



The Fabric of Stories
Materiality, Remembrance and Translation in Anne Carson's *Nox*

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for life's not a paragraph and death i think is no parenthesis

e.e. cummings

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Introduction

In the last moments before my ballet class began, wearing my leotard and having my long blond hair tightly bound in a bun, I would softly tread to the library to let my fingers run over the material of small wonders. For what once was, in the words of Ann Patchett, “a towering tree crowned with leaves and a home to birds” had now become an assemblage of papers bound together, imprinted with words that told a story that someone was telling, directly to me. Being only a child, this was miraculous. As I grew older and taller, I always kept believing in these small, tangible wonders called books. It was a belief that seemed to become more rare as the years passed and life became increasingly digitalised. What I saw happening around me while growing up didn’t go unnoticed in academics, a world that as a literature student I would many years later find myself in. The influential essay ‘Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture’ (2003) opens with poet and critic Dana Gioia discussing the end of print culture and the rise of electronic media, which we can see all around us, at least – that is if we would look up from our screens.¹ Basing his argument on various statistics Gioia outlines how the primary position of print culture is declining in favor of digitalised media that are becoming ever more ubiquitous.

Caring deeply for printed and analog materials in a time that is becoming predominated by digital media, the wish to write about the material form of the book came to me almost naturally, as if it always had been there already, quietly waiting for light to be cast on it so it could bloom. Consequently, for the past few months I have been carrying a box with me. The box contained one uncut length of paper, evenly folded to make it capable of being held. This book in a box carries the name *Nøx*, is made by the Canadian poet, translator, critic and essayist Anne Carson and was published in 2010 by publishing house New Directions. After her brother died, Carson made this epitaph for him in the form of a book that can be called both a form of literature and a form of art. This led me to a study of what I call the ‘fabric’ of *Nøx*. The fabric of a story is a form in which literature and art meet one another, a crafted substance made from the weaving of materials with the ability to bind and to separate, to be unravelled and to be rewoven.

By studying the fabric of *Nøx*, I hope to deepen my understanding of the profound relationship between a book’s material form and its meaning. In the first chapter I will briefly define the theoretical framework of the artist’s book as well as a basic interpretation of *Nøx* in light of the theory of the artist’s book, ending with an argument for the importance of its material form. In order to understand the meaning of this form, in the second chapter I will first discuss stories as crafted objects and their relation to memory, basing myself on the theory of storytelling as craft by the literary critic, philosopher and essayist Walter Benjamin. This allows me to thereafter approach the material form of *Nøx* as a fabric, whose relation to memory I will briefly outline at the end of the second chapter. In the third chapter I will analyse this material form as fabric in-depth by considering it firstly as being ‘made of a life remembered’ and secondly as having ‘the texture of remembering’, both on the basis of Walter Benjamin’s conception of translation. By studying *Nøx* this way, I hope to answer the question of how the material form of *Nøx*, when approached as a fabric, remembers a long-lost and deceased sibling.

¹ In this context I recommend looking at and listening to the spoken word video *Look Up* by ‘performer of words’ Gary Turk that can be found and accessed through the following url: <http://youtu.be/Z7dLU6fk9QY>

Chapter 1

Nox and the genre of the artist's book

In this chapter I will outline a basic interpretation of *Nox* and its identity as an artist's book. I will do so by first outlining the theoretical framework of the artist's book, after which I will analyse *Nox* within this framework.

1.1 The genre of the artist's book

The artful structure of books is both being appreciated and being debased, begins art critic Holland Cotter in his introduction to Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* (2004). With their carefully constructed design and cleanly bound pages, books can be considered as perfect things, he believes. At the same time, it is not the book's physicality that matters most – it is the content of the book, rather than the material form it has, that is considered of primary significance. There is an artform, however, that brings the form of the book to full attention. It is the artist's book, described by Drucker as “the quintessential 20th-century artform” (Drucker 1), that embraces the material presence of the book, making both content and form, as well as the relationship between the two, of primary significance. Cotter recounts his childhood time spent reading ‘art books’, ranging from productions spattered with flowers to Emily Dickinson's box full of handwritten poems that were threaded together by string. He recalls perceiving these books as visual objects made for both reading and looking and touching (Drucker xiii).

These visual objects are by Drucker explored in her work *The Century of the Artists' Books*, that maps out the artist's book as idea, form, metaphor and actual object. Rather than characterizing this artform by ascribing to it a set of specific factors that a book has to live up to, be it aesthetic or material, she “sketches out a zone of activity” (Drucker 1), a space made by the intersection of various elements and activities:

It [an artist's book] is a book which integrates the formal means of its realization and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues. (..) If all the elements or activities which contribute to artists' books as a field are described what emerges is a space made by their intersection. (Drucker 2)

The elements and activities Drucker alludes to are both other art forms and artistic activities that the artist's books draws from, such as collage, painting and sculpture, and other ways of ‘making’ besides the activity of writing, such as composing, curating and documenting. In studying artists' books, Drucker is interested in the relation between the formal structures of a book and its theme or its story, which is a relationship out of which literary meaning arises. To make this defining element of the artist's book clear, she sets its character apart from the closely interlinked category of the illustrated book: the *livre d'artiste*. According to Drucker, the books belonging to the category of *livre d'artiste* fall short on several aspects that define the concept of an artist's book. Firstly, an important distinguishing characteristic of the two forms is the artist's books “self-consciousness about the structure and meaning of the book as form” for it is

rare to find a *livre d'artiste* which interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests, or production activities. (Drucker 3)

In an artist's book the form of the book and its content (such as theme, intention, story) stand in meaningful relationship to each other, as opposed to the *livre d'artiste* in which a meaningful connection of that kind is absent.² This is closely connected to the second distinguishing element, which is the division between text and image, writers and artists, and ultimately in its broadest sense, literature and art. The predominance of "the conventional distinction between image and text returns works to the category of illustrated books, rather than artist's books" (Drucker 5). In many *livres d'artiste* text and image exist separately next to each other, with fixed boundaries that keep them from uniting, whereas an artist's book weaves its visual and verbal elements into a unity. In sum, in order for a book to belong to the specific space of the artist's book, in its artful structure, it has to have a reason to be the way it is.

1.2 *Nøx* as artist's book

Holding *Nøx* in one's hands for the first time is nothing less than a memorable experience. In one's hands rests a grey box, with three lines of white text on the back, and an old foxed photograph of a thin willowy boy wearing goggles on the front. With one simple movement of the hand one can open the grey box, which contains something that might be best described as one piece of paper cloth, evenly folded in separate, yet connected parts. As one lifts the top paper, this cloth quietly unfolds. On the front of the top paper, one can again see the thin willowy boy, looking at you through the goggles that cover almost half of his face. The boy is Anne Carson's long-lost and deceased brother, whose name is repeatedly handwritten on the third page of the paper cloth - michael michael michael michael michael. The writing of his name in black ink has penetrated the page and one can see it coming through on the other side – not completely visible and partly illegible, but still there. Parts of the letters of his name are covered by a small white sheet that says NOX FRATER NOX, which is Latin for 'night brother night'. It is the beginning of a book made from stitched-together pages that unfolds as you read, its paper filled with photographs, fragments of letters, poems, strings of definitions, stamps, drawings, paint collages and different kinds of faded and torn paper. The structure of *Nøx* is as follows: on the left hand side of the pages Carson unravels the elegy 'Poem 101' by the Roman poet Catullus by taking the elegy apart and gathering a string of English lexical definitions with each word, and on the right hand side of the pages Carson collects textual and visual memories of Michael's life. Readers and reviewers of the book are all looking for ways how to describe *Nøx*, putting it in words such as "an assemblage of words and images artfully arranged", "a moving document that holds poetry of the most welcome kind", "an evocative artifact of personal history" and "a notebook of memories" (Ervin; Burt; New Directions; O'Roarke). The reviews echo the extraordinariness and complexity of the book, the fact that it takes little time to read but a long time to absorb.

Out of the many ways that the book can be described, *Nøx* can positively be said to belong to the genre, or rather 'the space', of the artist's book.³ If one begins with looking at 'how' *Nøx* is made, one can find that Carson made *Nøx* by drawing from other artistic activities besides the activity of writing. Three of such artistic activities that can

² An example of such a meaningful relationship can be found in the artist's book *A Passage* by artist and critical writer Buzz Spector, a work that is furthermore interesting because it shares with *Nøx* its reflections on absence and presence. Spector's work is bound like a conventional book, but when one opens it one sees that its inside is made of torn paper. Spector's work is about the impossibility of the book to contain anything other than absence, which is embodied by the material form of *A Passage* (see Drucker 118-119).

³ Even though Drucker in her work defines artists' books as a space rather than a genre, one must critically reflect on the concept of 'genre thinking' as such, as literary and film theorist Robert Stam expresses in *Film Theory* (2000): "A number of perennial doubts plague genre theory. Are genres really 'out there' in the world, or are they merely the construction of analysts? Is there a finite taxonomy of genres or are they in principle infinite? Are genres timeless Platonic essences or ephemeral, time-bound entities? Are genres culture-bound or transcultural?" (Stam 14)

be traced in the work are the activity of keeping a notebook, the act of curation and the art of collage. Rebecca Macmillan in *Languages of Nox* (2013) for example found that Carson's intimate act of gathering finds its roots in the archival practice of keeping a notebook, a practice that springs from the urge "to make sense of what is fleeting, to catalog that which we urgently feel may vanish before (and even after) it goes recorded" (Macmillan 24). Carson's impulse to, in her own words, "gather the shards of her brother's life" (Aitken) is intimately bound up with the sense of the fleeting, the past and the ephemeral that even more strongly follows in the wake of loss. What turns *Nox* from a notebook into the product of the act of curation, is that Carson is not only concerned with the process of gathering, but also of omitting, in the same way as a translator eventually chooses one of the many possible meanings for a word. The reason is that part of the role of a curator is the task of *display*, since Carson consciously allows her intimate gathering of materials to be seen by others, to be open to the public. As such the task of a curator eventually ends in an exhibition, which works above all "to shape its spectator's experience and take its visitor through a journey of understanding that *unfolds* as a guided yet *open-weave pattern* of affective insights" (Smith 35, my emphasis). Hannah vanderHart in *Under a New Law* (2012) emphasizes not Carson's act of curation, but her poetic act of collage. According to vanderHart in *Nox*, Carson's poetic act of collage focuses on the surface of collage (to be illustrated by tea stains, photographs, torn paper and other material). Carson's act of gathering and layering all her material results in a surface that is not perfect but rather an approximation, "and yet, still, an approximation that says something true about life and the life lived" (vanderHart 34). For what Carson's art of collage ultimately communicates, argues vanderHart, is the emptiness of loss.⁴

If one looks at the eventual form of *Nox*, one sees that 'what' Carson made is an accordion-fold paper in a box that unites the visual and textual material it carries.⁵ *Nox* does not conform to the distinction between text and image, but rather makes the boundaries between text and image more fluid. What one for example can see is text *as* image, when fragments of text are, like visual images, spatially pasted on the paper cloth. As Drucker describes, acts like these are self-conscious acts "by which the text becomes integral with its placement, movement, symphonic orchestration through the spaces of the book" (Drucker 35-36). Carson furthermore plays with the visuality of words themselves, veiling and blurring them until they become almost illegible. Lastly, *Nox* is conscious of the book as form, the latter being intimately bound up with its narrative and thematic concern of loss and remembrance. In sum, in making *Nox* Carson draws from various artistic activities other than the act of writing, blurs the boundaries between text and image and is conscious of the book as form by making the material form of *Nox* meaningful in relation to, what is simply put, what it is about. The latter will be more deeply explored in the chapters that follow. In order to understand the meaning of *Nox*'s material form, I will approach the form of *Nox* as a uniquely crafted fabric of a story that can be known through touch and by sight.

⁴ These are some of Macmillan's and vanderHart's findings in short and this paragraph does not cover them extensively. The aim here is to shortly look at relevant studies of *Nox* in relation to the artistic practices that *Nox* as artist's book draws from to make one aware of these artistic activities besides the act of writing. For a more in-depth study of these practices I refer to the complete studies of Macmillan (2013) and vanderHart (2012).

⁵ Drucker categorizes the accordion-fold as a variation on the codex, the most dominant book form that can be defined as "a set of uniformly sized pages bound in a fixed and intentional sequence" (Drucker 123). The accordion-fold becomes a variation by changing the binding structure of the codex. This allows pages to connect in relations of continuity, becoming a larger pattern rather than being an assemblage of individual papers (see Drucker 128-131).

Chapter 2

Stories and crafts

Now that I have come to a basic understanding of *Nax* and its identity as an artist's book, in this chapter I will firstly discuss stories as crafted objects and their relation to memory by basing myself on Walter Benjamin's theory of storytelling as craft. Secondly, I will approach the form of *Nax* as a fabric and relate it to the act of remembering as theorized by Benjamin.

2.1 Storytelling as craft

The affinity between storytelling and craft practices has been illuminated by Walter Benjamin, whose theoretical work, such as his *Illuminations* (1968), is brimming with reflections on storytelling as craft, the storyteller as craftsman and the story as crafted form. In 'Traces of Craft' (1998), scholar Esther Leslie explores Benjamin's theoretical work on craft practices in depth. Benjamin does not perceive 'craft' as (merely) being the subject matter of stories, but he perceives stories as modes of craft themselves, since they "mirror a mode of processing and reconstituting experience" (Leslie 6). The storyteller experiences life, and *makes* this experience into a crafted object. As such, the storyteller, like the craftsman, fashions and moulds his material to a form, and thus both give back in a different form that which they have been given by the world first. This is a movement that Carson in a 1997 interview for the *The Iowa Review* described by the Greek word 'charis', which means 'grace' both as "a gift given and a gift received" (D'Agata 17). According to Carson, the world is always giving one things – that she describes as facts of life – and when it does, "one should receive the gift, do something with it, and give it again to the world" (D'Agata 17). Both the craftsman and the storyteller, or in Benjamin's understanding the storyteller as craftsman, contributes to this exchange since his/her experience of the world and of life doesn't go into the self and stop there. Rather (s)he moulds it into a form that makes it the experience of those that encounter it. Benjamin's conception of storytelling as craft practice mirrors the notion of the 'textility of making' by anthropologist Tim Ingold that he describes in his work *Being Alive* (2011). Ingold considers the process of making things not as placing form on matter, but on having matter that can be moulded or fashioned into a form, such as the weaving of threads into a fabric. In his view "making is less a matter of projection than one of gathering, more analogous, perhaps, to sewing or weaving than to shooting arrows at a target" (Ingold 178). In this view of making, the art of writing by a storyteller is not "a hammering of keys", but it is comparable to a handicraft, and to "the idea of the text as something woven" (Ingold 178).

The relation between the textual practice of the storyteller and the practice of weaving Benjamin finds expressed in the writing of novelist Marcel Proust. For Benjamin, it is not plot that expresses the practice of weaving in Proust nor personality, but memory: "a tightly plaited skein tangling the linear passage of time" (Leslie 6). The story as something woven is made of lived experience in the past, and as such the storyteller is preoccupied with the weaving of memory. At the heart of questions concerning memory lies an experience of loss. Constitutive of memory is time, or past-ness, for without time there is no memory. As far as time is a requisite for memory, time also impedes memory, "veiling, blurring and accentuating selectively" (Richter 187). It is only when an event has ended that we can experience memory, not during the event since then we are always still connected to experiencing the moment itself. That memory comes *after* requires the notion of an end, and then memory is what connects us to a past moment that we always inevitably lose, and that therefore has disappeared. For that reason the love of memory,

mnemophilia, involves a coming to terms with “distance, either spatial or temporal” in which memories connect: “in displacements that create distance, memories stand as mediators that connect the accessible with what threaten to become inaccessible domains” (Hallam and Hockey 25). Therefore memories are always dependent on the past and separated from it. Memory requires distance in order to become what it is, but at the same time it is based on notions as touch, closeness and connectivity that wish to bridge this distance. Memory can thus be defined by the two-fold movement that lies at the heart of it: the movement of distance and closeness, of being separated from and being connected to. Therefore storytellers as weavers of memory are always in touch with memory’s workings, how it is simultaneously there as it is once experienced but always alludes to that which is no longer. The material form of *Nox*, as it remembers times and persons that now belong to the past, is deeply concerned with this insight, which I will explore in the following section.

2.2 Remembrance and the form of *Nox* as fabric

Benjamin’s way of thinking about craft practices and stories can open up a way of thinking about works of literature and art. This already indicates that I will not directly apply Benjamin’s theory to *Nox*, for Benjamin sees *stories* as crafted objects, whereas I am interested in the *form* of a story as a crafted object – in the fabric *of* a story, and not the story *as* fabric. Nevertheless, Benjamin’s theory can be a valuable metaphor for, and can inspire a way of looking at, the material form of a book as a crafted object, for it allows one to explore what the object is ‘made of’, how this results in the eventual form it has, how this form ‘feels’ and, ultimately, why it is the way it is, which is essential in the study of artist’s books. That being said, the material form of *Nox*, the book in a box that one holds in one’s hands and can see and feel as it unfolds, can be approached *as* a fabric. This allows one to study the material form of *Nox* in terms of what it is made of and how it feels. The relation that this material form has to memory is two-fold, for the form is firstly ‘made of a life remembered’ and secondly has ‘the texture of remembering’.

Firstly, the material form of *Nox* is made of a life remembered. The displacement that for Carson created lasting distance is death. When her brother Michael died in Denmark she hadn’t seen him for over twenty years, and thereafter she “dismantled her memory of her brother’s life” (Aitken). Not only was distance created by death, but during his life Michael was for a large part absent from Anne’s, him being a roaming soul who ran away and was wandering and travelling until the day he died, gone permanently. After his death Carson remembers him by unravelling and untangling the plaited skein of his past life to separate threads and weaving these together in the fabric of *Nox*. Michael’s ashes got cast in the sea, and so *Nox* becomes the physical remainder that Carson has left of him. In sections that range from number 1.0 to number 10.3, one encounters these ‘threads’, for in fragments one encounters his childhood, the tree house, with Anne passing the lake in the evening, his running-away, his togetherness with a girl named Anna, his rare letter-writing, their short phone conversations, their mother’s despair, his dying, his funeral – eventually and all throughout already, his disappearing. Carson recalls these memories both textually, by writing them down in words, as visually, by for example placing photographs on the paper cloth, and weaves the two together.⁶ As has been noted in Chapter 1, even the textual fragments become visual images since they are layered as separate sheets and are as such spatially distributed across the page. The form of *Nox* being made of a life remembered will be further explored in section 3.1. Secondly, the material form of *Nox* can be said to have

⁶ As noted in Chapter 1, this distinction between text and image cannot be easily made in *Nox*, since Carson makes text *into* an image. However, in this particular sentence I aim at the conventional distinction between text employed for telling and image employed for showing (for example describing the tree house in words as distinct from showing the tree house in images).

the texture of memory.⁷ Like Proust, whom for Benjamin verifies “the textures and textual processes of memory”, Carson, too, “as weaver reflects on the workings of remembering” (Leslie 6). This is reflected by the way that Carson has crafted the texture of her material form, and this will be explored in section 3.2 of the following chapter.

⁷To clarify: in this study I perceive ‘fabric’ as *having* a texture. The texture of a fabric is its top layer, visible and sensible. Thus, I perceive texture not as being the whole substance itself, for that is the fabric.

Chapter 3

Remembering and translating

Now that I have laid the basis for approaching the material form of *Nax* as a fabric, I will analyse this fabric as, firstly, being made from remembered material, and secondly, as having the texture of remembering. I will do so by looking at the material form as a fabric along the metaphor of translation, basing myself on Walter Benjamin's conception of translation that he lays out in 'The Task of a Translator: an Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*' (1968). Section 3.1 will focus on the material from which the fabric is made, which will gradually develop towards section 3.2 that will focus on the texture of this fabric.

3.1 Made of a life remembered

The part of Benjamin's text that I wish to consider in relation to the material form of *Nax* is Benjamin's distinction between two theories of translation. Section 3.2 will discuss the second theory of translation that understands translation as the transformed afterlife of the original, whereas the present section will discuss the first theory of translation that understands a translation as the close reproduction or copy of the original.⁸ This latter, traditional theory of translation is concerned with the surfaces of works of literature. In this view the connectedness of languages is brought out by the "superficial similarity" of the original and its translation (Benjamin 73). Therefore this theory of translation is based on concepts of fidelity, licence and likeness. What this theory ultimately looks for in a translation is similarity: the accurate transmission of the original's subject matter, form and meaning (Benjamin 69). In this section, I will look at *Nax*'s form as a fabric that is striving for closeness to a remembered person in the same way as a translation strives for closeness to the original. And eventually I will need to consider the impossibility of this closeness: an impossibility that Benjamin also acknowledges. In my analysis, I take as the 'original' the remembered brother that Carson attempts to grasp in *Nax*. As Carson herself is "prowling the meanings of a word", she is "prowling the history of a person" – doing both with "no use of expecting a flood of light" (Carson 2010), since closeness is ultimately impossible.⁹

Since an understanding of the material form of *Nax* can be attained by considering a smaller part as exemplary for the whole, I will now take a closer look at the visual materials that Carson gathers and displays. *Nax*'s layered material is amongst other things composed of photographs. The placement of these photographs knows no distinct, even pattern: sometimes one finds a photograph on a page surrounded by white, sometimes one finds a photograph accompanied by a section of Carson's writing, a string of words or a line of text in *italics*. If one would attempt to categorize these visual images, one can see two types of photographs. The first are the rather visible family photographs that Carson collected from what could have been a family album. Such family photographs are characterized by the clear white borders around them and, though old and sometimes a little foxed, they are rather clearly perceivable. Different are the unusually shaped photographs that are much more ambiguous in their visual representation. They seem to be fragments of previously-whole photographs and appear to be parts of these photographs' background, defined by plays of shadow and light, landscapes, shapes and forms. Whereas the family photographs dominate the first part of the book, they come fewer and fewer in the latter part of the book that is predominated by the ambiguous fragments. What can be made of this gradual shift in visibility is that one sees

⁸ 'Reproduction' and 'copy' understood as something made to be similar to something else.

⁹ *Nax* does not contain page numbering, but is structured according to sections ranging from 1.0 to 10.3. If a piece of text that I quote contains a section number, I will refer to that particular section so that the relevant piece of text can be more easily found.

Michael slowly disappearing. Following the trail of the photographs, Michael moves from being close, allowing himself to be rather clearly seen, to vanishing into a distance in which he gradually becomes more and more unreachable by our sight. As the final lines of the book tell: “he refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears” (Carson 2010).

Photography can be considered as a special kind of ‘translation’, one in which “the photograph’s here and now are a translation of a particular there and then” (Richter 121). As such, a photograph is the material trace of a former presence. This bound with reality goes by the notion of the indexical nature of photography that is like a trace in the sand when you are walking or a weather vane moving because of the wind. The photograph is a record of physical proximity, of “closeness, contact, or the shared physical space of camera and person that affords in the photograph a power to evoke sensations of intimacy with the departed” (Hallam and Hockey 143). This relationship becomes even more meaningful in regards of memories of Michael, since his absence was not only one caused by death, but also one that was present during his and his family’s life ‘together’. The shared space with him in a family photograph is one of the few instances of physical proximity that they have known, and as such these photographs “display the cohesion of family and are an instrument of its togetherness” (Hirsch 7). Regarded in the light of this fact, the family photographs brought together in *Nøx* are an unfolding set of relations: a sense of togetherness and being with a person that is no longer and that never really was. Moreover, in the relation to remembering, a photograph is more than a visual image – it is “a tactile possession that engages not just vision, but also touch” (Hallam and Hockey 144). A photograph is a material record that can be seen, held and felt, and in that sense it is a tangible form of a something remembered. When one is presented with these family portraits, as one peers closely one sees an image of Michael quite clearly. It seems to be one of the few instances of *Nøx* in which Carson strives for exactness, closeness and clarity and succeeds.

... Does she? Looking at the second type of photograph layered in *Nøx*, there is not a sense of proximity at all, but a sense of distance. Perceived in this sense, a photograph as a ‘translation’ of the there and then is not the ‘material trace of a former presence’, but the ‘present trace of an absence’.¹⁰ The photographs gathered in *Nøx* do not only document moments of contact, but also of separation in the sense of that the moment is fleeting and the time is past, resulting in the fact that there is no longer likeness or contact. As scholar Marianne Hirsch notes in her work *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (1997):

While these photographs bring bodily traces of the dead, as they once were when living, into the lived environment of their survivors, they also register loss: they affirm the past’s existence and, in their flat two dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance. (Hirsch 23)

Devoid of detail and texture, these photographs carry within them a deep sense not of proximity and touch, but of absence and flatness. When one is presented with these fragments, as one peers closely one sees that there is supposed to be something, or there once was, but one cannot see it – there is nothing there. In this sense the photograph is an illusion: “it leaves us and continues to be visible, it is simultaneously there and not there” (Richter 138).

¹⁰ In this context I recommend Gerhard Richter’s history of afterness that he gives in *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (2011), because it includes very interesting reflections on photography in relation to presence and absence.

The specific case study of the photographs could be considered as exemplary for how the form of this material is defined by what it is made from. Looking at *Nøx*'s material form one sees depth – layers, wrinkles, shards and various textures – but when one touches the paper cloth one feels that it is merely a flat, two-dimensional surface (the experience of which will be explored in section 3.2). In this sense, the material traces that Carson lays out are insubstantial: in their presence, they perform distance, separation and difference. As such, *Nøx* renders visible Benjamin's acknowledgment of the impossibility of translation that is analogous to the sense of impossibility that goes with remembering a lost person as he was. For the reason that the surfaces of languages don't match word for word, surface closeness from the translation to the original is impossible by definition, and as one can see and feel the same goes for remembering the brother and his lived experience in the form of *Nøx*. For as much as time is constitutive of memory, time also impedes memory, making it impossible to remember something as it really was since "the image of the other in memory lies beneath *layers* of temporality and finitude. (..) Memory cannot happen without the obscuring *layers* of time and markers of identity" (Richter 187, my emphasis). So no matter how Carson tries "to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history" (Carson 2010: 1.0). Being made of remembered material thus always involves the notion of not being able to be perfectly made, because memory is blurred, veiled, ragged – itself imperfect.

In perceiving *Nøx*'s entire material form as a fabric along the traditional theory of translation, there is yet another layer of translation to be noted. The three white lines of text on the back of the box tell: "When my brother died I made an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get." (Carson 2010) As the traditional theory of translation understands the translation of an original as a close reproduction, i.e. as something made to be similar or identical to something else, similarly *Nøx* can be understood as the reproduction of a treasured, personal object of remembrance. For what is essentially an intimate, personal document, has been made public through technological reproduction, eventually becoming a mass-produced object published for the market. Returning briefly to Benjamin's theory of storytelling as crafts practice, one can see that Benjamin ultimately tells a story of change. For the craft practices that Benjamin alludes to, such as weaving, are former crafts that later mostly became superseded by different, technological modes of making by the machine, and no longer by the hand. Since weaving activities are now lost, according to Benjamin so "stories are lost: that is to say, textured experience, graspable experience, is lost" (Leslie 7). In light of *Nøx*'s mode of being technologically reproduced, one might sense a loss of the intimate, authentic quality of the personal object of remembrance. Carson writes that the replica they made is as close as they could get it, but what speaks from the materiality of *Nøx* is that in this striving for closeness it shows imperfection, difference and distance. The sense of the inaccessibility of Michael's life and the incapability of remembering him as he was Carson "allows to be seen by hiding" (Carson 2010) by making a replica whose material *shows* that it is not at all close to the original. *Nøx* is a material object that is capable of being grasped, but when one does so, it makes felt that it is, just like remembering Michael, not graspable but profoundly ungraspable. However, Benjamin's story of change was not a tragic tale, for he "sensed a beyond that was also in some ways a restoration or a rescue, a sense of possibility" (Leslie 9). This possibility lies in that 'what is remembered' resulting in becoming something that has the 'texture of remembering', which will be explored in the final section.

3.2 The texture of remembering

Now that I have considered the material form of *Nöx* as a fabric ‘made of a life remembered’, and therefore as an imperfect approximation, I wish to take a closer look at how the fabric of *Nöx* can be perceived as ‘having the texture of remembering’ itself. I will do so by focusing on Benjamin’s second theory of translation. Since it is ultimately impossible for a translation to attain exact similitude to the original, Benjamin argues for a different theory of translation. According to Benjamin the task of a translator does not lie in exactly reproducing words, sentences and structures, but in finding “that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (Benjamin 76). For that reason the ideas of the traditional theory of translation, such as likeness and similarity, are not serviceable anymore to “a theory that looks for other things in a translation than reproduction of meaning” (Benjamin 78). This second theory that Benjamin therefore proposes is one that understands a translation as the transformed afterlife of the original, in which the original itself is touched upon only fleetingly. The notion of the ‘afterlife’ is a less clear-cut concept than the concepts belonging to the traditional theory of translation, and the studies that explore the concept in more depth are rare. The studies that do approach the concept of the ‘afterlife’ do so with a focus on pure language, while they talk very little about Benjamin’s references to ‘life’, which I wish to explore in relation to the form of *Nöx*.

The theory of the afterlife allows Benjamin to dismiss the traditional ideas concerning ‘similarity’ and ‘likeness’ between the original and its translation, for in the original’s afterlife something is changed. Following Benjamin, the afterlife should not be understood as a continuity of life but as a life *after* the original, which alludes to a break first. Essential for Benjamin’s conception of translation is that it is not the actual surface form of the original that has life afterwards (Weidner 8). As literary scholar Daniel Weidner paraphrases Benjamin in ‘Life and Afterlife: a Figure of Thought in Walter Benjamin’ (2012): “the work of art lives on, but it lives on differently, it survives, it has its afterlife and that is a life after life” (Weidner 8). At this moment Weidner asks himself the question of what could be a life after life: is ‘it’, which is being described in words as ‘living on’, ‘surviving’, ‘living after’ and ‘a following’, either “the other of life, conclusively, so then no longer life” or “still part of life, so then no afterlife but simply life?” (Weidner 8). In my understanding of the afterlife, the answer is that it is neither. *After* the death of the original, there is an appearance of *life* that is neither death as ultimate closure nor the fullness of life, since the process of translation is one of “change and motion” (De Man 85) and one of “growing and *unfolding*” (Weidner 9, my emphasis). Understood as such, one does not speak in terms of neither ‘not life’ nor ‘simply life’ but in terms of what is no longer and not yet, or what is, as a movement, both slowly un-becoming and becoming. In sum, the afterlife is neither life, nor death, but a third space to be. In the following analysis of mine, ‘the original’ should still be understood as referring to the remembered brother, Michael.

If we now briefly revisit Benjamin’s theory on craft practices, we see that at the heart of his conception of crafted objects lies “an understanding of experiences to be had with objects” (Leslie 11). Even if a technologically reproduced object is not unique in its kind, the experience one can have with it *is*, and it can even be considered as being authentic and intimate (Benjamin in Leslie 9). In light of *Nöx*, textured, graspable experience is not lost, because *Nöx* is textured and graspable precisely as being un-textured and un-graspable, like remembrance is. Through touch, we can feel the material of the object, yet it is un-textured, through sight we see words, yet they are often illegible. What we experience is the visible *as* invisible, the intangibility *of* the tangible. As such, we experience memory’s workings, how it is simultaneously there but always alludes to that which is not. *Nöx*’s material lets one

experience both and therefore has the ‘texture of remembering’. Eventually, this texture embodies the third space of the afterlife. For something lost that is remembered is not fully living, but it neither knows death as ultimate closure. It belongs to the past, but is brought into the present as a memory and thus after a loss, it continues. It continues not as it was, but as it is remembered. So, the memory does not capture ‘the original’ as it was when living, for this is impossible, but captures it as how it is transformed when it is remembered. The memory is therefore the after-life, that which lets the remembered subject live on differently. Michael remembered is not completely dead, not fully living, but is after-living as a memory. The form of the book enabled Carson to capture this third space of after-living materially. By handling the spaces and interstices that the book as form gave her, Carson could manage to make something tangible that one can hold, but by using her remembered material in a unique way it could still embody the sense of intangibility, by an un-graspable texture with blurring, veiling, wrinkles, depth, flatness, and so forth. She thus combines two things, that are neither themselves fully, to a third space, not living, not dead, but after-living.

There is yet another third space in *Nox*: the act of translation that Carson herself performs on the left-hand side of the pages of *Nox*. Where Carson on the left-hand side performs the translation of the Roman elegy by the poet Catullus, in section 7.1 on the right-hand side she explains how she has loved the poem since the first time she read it and how she never arrived at the translation she would have liked to do of the poem, despite having tried a number of times. Nothing can capture the surface of the Roman elegy, no one can approach the Catullun diction (Carson 2010: 7.1). In her translation of the Roman elegy in *Nox*, the original can be found in the very beginning, then word for word all throughout the paper cloth, between section 7.2 and 8.1 translated visibly and eventually at the very end one finds the translation visible but illegible, the words smudged and the paper foxed. Thus, *Nox* contains both the original, as the legible and illegible translation, as a third space: the process in between. In this space, the original has not yet vanished or disappeared and the translation for a long time is not yet completed or arrived upon. This is like a memory in the present of something that can therefore not vanish but that also will never be there completely, for it belongs to a different place, the past. In this space one is slowly vanishing as the other is slowly becoming. It is this space that Carson finds herself in, where she is groping, prowling and searching for sense. Carson herself analogizes her act of translation to remembering Michael by writing: “I guess it [the translation] never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end” (Carson 2010: 7.1). The one aspect of *Nox*’s material form that has not yet been explored is the fact that it is one, complete piece of ‘fabric’, of which the texture it has, has been explored, but not yet its own substance. As an accordion-fold book, *Nox* does not consist of individual, separate papers but its separate papers are woven together to one continuous line of paper that knows no separation. During one’s experience of *Nox*, the page does materially never end. Ultimately, the act of remembering is the act that connects the present with the past. If ‘to translate’ is “allowing oneself to be set on a journey toward the open, the other shore, the land that is not yet in sight” (Richter 115) then ‘the act of remembering’ is allowing oneself to tread the bridge of memory that connects the land of the past to the land of the present that is always departing. Although the bridge is slippery, although the bridge will never end and although the other shore can never *really* be reached, as long as it continues to be connected, as long as Michael will be remembered, that is how long he will live ever after.

Conclusion

The beginning of my study of *Nōx* was my hope to find the meaning of its materiality by considering its material form as a fabric – as a crafted substance made from the weaving of materials with the ability to bind and to separate, to be unravelled and to be rewoven. The material form as fabric can be considered as being ‘made of a life remembered’ becoming something that has ‘the texture of remembering’. As being ‘made of a life remembered’, *Nōx* is ultimately un-textured and un-graspable, since events and persons of the past are veiled under layers of time and can never be reached, merely approximated. Yet, as being ‘the texture of remembering’, it is this materiality that can be read as a third space of possibility. The material form of *Nōx* as a fabric that has a texture of remembrance is textured and graspable *as* un-textured and un-graspable, like remembrance is. To experience the material form of *Nōx* is thus experiencing not something that is dead, nor something that is living, but something that lives after, as a third space where there is becoming and un-becoming as a process of unfolding. In sum, *Nōx* remembers by crafting a material form that is both made from that which is remembered and that can, by touching the texture it has, be experienced as the workings of remembering. In section 3.3 of *Nōx* Carson concluded that remembering the past is at once “concrete and indecipherable” (Carson 2010), which is a very precise way to describe the fabric of *Nōx*. The material form of *Nōx*, when approached as a fabric, binds and separates as remembrance does, unravels and reweaves as Carson does. It has a texture that is an illusion, both in the sense that it claims to have depth but appears to be flat and two-dimensional, and in the sense of a fine transparent cloth, and as one is holding it in one’s hands, one seems to be seeing through it a leaving past that is still present because it is remembered.

In a time when people speak of the end of print culture, the notion of the afterlife might be a very hopeful one. In ‘Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture’, poet and critic Dana Gioia opens by noting that “print has lost its primacy in communication” in favor of forms of electronic, digital technology that haven taken over print’s function as being the most important bearer of information (Gioia 21). If the afterlife teaches us to think about loss and endings in terms not of finitude but of survival, perhaps as literary scholars we can learn to think about print culture not as ending, but as living on differently and us moving along with this motion. It is possible that, in the same way that the artist’s book makes boundaries more fluid, so books in their after-life are not necessarily separate from screen materialities, but will be connected to the latter as well in ways that we cannot yet imagine. After all, *Nōx* presents its layered material *as* a screen. As such, the analog and the digital are not as removed from each other as they may seem, perhaps they are already close, or moving closer. Yet, what *Nōx* ultimately also shows is the power of print as material object. As Drucker notes, paper, printing and production of books may change, “but the potential of the book as a creative form will remain available for exploration” (Drucker 364). For books do not only communicate through the words on the pages, similar to words on a screen, but in “all the opportune spaces and interstices which a book can provide” (Drucker 358). As my reading of *Nōx* has demonstrated, it is the form of the book that provides these opportune spaces and interstices; it is its form that enables the book to capture lived and remembered experience and to be profoundly experienced itself. Seen from these two perspectives, perhaps our challenge as literary scholars is to find a balance between acknowledging the inevitable motions of analog and digital materialities in times like ours *and* keeping a, perhaps child-like, belief in the tangible, material form of the book as printed object that is, and will always remain, a space of opportunity.¹¹

¹¹ In his 2013 Commencement Address at Middlebury College, novelist Jonathan Safran Foer talks about how technology influences how we experience, remember and live life. It is a talk I highly recommend watching because of its beauty, relevance,

Three years ago, Anne Carson and dancer-choreographer Rashaun Mitchell collaborated and translated *Nox* into a choreography. A writer reviewing the dance writes:

Outside the theatre, Silas Riener (the leggings of his costume ripped) runs along a wooden ledge like a specter. He's separated from us by the theatre's windows but claims our attention with the alarming presence of a ghost. Meanwhile, Mr. Mitchell, quieter and more vulnerable, watches him from a distance. (Macaulay)¹²

When I saw on film the moment that Macaulay here describes I felt that it perfectly captured how I always imagined encountering Michael in *Nox* – fleetingly visible but ungraspable by the glass separating his world and ours. If we would reach out, all we would feel is the flat, cold surface of the glass. Yet, although fleetingly and almost invisibly, for a short moment he is there, moving. More than one person pointed out to Carson a likeness between her brother and Lazarus, who you can think of as either an example of resurrection or as a person who had to die twice (Carson 2010: 8.3; 8.4). In the pages of *Nox*, when he is remembered, does Michael die again or live again? The notion of the afterlife allows one to believe that he does neither fully. Rather, he silently and almost invisibly passes us like a soaring mayfly that, living only for a day, is always both becoming and un-becoming as the night draws near: iridescent, startling, lucid, gone.

wit, poetry, insights and, in light of the context of this study, reflections on how to live a life with a balance between (analog) remembering and (digital) recording. And about the ability to believe: "I worry that the closer the world gets to our fingertips, the further it gets from our hearts. Things will only feel like a miracle, if we are still capable of feeling miracles. Which is to say, if our hearts are worth saving."

¹² This moment can be seen and accessed through the following url: 'Nox excerpt' 0:00 – 0:03 <http://youtu.be/zJSZXuGNp08>

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