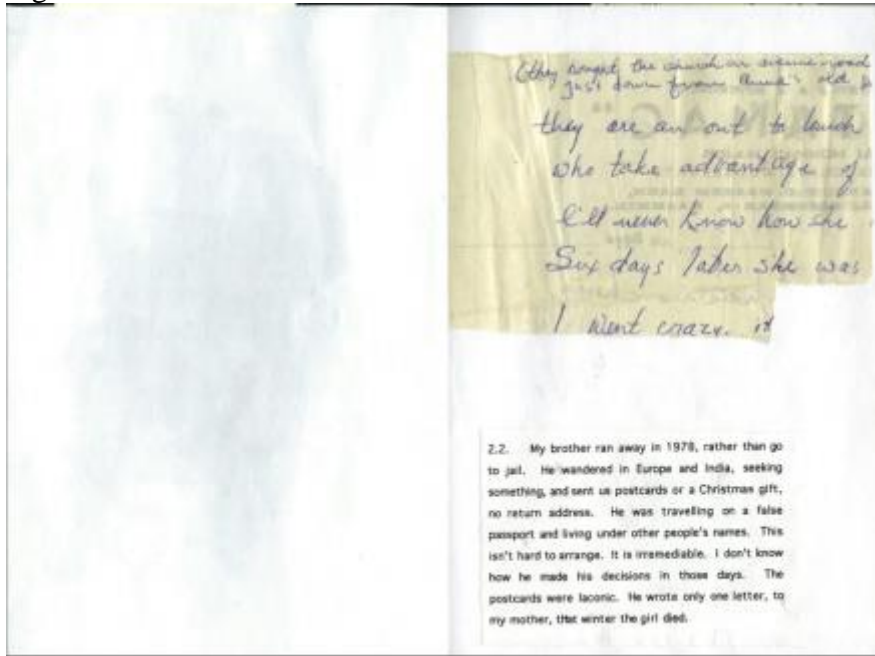


Figure 2:

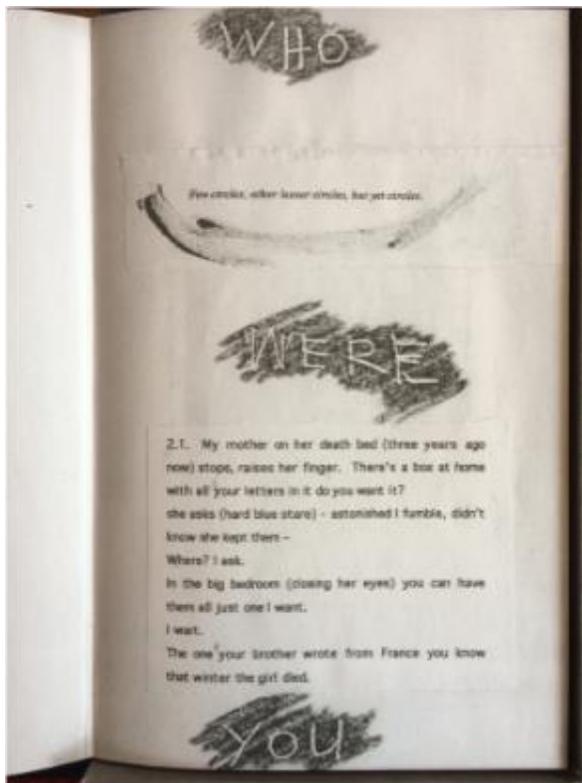


Figure 3:

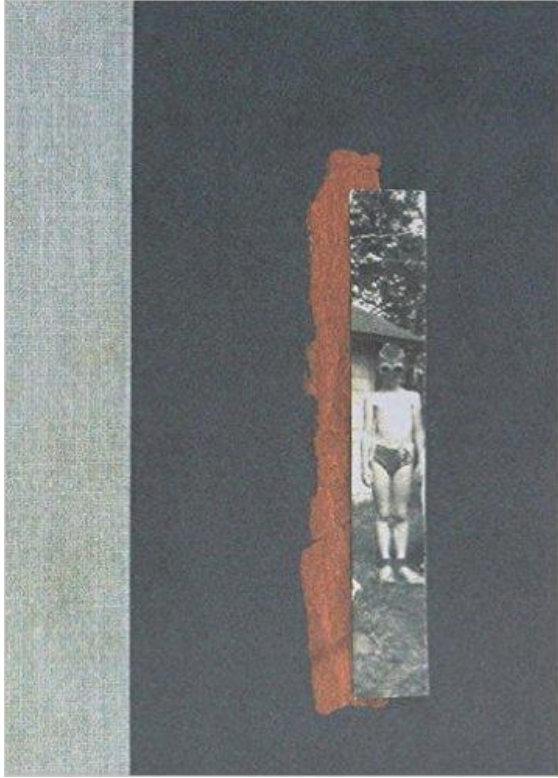
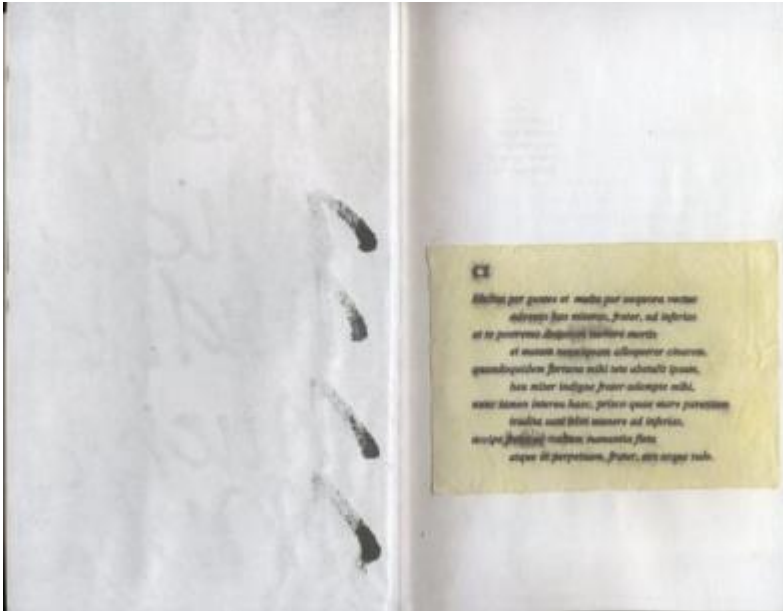


Figure 4:



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