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# Material Intervention as Digital Resistance: Aesthetic and Archival Practices in Anne Carson's *Nox*

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**Abstract**

This article examines how Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) deploys material intervention as a form of digital resistance through what Karen Barad calls "material-discursive practices." Drawing on new materialist theory, the analysis demonstrates how Carson's hybrid elegy reveals matter itself as agential in resisting digital culture's dematerializing tendencies. Through strategic physicalization of digital communications (photocopying, collaging, and hand-binding), *Nox* reveals the material substrates that digital culture systematically obscures while creating what Jane Bennett terms "thing-power" through assembled objects that exceed their constituent parts. This analysis positions Carson's work within broader new materialist frameworks that challenge the nature/culture divide, demonstrating how material agency can intervene in digital capitalism's logic of ephemerality and planned obsolescence. By examining the entangled relationships between bodies, technologies, and texts in *Nox*, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on material poetics and establishes new materialist reading practices for contemporary experimental literature.

***Keywords: new materialism, material agency, digital resistance, material-discursive practices, thing-power, experimental poetics.***

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Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) presents what Karen Barad would call a "phenomenon," not simply an object of study but "a differential pattern of mattering within and as part of the world's dynamic performance" (140). This accordion-folded artist's book, created as an elegy for Carson's estranged brother Michael, assembles fragments of digital correspondence, photocopied photographs, and dictionary entries into what Jane Bennett terms an "assemblage," a heterogeneous confederation of elements that generates effects irreducible to the sum of its parts (23). Rather than merely representing grief through linguistic expression, *Nox* enacts what new materialist theorists call "material agency"; the idea that nonhuman matter actively participates in meaning-making, shaping affect and narrative as much as language does (Barad 33, Bennett 21).

The work's significance extends beyond formal innovation to engage fundamental questions about the relationship between materiality and digitality in contemporary culture. As digital technologies increasingly mediate human relationships, *Nox* reveals what Diana Coole and Samantha Frost identify as the "agentic contributions of nonhuman forces" that digital culture systematically obscures (9). Carson's strategic deployment of photocopying, paper, ink, and binding creates what this analysis terms "material-discursive resistance;" a form of opposition that operates through the agency of matter itself rather than purely human intention.

This article argues that *Nox* functions as both elegy and new materialist intervention, demonstrating how assembled objects can resist digital capitalism's dematerializing logic while generating new possibilities for embodied engagement with loss. Through analysis of Carson's material-discursive practices, this study examines how the work challenges anthropocentric assumptions about agency, meaning, and resistance, positioning materiality as an active participant in cultural critique rather than passive substrate for human expression.

*Nox* begins with what Barad calls "intra-action," the mutual constitution of matter and meaning through entangled relationships rather than separate entities acting upon each other (33). The work consists entirely of reproduced materials that have been assembled through what Bennett terms "confederations" of human and nonhuman actors: photocopying machines, paper, ink,

scissors, glue, and binding materials (21). These material components are not merely tools wielded by Carson but active participants in the work's meaning-making processes.

The photocopying process itself demonstrates material agency in ways that challenge conventional assumptions about digital reproduction. While digital files can be copied infinitely without degradation, photocopying introduces what Bennett calls "thing-power," the capacity of material objects to act as quasi-agents within assemblages (2). Each photocopy bears traces of the machine's material processes: slight blurring, toner variations, paper texture, and mechanical artifacts that reveal the material labour involved in reproduction. These material traces are not simply aesthetic effects but what Barad terms "material-semiotic" practices that participate in the work's production of meaning (152).

The degradation visible in Carson's photocopied materials functions as what Benjamin might call the "aura" of mechanical reproduction; a temporal trace that digital copies systematically eliminate (223). When Carson reproduces her brother's letters, the photocopy artifacts become meaningful precisely through their imperfection. The slight blur of text makes reading laborious, requiring bodily effort that mirrors the emotional difficulty of processing estrangement and loss. The toner streaks and mechanical inconsistencies create what Derrida would recognize as "differance" (13); a spacing and temporal delay that disrupts the immediacy digital culture promises. These material interruptions force readers to slow down, to encounter text as a resistant object rather than a transparent medium.

Carson's assemblage of photocopied materials creates what new materialist theorists call distributed agency across human and nonhuman actors. The degraded quality of photocopied text makes visible the material processes that digital reproduction typically conceals. As Karen Barad observes, "matter and meaning are not separate elements but are intra-actively related" (3). In *Nox*, the material degradation of photocopied communications becomes meaningful precisely through its difference from digital reproduction's supposed perfection, revealing what Bennett calls the "political ecology of things"; the ways material objects participate in networks of power and resistance (108).

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Carson's fragmentary translation of Catullus 101 exemplifies how material-discursive practices can resist digital culture's demand for instant accessibility and complete information. Rather than providing a fluid translation, Carson presents the Latin poem as a series of dictionary entries, each word dissected through etymology, definition, and personal reflection. This methodological approach demonstrates how spatial arrangement on the page creates meanings that neither scholarly apparatus nor personal testimony could generate independently.

The word "frater" (brother) appears with its Latin definition, followed by Carson's note: "When he was running away, he called me, once. I could have stopped him." This juxtaposition of scholarly apparatus and personal pain demonstrates how material arrangement on the page creates meanings that neither element could generate alone. The dictionary format itself materializes what Benjamin calls the "untranslatability" of certain experiences, especially those tied to grief and memory (224). Each Latin word becomes a physical object on the page, surrounded by white space that visualizes the gaps in understanding between Carson and her brother.

The word "ave" (hail/farewell) receives extensive etymological treatment, yet Carson's accompanying personal commentary, "I never said goodbye", reveals how scholarly knowledge fails to bridge emotional distance. The material spacing between dictionary entry and personal confession creates what Derrida terms "espacement," a gap that cannot be filled but becomes meaningful through its very persistence (9). This spatial relationship between elements demonstrates how material arrangements participate in meaning-making processes irreducible to linguistic content alone.

Carson's handling of the word "desiderium" (longing/grief) particularly demonstrates material-discursive resistance to digital culture's algorithmic logic. Where search engines promise complete information retrieval, Carson's fragmented approach reveals language as materially resistant to total comprehension. The word appears multiple times throughout Nox in different contexts, accumulating material traces through repetition rather than achieving semantic closure. This accumulative approach challenges digital culture's tendency toward data

optimization and search efficiency, insisting instead on the temporal labour required for meaning-making through what Barad calls the "material-semiotic" nature of language: its participation in material practices rather than separation from the material world (152).

The work's handling of photographs demonstrates how material reproduction processes participate in memorial practice through temporal layering that exceeds human intention. Unlike digital images that exist as data patterns, Carson's photocopied photographs bear material traces of reproduction processes that become part of their memorial function. The degraded reproduction quality makes visible the temporal distance between photographic moment and memorial encounter, showing how material processes participate in grief work through what Susan Sontag might recognize as a double melancholy: first, the inherent sadness of photography's temporal capture, and second, the additional mourning created through material reproduction (15).

When Carson photocopies childhood photographs of herself and Michael, the mechanical process strips away colour, contrast, and detail, creating ghostly traces that seem more appropriate to memory's imperfect operations than photography's supposed exactitude. The photocopy grain becomes a material metaphor for the texture of remembering, while the loss of photographic detail mirrors the gaps in Carson's knowledge of her brother's adult life. This material degradation participates in the memorial process, demonstrating how material decay and human forgetting operate through similar logics of temporal erosion.

Particularly striking is Carson's reproduction of a photograph showing Michael as a young man, his face partially obscured by photocopy shadows that create what Barthes calls the "punctum"; the detail that wounds the viewer (27). Here, the wounding detail is precisely the material failure of reproduction itself. The shadows that fall across Michael's face in the photocopy become prophetic of his future disappearance from Carson's life, showing how material processes generate meanings that exceed conscious authorial control.

Carson's photocopied photographs also resist digital culture's promise of perfect archival preservation. While digital images can theoretically exist unchanged indefinitely, the photocopied materials in *Nox* will continue aging, yellowing, and deteriorating. This material vulnerability becomes ethically significant, creating what Carolyn Steedman calls "the matter of

the archive"; the way historical preservation depends on fragile material substrates that embody their own temporal limitations (18). The photographs' material mortality mirrors human mortality, creating a form of memorial practice that acknowledges rather than denies the inevitability of loss.

*Nox* functions as what new materialists term a material-discursive assemblage that challenges conventional distinctions between subjects and objects, culture and nature, human and nonhuman agency. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of assemblage, the work demonstrates how heterogeneous elements, photographs, text, paper, ink, binding materials, enter into relations that produce emergent effects irreducible to individual components (Bennett 23). The work's archival practice exemplifies what Bennett calls "horizontal" rather than "vertical" causality; effects emerge through lateral relations between assembled elements rather than top-down human control (21).

The accordion fold structure creates effects that challenge digital interface conventions and enforce embodied engagement with temporal processes. While digital texts exist as what N. Katherine Hayles terms "flickering signification"; the patterns that can be instantly rearranged without material constraint. *Nox* insists on sequential unfolding that engages readers' bodies in temporal processes (30). The physical act of unfolding becomes part of the work's meaning-making, demonstrating the "entanglement" of material and discursive practices that Barad identifies as fundamental to posthuman agency (152).

The accordion structure specifically resists what Franco Berardi identifies as digital capitalism's acceleration of "connective" communication (21). The rapid, functional exchanges that prioritize information transfer over human encounter. *Nox's* material format enforces what Berardi calls "conjunctive" communication (22), which requires temporal investment and embodied presence. Readers cannot skim through *Nox* or search for specific content; they must commit to the temporal process of sequential unfolding. This material resistance to digital browsing practices creates what Paul Virilio would recognize as a form of "dromology"; a critique of speed that reveals how acceleration serves power rather than human flourishing (69).

*Nox* enacts what Sara Ahmed calls "affective materiality"; the ways emotional experiences are mediated through material encounters that exceed purely cognitive processing

(10). The work's tactile dimensions create an embodied knowing that challenges digital culture's privileging of visual information over multisensory engagement. When readers handle *Nox*, they encounter what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls "motor intentionality"; the way bodily movement participates in meaning-making before conscious interpretation begins (110). The weight of the unfolded accordion, the resistance of pages that stick together, the effort required to manage the unwieldy format; these material encounters become part of the work's memorial practice.

The photocopied text requires different reading practices than digital display, creating what Bennett calls "sensuous materiality" that engages readers' bodies in ways digital interfaces typically minimize (13). Reading *Nox* becomes a form of physical labour that mirrors the emotional work of grief. The eye strain caused by degraded text quality, the hand fatigue from managing the accordion format, the temporal investment required for sequential unfolding. These bodily experiences become meaningful rather than merely inconvenient. They demonstrate what phenomenologists call embodied cognition; the way thinking happens through and as bodily engagement rather than despite material constraints.

*Nox* challenges anthropocentric assumptions about archival practice by demonstrating what Rosi Braidotti calls "posthuman" agency; forms of action that exceed human intentionality while remaining ethically and politically significant (49). Carson's archival assemblage includes nonhuman actors—paper, ink, machines, binding materials as active participants in memorial practice rather than passive tools. This posthuman approach to archiving resists what Nick Srnicek calls the "platform economy"; the way digital capitalism captures and commodifies human memory through data extraction and algorithmic manipulation.

The work's material format specifically resists digital capitalism's logic of planned obsolescence and platform dependency. While digital files become inaccessible through format changes, software updates, and platform closure, *Nox* persists through material networks that operate independently of technological systems. The work cannot be searched, indexed, or algorithmically analysed in ways that make it valuable to data extraction capitalism. Its material format creates what Shoshana Zuboff calls "sanctuary" from surveillance capitalism's behavioural modification apparatus (524). Readers cannot be tracked, their attention cannot be quantified, and their engagement cannot be converted into actionable behavioural data.

Carson's photocopying practice also challenges digital capitalism's promise of infinite reproducibility without degradation. Each photocopy introduces unique material variations that resist standardization and mass production. While digital reproduction enables mechanical reproduction that destroys artistic aura, Carson's photocopying creates what might be termed 'material aura'; the unique traces of specific machines, papers, and reproduction processes that cannot be standardized or optimized. This material uniqueness resists digital capitalism's tendency toward algorithmic optimization and data commodification while creating what Bennett calls "thing-power'; the capacity for objects to act as quasi-agents within political and cultural assemblages (2).

The work's resistance operates through "material-discursive practices" rather than purely oppositional politics (Barad 152). By revealing the material substrates that digital culture conceals, *Nox* participates in what Annemarie Mol calls "ontological politics"; challenges to fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality rather than simply ideological critique (74). This approach demonstrates how material interventions can function as cultural resistance while remaining attentive to the agency of nonhuman actors in processes of social transformation.

Carson's archival methodology in *Nox* operates as what Ann Cvetkovich calls "counter-archive," challenging institutional memory practices through personal and material approaches that resist official historical narratives (244). Where institutional archives prioritize preservation, organization, and accessibility, Carson's archive embraces fragmentation, decay, and material resistance. The scattered fragments of correspondence, the partial translations, the degraded photographs; these elements create what José Esteban Muñoz terms "ephemera"; traces of lives and relationships that official archives systematically exclude or marginalize (10).

Following Steedman's attention to dust, paper, and storage conditions, *Nox* reveals how archives are never neutral repositories but material assemblages that shape what can be known and remembered. Carson's domestic archive similarly reveals the gendered and classed dimensions of memorial practice, showing how personal relationships exist partially outside institutional memory systems while remaining vulnerable to material loss and decay. The fragmented correspondence between Carson and Michael creates what Diana Taylor calls

"repertoire" rather than "archive" (19); embodied knowledge practices that resist official documentation while remaining politically and culturally significant.

The gaps in their correspondence, the missing letters, the failed attempts at communication; these absences become materially present through Carson's archival practice. The work shows how estrangement and family trauma create alternative temporalities that resist linear narrative while remaining historically significant. This approach to counter-archival practice demonstrates how material-discursive assemblages can preserve forms of knowledge that institutional archives systematically exclude while creating new possibilities for memorial engagement that honour both presence and absence, connection and estrangement.

As digital technologies increasingly mediate human relationships, *Nox* provides a crucial model for material-discursive engagement with digital culture that neither rejects technological mediation nor accepts its dematerializing logic uncritically. The work demonstrates how assembled objects can resist digital capitalism's logic of ephemerality while creating spaces for embodied encounter with loss. Carson's material intervention establishes new possibilities for posthuman memorial practice that honour both digital mediation and material agency, suggesting pathways for meaningful cultural resistance within digital assemblages.

The implications of Carson's material-discursive practice extend beyond literary analysis to engage broader questions about agency, resistance, and cultural critique in the digital age. By positioning materiality as active participant rather than passive substrate, *Nox* contributes to new materialist projects of challenging anthropocentric assumptions while generating more ethically and politically responsive forms of cultural engagement. The work's posthuman archival practice offers resources for developing material-discursive forms of resistance adequate to the challenges of digital capitalism while remaining attentive to the agency of nonhuman actors in processes of cultural transformation.

Furthermore, Carson's work establishes methodological frameworks for analysing contemporary experimental literature through new materialist approaches that attend to the entanglement of textual, material, and technological assemblages. The work suggests directions for future scholarship on material poetics that could extend these insights to other contemporary experimental practices, contributing to broader theoretical conversations about posthuman

agency, digital resistance, and the politics of matter in late capitalism. *Nox* thus functions not only as memorial practice but as theoretical intervention, demonstrating how experimental literature can participate in broader cultural and political transformations through material-discursive practices that exceed purely human agency while remaining ethically and politically significant.

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