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The Languages of *Nox*:

Photographs, Materiality, and Translation in Anne Carson's Epitaph

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**The Languages of *Nox*:
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Report

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Dedication

For my family

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Abstract

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Looking primarily at the family photographs in Anne Carson's epitaph in book form, this essay explores how *Nox* multiply exhibits translation as the approximation of an imperfect nearness. The replica of a testimonial object Carson created after her brother's passing, *Nox* is a resolutely non-narrative work of poetry structured around a belabored translation of a Catullan elegy, prose poems, photographs, and other fragments of memorial matter. Examining *Nox* as an intimate archive made public through Carson's act of curation, my project draws attention to how this work analogizes translation to the understanding of affective life. Inspired by Marianne Hirsch's critical work on vernacular photography, I demonstrate that the exhibited family photographs in *Nox* not only thematize Carson's focus on illumination and darkness, but also materially amplify the inaccessibility of the felt lives they encapsulate. I argue that *Nox*, like the photographs it houses, models a memorial practice insistent simultaneously on materiality and the incomplete proximity to what remains.

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The Languages of *Nox*:
Photographs, Materiality, and Translation in Anne Carson's Epitaph

“There is no sun without a shadow, and it is essential to know the night.”

— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Anne Carson's *Nox* is, in a word, unruly. When I first encountered it, I was impressed by its seeming compactness—the way the gray, sepulcher-like box so perfectly encases the accordion-style work within, the repetition of the slim photograph on the cover of each, its pronounced weight in my hands. What first seems, however, like a rather neat package explodes with just one exploration. When I opened up Carson's creation—her epitaph, as she names it, for her long-estranged and now deceased brother, a man who appears in the front and framing image as a thin little boy sporting goggles and swim trunks—it threatened to come apart at the seams. Because it is not bound, a slip of the finger leads to something like a falling house of tethered cards. When I first opened *Nox*, it emerged as a rush of textual and visual constellations: a peppering of prose poems, words translated and defined, the fragments of stamps, photographs, correspondence, patched paper and paint collages. I had no idea how to handle it, or where to look first.

Reviewers of the book echo these mixed feelings of awe and confusion. They wrestle with the shape and purpose of *Nox*, calling it, for example, “beguiling,” “a notebook of memories,” “a mosaic of memories,” a “reliquary,” “something utterly curious,” and “a deeply moving scrap heap” (Motion; O’Roarke; Dirda; Dirda; Reidy; Anderson). They depict

Nox as a testimonial work—a catalog, in part, of Carson’s recollections—that takes an unusual shape. Writing for *The Guardian* in July 2010, Andrew Motion moves away from categorizing *Nox* even as a book, and instead draws attention to it as a thing particularly difficult to spend time with; he writes, “It’s not exactly a companionable object” (Motion). In its bulk, its nested substance and thematic layers, *Nox* can feel both daunting and perplexing; it is a strange and poetic web to witness and to hold. As a reproduction of a memorial scrapbook that Carson created after her brother’s passing—a personal collection made public through replication—*Nox* further incites an array of feelings. The manifold layers of *Nox*, and the affective responses the work inspires—for example: uncertainty, fascination, bewilderment, curiosity, unease, love, and a yearning for sense—resonate with its central theme, the search for meaning that follows loss.

In its precariousness, its capacity to shift in structure, and the looming empty white space of its expanded backside, I first read *Nox* as a text that enacts the work of mourning—that materially manifests several aspects of grief that Roland Barthes transcribes in his *Mourning Diary*: the impossibility of measuring mourning, the experience of blankness or numbness, and the looming threat of collapse (Barthes 2009, 10, 26, 29). However, in a May 2011 interview, Carson makes clear that her intention in creating *Nox* was *not* to highlight the contours of her own suffering. She says, “It’s not about grief. It’s about understanding other people and their histories as if we are all separate languages. That’s what I was trying to explore. Exploring grief would have made it a book about me, and I didn’t want that” (Sehgal). Carson’s desire, then, is clear. Insofar as *Nox* elegizes, according to her wishes, it does so from an investigative angle. *Nox* memorializes as it asks what it means to remember;

it investigates Carson's own history as it asks how disparate, intimate histories may be defined, traced, and transmitted.

My project explores how *Nox* multiply exhibits translation as an act of assemblage. Structured primarily around Carson's work to translate an elegy by the Roman poet, Gaius Valerius Catullus, *Nox* extends the task of translator to include the observation and collation of material matter such as family photographs. As a replica of a memorial scrapbook, it analogizes translation to the understanding of another person's lived experience. *Nox* looks, as Carson describes, at personal history and the fragmented matter that attests to it as a language *to be translated*. And it does this with the awareness that—to use Walter Benjamin's words—"All translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (Benjamin 1968, 75). Through the textual and visual matters it gathers together, and as a meditation on the distance that inheres between people—like that perpetual, insuperable gulf that separates distinct patterns of speech—*Nox* intricately curates and *materializes* the persistence of this foreignness.

Carson's focus on translation inheres across and draws attention to the different media contained in *Nox*. Her prodigious translation of the Catullan elegy unfolds *across* the space of *Nox* and *around* the personal effects it catalogs. These personal effects—including the exhibited collection of family photographs—further materially contribute to and amplify the scrapbook's status as testimonial object.¹ Through their installation in the larger work, the photographs in *Nox* not only serve to thematize Carson's focus on illumination,

¹ I take this term from Hirsch and Leo Spitzer's article, "Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender, and Transmission," which considers "how material remnants can serve as testimonial objects that carry memory traces from the past and embody the process of its transmission" (Hirsch and Spitzer 353).

obscurity, and shadow, but also interrupt and supplement her belabored translation of the elegy with snapshots from her own familial past. Rendering visible remote moments of personal history, they simultaneously testify to the material dimension of her family's past presence and the incommunicability of what formed the relationships they frame. And, particularly insofar as they draw attention to their own status as replicas, these images amplify the insistent inaccessibility of the felt lives they encapsulate. A resolutely non-narrative poem, *Nox* curates private, personal archives, and *through exhibition* brings them into public view. Like the photographs it houses, Carson's epitaph models a memorial practice insistent simultaneously on materiality and the incomplete proximity to what remains.

Translating Elegy

In *Nox*, Carson translates an elegy, and, in doing so, creates an epitaph. In this way, her laborious translation of the Catullan elegy (Poem 101) offers her memorial scrapbook not only structural organization, but also generic counterpoint. While *Nox*, like Poem 101, pivots around the loss of a brother, it departs significantly in scope and stress from the Catullan elegy, and from the poetic genre of elegy more generally. In a short framing claim—which is printed alone on the back of the box in which *Nox* is housed—Carson confirms this distinction. She writes, “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). As this statement suggests, *Nox* better fits in the poetic genre of epitaph than elegy.

While never explicitly naming her work as such, Carson makes reference to the genre or mode of elegy multiple times within the body of *Nox*. The closest she comes to calling *Nox* an elegy is in the very first numbered prose poem. Reflecting on her project’s beginnings, Carson writes,

I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he’s dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history. (Carson 1.0)

Carson claims connection to elegy only in the past tense. Her initial intention was to evoke her brother, to show him as he illuminated like a star, but words, Carson finds, cannot add to death. Here, much like in her interview, she suggests that her purpose in writing was

never primarily to give shape to grief.² Here, as well as in Carson’s detailed breakdown and translation of Catullus’s poem, *Nox* investigates elegy without itself subscribing to this category.³

While the epitaph, like the elegy, is a form closely associated with mourning—with memory and loss—it connotes a distinct practice or mode of representing these feelings or experiences. And, while elegy persists as an expansive container for the poetry of grief (both written and spoken), the genre remains rooted in its connection to song: sound. The epitaph, on the other hand, is tied immutably to materiality. Even if spoken on the occasion of a burial, it is “an *inscription* upon a tomb” (“epitaph, n.,” my emphasis). As Gary Saul Morson describes epitaphs, “their physical location on a tombstone and the moment of their carving for a memorial are intrinsic to their meaning” (Morson 198). Unlike the elegy, whose traditional functions include lamentation, praise, and consolation, the epitaph indicates primarily “the salient facts about or characteristics of the deceased,” shifting the focus not only away from aurality to inscription, but from the features of grief⁴ to the question of just whom the deceased was (Preminger 377). In its demonstration of grief—the described distance traveled by the speaker to get to the burial site, the presence of his own tears, and the lamentation of the unfairness of his brother’s death—the Catullan elegy participates in

² In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion describes both the loss of her husband and the illness of their daughter. She writes, “Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life” (Didion 2006, 27). Insofar as *Nox* again and again highlights the experience and relevance of distance, I find convincing Carson’s claim that this is not a work about grief.

³ As Jahan Ramazani argues in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, the elegy is an especially expansive generic category with a long and often self-reflective history. Ramazani writes, “every elegy is an elegy for elegy—a poem that mourns the diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning” (Ramazani 8). While *Nox* certainly engages with this tradition through Carson’s focus on, and translation of, Catullus’s elegy, it seems, again, to separate itself from the lineage Ramazani describes. *Nox* does not mourn, but celebrates the Catullan elegy as it dissects and refashions it.

⁴ Ramazani notes, “the modern elegist reveals grief in ever more detail and complexity” (Ramazani 17).

these traditional conventions. *Nax*, as epitaph, does not lament, praise, or console, but instead investigates the collected materials that physically mark Carson's connection to her brother as he lived.

Even though the Catullan elegy does not reflect on who the lost brother was, it provides Carson material with which to ask this question herself. It is through both the dismemberment and then translation of this text that *Nax* asks what we attempt to know of someone, how much can ever be known of someone, and how—in the absence of certainty—to remember and memorialize those we lose. As with the family photographs that *Nax* includes, part of what Carson's scrapbook suggests in answer to these questions is the difficulty of pinning down a particular history. One of the earlier prose poems contained in the text directly foregrounds the desire for a narrative through line, and the presumed connection between the capacity to tell a story and preserve a memory. Positioned opposite an extended translation and definition of the Latin word “frater” (brother), Carson's poem begins, “We want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here's why. It forms a lock against oblivion. Does it?” (Carson 3.3) Starting out assertively in the first person plural, Carson claims a general longing for the coherence of experience, and for the ability to report clearly and fully on the details of another person's life. According to Carson, we want to be able to understand and explain both the actions and the choices someone made. She declares at first, this is how to stave off forgetting. (Or is it? she wonders.)

While Carson suggests initially that to tell a clear story about someone—to pin down a center and sustain that center through narration—prevents forgetting, she appears, at the

end, to reconsider. The small question swiftly signals her doubt that oblivion may indeed be kept at bay through any rigorous account taking. Carson suggests that even if neatly coherent stories might be located and told, they can still fade away in time. As Carson writes through and gathers the often-fragmentary materials she is left with after her brother's death, however, it is just this kind of desire for the clean strokes of a linear chronology that her work of assemblage refuses to satisfy. By contrast, *Nox* asserts again and again that any exhaustive understanding remains incalculable.

In *Nox*, Carson's broader efforts of translation underscore indeterminacy. Though she provides a complete English translation of Catullus's elegy near the end of *Nox*, this short text, in addition to the prodigious translated lexical entries, serves not as a site to contain meaning, but instead to undercut any sense of finality. In the lexical entries, even the translation of a single word from Latin to English produces a bounty of possible—and sometimes even contradictory—definitions. Carson belabors her own work of translating the elegy by Catullus while simultaneously acknowledging the perpetual incompleteness of this process. Even when she *has* offered a complete version of the poem in English it remains, she feels, imperfect. In an unusually direct and colloquial moment, Carson asserts,

I want to explain about the Catullus poem (101). Catullus wrote poem 101 for his brother who died in the Troad. Nothing at all is known of the brother except his death. Catullus appears to have travelled from Verona to Asia Minor to stand at the grave. Perhaps he recited the elegy there. I have loved this poem since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and I have tried to translate it a number of times. Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. (Carson 7.1)

Carson theorizes translation as a practice analogous to that of understanding and memorializing another person, which requires repeated labor. In the case of the Catullan elegy, as with her brother, no amount of attention will be enough to fully communicate its multitudinous meanings. No matter the translator, no matter the language, no one can totally replicate the poem's constitutive contradictions. The work of complete translation is, in a sense, unattainable by definition. The translator attempts and fails to precisely transcribe meaning, settling instead, and at best, on a sense of imperfect nearness. As Gregory Rabassa writes, "It is my feeling that a translation is never finished, that it is open and could go on to infinity" (Rabassa 7).⁵ In *Nox*, Carson demonstrates how the process of coming to understand and memorialize her brother is perpetually unfinished. She writes,

Over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end. (Carson 7.1)

Translation is akin to prowling—an animalistic mode of searching for prey, often done under cover of night. As this central metaphor suggests, in *Nox*, there is no end to the translator's sidling task.

Unlike *Nox*, which suggests this endless space for continued prowling, the Catullan elegy decisively records an act of leave-taking. At its close, the poet bids his brother farewell. Though Carson repeats one of the final words of Catullus's goodbye within the body of *Nox* (and appears to derive her work's title⁶ from it), *Nox* itself resists any sense of closure even as it nears an end. "Ave" is reproduced both in a lexical entry, like the other words, and as

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov echoes this sentiment in describing his own desire for capacious "translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity" (Nabokov 127).

⁶ The Latin "nox" translates to "night."

part of an incorporated photographic scrap (written in red ink on top of a black and white image of a brick wall). In the translation she provides, Carson notes that this word can mean not just “Fare well!” but “Be well!” and “Be happy!”; “on sepulchral monuments,” she writes, “ave” translates to “now it is night” (Carson).

On distinct yet mutually reinforcing levels, *Nox* sets up a paradox with respect to closeness. On one level, this is a text that illustrates the work of translation through the Catullan elegy. On another, it explores this labor metaphorically, investigating what it means to attempt the posthumous translation of a person as if they were a different language. Both of these processes, *Nox* concludes, are inexhaustible. Anytime meaning is located, it proliferates; it produces more questions, remains a space of ambiguity, an interminable room. As Carson traces the material fragments of her brother’s history, *Nox* argues that any attempt to know and remember someone is limited by the perpetual contingency of translation as Benjamin describes it. Translation, at its best, renders the foreignness of languages visible. This is what *Nox* does for kinship.

Nox begins and ends—inside the vast paper space of its pleated pages—with explicit material reference to the Catullan elegy that Carson translates. At the opening of her scrapbook, directly after the published version’s front matter, is a replication of the text. It is a yellowed and wrinkled page on which the poem’s lines are recorded in the original Latin in splotchy black ink, which bleeds and blurs. Later, inside the last flap of *Nox*, is another similar artifact. This time, the scrap of discolored matter looks singed on its edges and is particularly crinkled. Its text—which is notably Carson’s English translation of Poem 101—has been almost entirely obscured through the running of the ink. One paper fragment is

torn off and pasted in below. In its weathered scrappiness, this elegy has become epitaph. Carson's translation of elegy to epitaph is demonstrated in *Nox* through the work's reliance on and foregrounding of materiality as it relates to loss—its status as a collection of memorial scraps that physically marks distance from the departed and absent.

A Constellation of Images

The photographs that *Nox* enfolds are one of several elements that contribute directly to the work's layered material dimension as epitaph and that substantiate Carson's continued focus on translation as it relates to illumination. In the same interview in which Carson claims that her intention in creating *Nox* was not to focus on grief, she invokes the late astronomer Carl Sagan. Carson recalls that Sagan "described the universe saying, 'Well it's a million miles of dark empty space with nothing in it and no meaning, but there are a few places with light. We want to focus on the light places.' I think that's a good rubric" (Sehgal). With both this statement and the title of *Nox* in mind, it is unsurprising that this work is, in Marianne Hirsch's words, a "meta-photographic text," or one that, by way of reproduction, description, or some combination of the two, places pictures within a more narrative context (Hirsch 1997, 8).⁷ *Nox* requires its reader to engage in the act of looking at photographs—material archives of light.⁸

The photographs assembled in *Nox* punctuate the text in no clearly defined pattern. At times, a single image stands alone in the space of a full accordion-style page or two. At others, image is juxtaposed with text (lexical entries, numbered prose poems, or even the scrap of an unlabeled sentence). The photographs in *Nox* take a variety of forms, but these are roughly separable into two categories: those rectangular images bounded by a thick white frame, and those variously shaped and unbounded. The snapshots that I describe as family

⁷ W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* are additional examples of "meta-photographic texts," and two of those with which Hirsch engages in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012). Like *Nox*, these are works guided by experiences of loss.

⁸ Though my claims in this paper specifically address the *installation* of visual materials within the body of the work, it is important to draw attention to the fact that all of *Nox*—in its mass-produced and public form—relies on photography. Insofar as *Nox* is a *facsimile* of Caron's original memorial scrapbook, it is itself entirely image-based.

photographs are of the former group, and they show a rotating yet repeating cast of characters: a young Carson, her brother, and their mother. Those from the latter group include what appear to be cuttings or fragments of what may once have been larger photographs. These seeming scraps differ in size and orientation, and are less formally composed. They depict mostly landscapes, often harbor shadows, geometrical forms, plays of light, and stretches of water lapping against shoreline. In the earlier part of *Nox*, family photographs amass with more consistency than the more abstract and cut forms. As the work continues, however, the more fragmented, shadowed images predominate. Those photographs that picture people become fewer and fewer.

Whether portraits or small landscapes, neatly encased rectangles or octagonal cut fragments, the pictures in *Nox* are vernacular photographs: quotidian images found and depicting the everyday, and often taken in common or domestic contexts. Vernacular photographs are notable in their seeming ordinariness. These artifacts, as Tina M. Campt points out, are often made by amateur photographers, and are “intended as documents of personal history” (Campt 7).⁹ The vernacular photographs in *Nox* reflect this apparent intention. They register unremarkable everyday experiences divorced from direct narrative explanation. Ranging only slightly in tones of black and white, they occasionally appear slightly browned or yellowed. No color images surface. Carson provides neither a list of figures nor a series of photographer credits. For the most part, reading the pictures of *Nox*, one is left largely in the dark.

⁹ In his description of vernacular photographs, Geoffrey Batchen notes that these are images “that preoccupy the home and heart but rarely the museum or the academy” (Batchen 57). While this more polarizing definition is usefully modified by Campt’s explanation, it is worth considering just how vernacular photographs have not always been seen as objects worthy of scholarly investigation.

Unframed by origin story or contextualizing caption, the family photographs in *Nox* ambiguously mediate Carson's non-linear narrative of her relationship with her brother. Formally disrupting the proliferation of lexical entries, prose poems, and pieces of ephemera that populate *Nox*, these snapshots visually frame and materially substantiate Carson's family relations. As Hirsch claims in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, family photographs are complex sites of familial memory as well as instruments of self-knowledge. she explains, "As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history" (Hirsch 1997, 7). Constituted by a network of 'familial looks,' family photographs are spaces in which relationships are not simply recorded but selectively composed—arranged to appear a certain way, or to articulate a particular relational aspiration. In *Nox*, many of the textual descriptions—especially the numbered prose poems—delineate the separate courses the adult lives of Carson and her brother take. By contrast, the family snapshots imagine between the two of them a shared space and time. As small children, they are often pictured in close proximity to one another.

The cover image of *Nox*, a cropped and collaged photograph of Carson's brother as a little boy, immediately draws attention to the entangling act of familial looking. Located on the front lid of its box and then again on the cover flap of the accordion-style sheet within, this first image is a tall, narrow slice of an old sepia-tone family snapshot. With a slight horizontal white tear, and placed against a contrasting streak of a stretch of paint or foil, the materiality of this photograph—its scrappiness, even—stands out. Within its thin frame, there looks to be lawn, trees, and sky. Set against the backdrop of an indeterminable building

is a skinny child wearing only swimming goggles, trunks, and flippers. His eyes are entirely shaded by the goggles, producing an uncanny and unnerving effect. Though he peers directly out of the photographic frame, implicating the reader in that network of familial looks Hirsch describes, we cannot see his eyes. We may detect instead only the dark lenses that encase them. And, while the faint lines of tiny ribs texture one side of his chest, Carson's brother's torso is predominantly awash in white. With his middle bleached, the top half of his erect body recalls Sagan's rubric; Carson's brother's center is predominantly a space of indiscernible lightness. Here though the extreme illumination becomes its own kind of opacity—a visual reminder that for all that the photograph translates, a complete picture of just who this person was remains out of reach.

The family photographs in *Nox* often picture Carson and her brother's intimate history by visually dramatizing the contrast in light and dark on which *Nox* thematically builds. Of all the images that inhabit *Nox*, the very first in the body of the book especially frames darkness and obscurity—signs of night. A shadow-filled picture, it establishes further a mood of distance set apart from the textual elements that precede it (the Catullan elegy in Latin, the first lexical entry, the first numbered prose poem). It is surrounded by the full white space of two pages. This photograph is quite small—two by three inches at most—and, especially because of its slight blurriness, we can make out very little. We are looking from the inside of some room out at two tent-shaped spaces of sun-filled windows, and there below them is the outline of an armchair on which two children sit. One child is larger than the other, and contains the smaller in his lap. We can see one side of each of their faces, but their individual features are almost entirely indiscernible, or washed out. Though we can

assume that this is a very young Carson with her brother, the snapshot itself suggests little specificity. These might be any number of small, pale children, at any number of points in time. What is emphasized compositionally is not an interior setting, the particular season or quality of light, or the children's distinct expressions or identities. This image centers instead on the closeness of the two tiny figures. Amidst darkness, the small bright patches of their bodies clump together. And, while later in *Nox* family photographs are often much more legible as such, this initial photograph accentuates its own narrative and formal remoteness. Even as something of a portrait, it depicts, above all, the contrast between dark and light spaces, and the small lines of shadow that act to bridge them. In other words, the blackness that encircles the children and the windows makes them stand apart. The lighter aspects leap out of the flat obscurity, focusing the reader on Carson and her brother's abstract yet documented former togetherness.

In *Nox*, even when family photographs appear loosely legible, they offer little in the way of a definitive storyline. Even when it would seem, as Hirsch writes, that they “would tend to diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification and affiliation,” these photographs suggest access to an intimate familial past only as they underscore the reader's incapacity to understand what is shown (Hirsch 2012, 38). Placed between the lexical entries of Carson's belabored translation of the Catullan elegy, these snapshots suggest a separate visual and yet thematically analogous mode of looking for meaning in memorial matter. Implicating the readers of *Nox* in this search for significance, these replicated family photographs permit us blurred access into Carson's past. We have no confirmed sense of what we witness in the space of their frames. In looking at these

documents of personal history, ours is a limited field of vision. These snapshots perform what Hirsch describes; they

enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past, but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic “take.” The retrospective irony of every photograph consists precisely in the simultaneity of this effort and consciousness of its impossibility. (36)

It is in just this way that the family photographs in *Nox*—particularly insofar as they intersect with and separate the strands of Carson’s efforts of translation—amplify the circularity and endlessness of such a labor. In viewing the photographs Carson exhibits, the reader of *Nox* inhabits the position of translator. As we look to these snapshots to animate Carson’s past, we become increasingly aware of the very impossibility of their doing so.

The family photographs in *Nox*—which often contain foregrounded figures who look right to the camera or photographer—show us more about ourselves as readers than demystify or make clear the details of Carson and her brother’s familial past. They are “sites of projection”—scenes in which we cannot be sure what we see (38). And,

in seeming to open a window to the past, and materializing the viewer’s relationship to it, they also give a glimpse of its enormity and its power. They can tell us as much about our own needs and desires (as readers and spectators) as they can about the past world they presumably depict. (38)

As viewers of the photographs in *Nox*, we do not know the particular (and potentially familial) looks that initially constituted these arrangements. From where most of the photographs in *Nox* come—let alone who snapped these shots—is uncertain. In *Nox*, we find only a couple of small contextualizing comments. At least once, Carson tells us a photo is hers. Another time, she notes that after his death, she learned from his widow that her brother was himself a photographer and archivist. She describes, “My brother’s widow gives

me some old diaries she found. From his wandering years, filled with photographs that he developed himself in hotel rooms” (Carson 3.2). Are some of these images in *Nox* of Carson’s brother’s making, or at least from his collection? The ambiguity around authorship blurs the reader’s sense of time and of precisely whose memory or past is whose. And to so often layer, confuse, and absent the origins of these images suggests a lessened concern for how photographs are created (or by whom), and stresses instead the effects of their material presence. As an epitaph that exhibits fuzzy family photographs, *Nox* enacts Hirsch’s claim that

Photography’s relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability. (Hirsch 1997, 20)

The photographs in *Nox* do not document a linear history or familial arc, but disrupt the sense that, in the face of loss, any such neat narrative remains possible.

Without explicit captions, the family photographs in *Nox* often suggest no precise history of familial relations, but persist in visually marking the togetherness of the individuals they frame. The picturing of the family group—its clustering and thus a sense of its togetherness—appears in several of the snapshots Carson includes. Hirsch describes what I think of as a potentially performative act of solidarity when she writes, “The family photograph both displays the cohesion of family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of those rituals” (7). One of the most centrally located family photographs in *Nox* emphasizes the way family snapshots may index both a reality of, and an attempt at, unity. In the foreground of this photograph stands a small Carson with her brother and their mother, and though they are somewhat in

shadow, we can see each of their forward-looking faces. Posed just opposite a translation and definition of *nequiquam*, this photograph takes on an ominous tone. *Nequiquam*, as Carson describes, means “to no purpose or effect, vainly, without avail” (Carson). The photographic ritual of familial togetherness in no way forecloses future separation.

In *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, Campt reads Hirsch’s work on how family photographs act to both record and construct narratives of family life. Campt suggests that, in Hirsch’s reading, it is by “imaging affiliation” that pictures are both “visually and affectively suturing individuals to one another” (Campt 48). In other words, placing people alongside each other in the space of a photographic frame binds them both in terms of what is seen and what is felt. For Campt to characterize this photographic framing as an act of “suturing” is to suggest that the separation between individuals is first a wound, and that it is this form of laceration that photographs have the capacity to heal. But if the images in *Nox* provide this kind of relief, we as readers are not privy to it. Within the space of their photographic frames inheres an element of Barthes’s *punctum*—“that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthes 1980, 27). To the reader of *Nox*, Carson’s family snapshots are poignant, but subjectively so. These photographs are, above all, records of an inaccessible past. They picture familial affiliations no longer possible.

As a work that investigates the limits of memory and meaning making in the face of familial loss, and that does so in part by collecting and exhibiting photographs, *Nox* recalls Barthes’s *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Except for one photograph, Barthes presents each of those he describes somewhere in his book. The excluded image, the winter

garden photograph of his mother as a little girl, is central to his project. It is through his encounter with this image that Barthes is able to find connection to his mother after her death; it is this picture above all that he experiences as a wound. Barthes begins by describing how in his grief for his late mother, he sought a “just image”—one that would depict his mother accurately, and that would give to him “a sentiment as certain as remembrance” (70). It is the winter garden photograph, Barthes finds, that is able to do this for him. This image, writes Barthes, “accords with both my mother’s being and my grief at her death” (70). While other photographs of his mother succeed only in provoking his mother’s identity, the winter garden photograph, for Barthes, preserves something much more unusual: her essence (71). The decision he makes not to reproduce the winter garden photograph within *Camera Lucida* is tied to the untranslatability of the feelings it inspires. Barthes says (within a space of parentheses) that this photograph wounds him in a way that it cannot wound his reader. It will not mean enough to someone whose connection to its subject is not familial. He writes,

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the “ordinary”; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound. (73, emphasis in original)

The explicit connection between text and images in *Nox* is quite unlike that set up here by Barthes. While Barthes leaves out this family photograph because it cannot mean to his reader what it means to him, Carson leaves her feelings undisclosed, and her images on exhibit. While Barthes continually describes his own affective responses to the many pictures he shows, Carson only very minimally narrates the photographs she includes.

Carson describes the punctum—the way a particular photograph pierces her—only once in *Nox*. Very late in the accordion-style work, she centers on an image of her brother as a child. As in all of the family pictures included in *Nox*, he is quite young. This photograph is, in fact, the final family snapshot that appears in the course of the book, and it shows Carson’s brother in the very bottom center of its perfectly fluted square frame. The more delicate features of his face are difficult to discern. Even up close, we cannot make out whether he is smiling loosely or gripped in thought, but his gaze is strikingly directed at the camera. In sun, he stands with his back against the trunk of a tree. He is directly below a platform of branches and occupied by three larger boys who blend—unlike him—into the space of the foliage that surrounds them. Carson remarks directly of this image, in the first prose poem that follows its inclusion in *Nox*,

When we were children the family moved a lot and wherever we went my brother wanted to make friends with boys too old for him. He ran behind them, mistook the rules, came home with a bloody nose, it puzzled me from the beginning, it made my heart sink. I have a photograph of him (taken in the bush behind Bald Rock) about ten years old standing on the ground beneath a treehouse. Above him in the treehouse you can see three older boys gazing down. They have raised the ladder. *He is giving the camera a sideways invisible look.* Years later, when he began to deal drugs, I got the old sinking feeling – not for the criminality of it, not for the danger, but *that look*. No one knew him. He was the one who was old. (Carson 8.2, my emphasis)

In this rare moment of explicit, detailed narration, Carson describes the punctum of this image. In addition to the raised ladder (which hangs just below the base of the treehouse) there is her brother’s “sideways invisible look” which, reproduced in *Nox*, is only blurrily transmitted. Here, Carson’s short sentences stand out in contrast to the long, languorous ones that begin this prose poem, emphasizing the impact of the raised ladder, her brother’s peculiar look, and her ultimate observations of him. The last two sentences—comprised

wholly of single-syllable words—are especially weighted and slowing. Anticipating their final, steady beat, the penultimate sentence ends similarly: “but that look” (8.2). It is ultimately her brother’s “sideways invisible look” that leads Carson to assert that no one knew him. This is a claim, but it is also the central challenge of *Nox* itself: to imagine what a work of translation looks like when applied to affective life.

Nox complicates our vision, in other words, of how photographs act to stitch lives together. As it fans open, Carson’s meticulous efforts at translation and numbered prose poems proliferate, and more and more images accrete without unfurling any clear sense of narrative trajectory. The arrangement of these photographs further emphasizes their ambiguity. The capacious accordion-style shape that *Nox* takes both permits and insists on multiple modes of engagement with the photographs it envelops. On the one hand, we can look at these images within the framing space of their individual pages. On the other, because *Nox* is so emphatically *unbounded*, we can never entirely divorce these pictures from each other. One reviewer of *Nox* describes the form of accordion-style books such as this one as making possible “the simultaneous representation of episode and arc, individual and ensemble” (Chiasson). Each photograph remains at the same time isolated and a part of the curated visual exhibition of all those that surround it.

Carson's Curatorial Practice

In *Nox*, Carson demonstrates how the work of translation requires selection by providing not only a finished English version of Catullus's elegy, but also detailed and prolific lexical entries. Before making public, that is, a completed text turned from one language into another, the translator must decide which of the often multiple possible meanings of a word to show. In this way, translation is a form of textual curation. In her effort of translation, and, more broadly, in her public exhibition of a selection of personal, testimonial materials, such as family snapshots, Carson creates in *Nox* a curated archive that sheds light on the intersections between contemporary practices of curation and book-making.

To describe Carson's *Nox* as a curated archive requires consideration of two broader, framing questions: what counts as contemporary curation, and how do current curatorial practices come to matter? A significant amount of critical exploration is presently taking place with respect to these key provocations; just last year (in 2012), for example, Independent Curators International (ICI) published what promises to be the first of a book series entitled *Perspectives in Curating*. Written by Terry Smith, a professor of art history and theory, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* provides a clear point of entry for what he describes as a nascent and ongoing dialogue among various kinds of interested practitioners: art historians, museum workers, cultural studies scholars, and especially artists. *Thinking Contemporary Curating* draws attention particularly to the ways in which the role of curator has shifted within the last couple of decades, and how this designation is becoming increasingly expansive as it gains purchase within different disciplines, and with respect to distinct

materials or environments. Smith explains, for example, that curation happens within and without the space of museums; “curating now encompasses not only exhibition making but also programming at many kinds of alternative venues, and is often adjunct to even the most experimental art space” (Smith 19).

While the etymology of the word “curator” underscores both care and oversight, it fails to emphasize the agency and organizational dimension of this work (“curator”). In an introductory meditation on the term, Smith notes its widespread circulation in contemporary discourse, and describes how the

title of curator is assumed by anyone who has a more than minimal role in bringing about a situation in which something creative might be done, who manages the possibility of invention, or even organizes opportunities for the consumption of created objects or orchestrates art-like occasions. Google invites us to curate our profile, Picasa our very own image gallery. (17)

What unites these assorted meanings—the umbrella under which we may locate them—is their dependence on the process of aggregation and exclusion. To act as curator is not only to care for and oversee, but, in the contemporary sense of the term, *to gather and omit*, and to then make public one’s gathered materials through some form of exhibition. Exhibition is key insofar as it differentiates the work of curator from that of archivist. While the archivist acts to both assemble and arrange, the work of *display* remains central to the task of the curator. As Smith writes,

To exhibit is [...] to bring a selection of [...] works of art, into a shared space (which may be a room, a site, a publication, a web portal, or an app) with the aim of demonstrating, primarily through the experiential accumulation of visual connections, a particular constellation of meaning that cannot be made known by other means. (30)

Ultimately, Smith claims, “exhibiting artistic meaning is the main task of the contemporary curator” (31). As an exhibition in book form, *Nox* takes part in contemporary curatorial practice.

Through its narration, *Nox* reveals little about the curatorial practice of its own construction. As readers, we are left to wonder how and when precisely Carson selected and organized the material she presents. Questions persist: did she fill this scrapbook day-by-day as reflections came to her? As she recalled or physically discovered the family snapshots she includes? Were the smaller images of shadowy place already cut to size, or did she snip away rough edges with the hope of illuminating a particular detail or angle of light? In other words, we cannot know how methodically planned a process creating *Nox* was, but small details suggest a rougher quality to the work produced—small typographical errors, for example, persist within the space of its long single sheet. As a memorial album, *Nox* reflects Carson’s excavation of her brother. Drawing attention again and again to all that resides in the obscurity of night, it enacts the indispensable; to borrow from Benjamin, *Nox* archives “the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam” (Benjamin 1999, 576).

Configured and culled from Carson’s own intimate visual and textual materials, *Nox* acts, like Benjamin’s archives, to preserve “the idiosyncratic registrations of an author, subjective, full of gaps, unofficial” (Wizisla 1). It is a gathering of numerous and various matters and feelings, “a reservoir of experiences, ideas, and hopes, all of which have been inventoried and analyzed by their stock taker” (2). We can think of Carson as a kind of Benjaminian ragpicker. Benjamin notices in Charles Baudelaire’s description of a man who picks up trash, who catalogues and collates the material ephemera of everyday city life, a

deep similarity to the poet. The poetic method, in other words, may be considered analogous to the collection of fragments or debris; Benjamin writes, “Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse” (Benjamin 2007, 251). The last word here, “refuse,” is worth pausing over. It suggests for poetry the importance not only of piecing together broken bits of experience, but those very objects that have been by others discarded, repudiated, abandoned, or given up for lost. *Nox*, too, deals in what may appear at first glance like dregs: snippets of overlaid paper, unpolished scraps of writing, discolored and ripped renderings of the poem by Catullus that Carson ultimately translates. More figuratively, the anecdotes Carson includes, the details about her brother—his relationships, his disappearance, his muteness, what happens to his physical remains—persist here as scraps. They are memories quietly relayed and materially patched together.

Nox is, in its initial form, an index of Carson’s own impulse to collect in the wake of familial loss. Before it becomes an example of curation, Carson’s project takes root in the archival practice of *keeping a notebook*. The notebook as a site of collection or archive is especially suggestive with respect to its connection to mourning, for, as Joan Didion writes, “Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss” (Didion 1968, 132). According to Didion, we keep notebooks out of some inherent urge to take stock, to reorder, to make sense of what is fleeting, to catalog, in other words, that which we urgently feel may vanish before (and even after) it goes recorded.

The thrust of Didion’s claims connects as well to issues of both memory and self-deception. As one who describes strangers, maintains small lists of everyday tasks, notes, for

example, the tastes of a particular meal or attributes of an outfit, she writes, “I imagine, in other words, that the notebook is about other people. But of course it is not” (135). The private notebook, argues Didion, is ultimately not about facts, or about making coherent one’s trains of thought. It is instead about the keeping of feelings, the transcription of who one was at a certain moment; “Remember,” Didion says, “*what it was to be me*: that is always the point” (136, emphasis in original). The private notebook is a space of subjectivity, an archive that necessarily exposes the archivist. In *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*, Michael Taussig suggests—in a move complementary to Didion’s—that

the notebook is actually an extension of oneself if not more self than oneself, like an entirely new organ alongside one’s heart and brain, to name but the most evocative organs of our inner self. What this new organ does is incorporate other worlds into one’s own. (Taussig 105)

In Didion’s words,

our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable “I.” We are not talking here about the kind of notebook that is patently for public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful *pensées*; we are talking about something private, about bits of the mind’s string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker. (136)

As a private notebook then made public, *Nox* unsettles Didion’s separation of the two spheres. While *Nox* becomes a work “patently for public consumption,” it retains aspects of those “bits of the mind’s string too short to use” (136). It is populated, quite literally, by fragments. A notebook that collects and arranges Carson’s memorial scraps in the time after her brother’s death, *Nox* asks what kind of meaning gets translated when an intimate and “erratic assemblage” is made available for public exhibition.

Nox is neither a museum nor an archive in the traditional or institutional senses of these words, but it puts pressure directly on the concept of exhibition, as the word circulates in Smith's discussion of contemporary curatorial practice. "Exhibition," he writes,

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, each triggered by looking, that accumulates until the viewer has understood the curator's insight and hopefully, arrived at insights previously unthought by both. (Smith 35, my emphasis)

As a mass-produced and widely published book, *Nox* provides a space for the public *exhibition* of an intimate gathering of materials, and, in this way, relies entirely on Carson's act of poetic curation. *Nox* connects some of the critical questions around current modes of curating to contemporary practices of bookmaking and publication. *Nox* suggests, that is, that capacious and untraditional book forms may inventively respond to that which Smith identifies as a particularly "interesting challenge for curators" in the present: to counteract passive spectatorship and to instead "curate experiences in which subjects exercise the kinds of creativity required by their contemporaneity" (43). In its strange doubling as book and art object, *Nox* demands to be understood not only as material to be *read*, but matter to be *observed and felt* in much the way that one who visits a space of exhibition comes to inhabit a curated collection.

Illumination and Memorial Matter

Particularly insofar as this epitaph in book form reflects and meditates on the meticulous work of gathering and then exhibiting as a means of processing loss, *Nox* calls for lingering and rumination. Its shape, size, weight, and complex, layered formation further encourage a slow, attentive, and sensorial reading practice. *The Irish Times* 2011 interview with Carson underscores the unhurried, almost ceremonial type of engagement *Nox* requires. Crediting her collaborator, Robert Currie, for the book's creative form here as well, Carson comments at some length on the making of the book, and on the experiences she imagines might be inspired by it. The article's author, Parul Sehgal, reports of *Nox*,

It's reading at its most mimetic: Carson makes the reader participate in translating the poem – and in deciphering her elusive elder brother. Carson credits Currie, her collaborator, for encouraging this complicity. “He thought it was important to have the reader *enter into the reading physically*, as I did when I was making the pages,” she says. “Having it in the box and having it unfold draws you in too. You can go back and forth, and you can turn it over.” She takes abundant pleasure in its heft and form. “I like to walk around ideas, but I'm not intrinsically spatial as a thinker. I make a page, which is a flat event. Currie has a way of observing any page and knowing how it would be in space. He added spatiality to these pages. The book's publication happened to coincide with Kindle, and I'm so pleased that it's so un-Kindle-izable.¹⁰ (Sehgal, my emphasis)

Replicating Carson's memorial scrapbook as a single sheet of folded paper (roughly paginated, but unnumbered) compels the reader of *Nox* to take part in the intricate and elaborate elements of translation that Carson performs. And, as Carson happily notes, producing this epitaph in the form of such a weighty and necessarily three-dimensional artifact precludes the possibility of any easy digitization. *Nox* further enacts the impossibility of complete translation through its inability to be easily transformed or rendered in a two-

¹⁰ The review of *Nox* that appeared in *New York Magazine* in April 2010 also describes the book as “the opposite of an e-reader” (Anderson).

dimensional medium. The reading experience of *Nox* could not be simply produced on screen because the work itself would not be materially present in the same way. It would not permit *entrance* in the way Carson emphasizes its spatial dimensions make possible. It would not literally weigh on its readers as it does in its current book form.

In addition to reading, the seemingly simple process of citing *Nox* is made difficult by its formal presentation, and emphasizes the reader's increasingly subjective and potentially isolating (or untranslatable) experience of *Nox*. Consider, for example, how some of its lexical entries center on the same word, how one numbered prose poem is repeated, and how both entries and poems sometimes stretch across multiple pages. Again, the photographs of *Nox* surface without credits or corresponding dates. And, like the photographs, segments of letters and transcriptions of conversations are often only partially contextualized (if at all). The space of *Nox* is one of accretion: shadowy memorial fragments literally pile on top of each other, and much of its affective power—though, as Carson says, this part is not wholly due to her, but to Currie—is born of its shape. As readers, we are forced both to pull apart and to inhabit *Nox*. Further, in its capacity to stretch and to collapse, *Nox* draws attention to, and proliferates, the experience of distance. This is a multitudinous and multivalent work that demands we acknowledge the perpetual space between different languages and between different people. *Nox* demonstrates how, in the face of loss, personal history becomes a space of material curation. Though I realize its material limits, Benjamin's words ring through my head each time I hold this memorial archive in my hands. He so aptly describes a reader's experience of the specific fan-like materiality maintained by *Nox*: "He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never

comes to the end of its segments” (Benjamin 1999, 597). Through its collapse and expansion, its size and heaviness, and especially the visual and textual artifacts it exhibits, *Nox* continually calls attention to its own sweeping physical presence.

As constitutive parts of this larger testimonial object, what is stressed especially about the family photographs (and other embedded matter) is their material dimension—the ways in which they physically contribute to the making of *Nox* as a memorial monument and marker of loss. Punctuating the lexical entries and the prose poems, these family images interrupt Carson’s reflections on her present with material from her history, demonstrating how the past physically persists in the present.¹¹ As Geoffrey Batchen has noted with respect to vernacular photographs like those catalogued by *Nox*, everyday visual matters (such as family portraits or miniature photographic alters) compel us to attend especially to their morphology or physicality. They require us to “look at rather than only through the photograph” (Batchen 60). As elements of *Nox*, Carson’s family photographs insist on being read as matter—a collection of familial material belongings that testify not only through *what* they picture but *how* they picture it.

What is curious about the materiality of the family photographs in *Nox* is the way in which they have been reproduced, or materially translated from their original scrapbooked form. Again, as Carson’s framing assertion confirms, *Nox* is “an epitaph for him in the form of a book. This is a replica of it, as close as we could get” (Carson). As a mass-produced, published book, *Nox* should not be confused with the original epitaph of Carson’s own making. While unoriginal, Carson claims *Nox* as an approximation of the highest quality, an

¹¹ Through its installation of visual materials, *Nox*, like *Maus* and *Austerlitz*, succeeds in demonstrating how “the memory of the past is an act firmly located in the present” (Hirsch 2012, 40).

adaptation completely true to that which it transforms. It is impossible, however, once you open up the work of *Nox*, or move your finger across the flattened version even of the family photograph that graces its cover, to take this section of Carson's claim completely at face value. This final work cannot really be *as close as* one could get. The texture of the photographs—as well as the collages and the scraps of paper—could have been more fully *and tactically* reproduced. The images could have been printed at a higher resolution. These are material approximations that demonstrate not intense closeness to originality, but the persistence of difference between archival object and curated replica.

As material forms identified from the outset as replicas, the photographs in *Nox* serve as an investigation of just what it means to try for closeness while *showing* that to achieve it absolutely here remains impossible.¹² Nested within *Nox*, these images simultaneously document absence and visually testify to past presence, and they do so somewhat blurrily. As one of the many structuring constellations in *Nox*, that partake in this meditation on what it looks like to curate the traces of intimate histories, the photographs then both illuminate and disrupt the epitaph's other constitutive parts. Insisting on the simultaneity of nearness and its infinite deferral, they perform Carson's theorization of translation. In its bountiful unfolding, *Nox* analogizes the practice of translation to that of poetic memorialization, and insists that both are without end. Carson writes, "Prowling the

¹² Susan Stewart describes the "obvious illusion" of the textures of the materials replicated in *Nox* as creating a "*trompe l'oeil* effect that compounds the work's dominating mood of distance and belatedness. The inauthenticity of this replica, deliberately amateurish as a work of visual art, beckons to a prior fleeting presence that constantly recedes before the mourner" (Stewart, emphasis in original). I strongly agree with Stewart's reading of *Nox* as developing a "mood of distance and belatedness" in large part through its replication of the materials it encloses, but I think the kind of meaning Carson suggests as fleeting is even broader than that which a mourner seeks. Distance and belatedness are suggested, in *Nox*, with respect not just to remembering someone now lost, but to knowing someone at all.

meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light” (Carson 7.1). *Nox* materializes the unwieldiness of loss and the attempt to make meaning of someone now absent. All that remains is the possibility of prowling, and, as Carson’s family photographs attest, distance and obscurity will persist. For all its emphasis on illumination, *Nox* demonstrates the richness of that which resides under perpetual, if partial, cover of darkness. It argues for the essential experience of knowing the night.

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