

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: BOOKS AS ARCHIVES: ARCHIVAL
POETICS IN POST-1980 EXPERIMENTAL
WRITING AND BOOK DESIGN

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In “Books as Archives: Archival Poetics in Post-1980 Experimental Writing and Book Design,” I develop a formal and historical poetics of what I call multimodal book-archives, an experimental mode of contemporary writing that tells stories through the collection and representation of reproduced texts and other artifacts. In forgoing any conventional concept of a narrator, the narratives and textual networks that book-archives construct are created through the interaction between texts that characters make, collect and transmit to others, ranging from handwritten letters and documents produced by word processors, to drawings, maps and photographs. Because book-archives combine verbal and pictorial modes, as well as different types of nonnarrative discourse like catalogues, exposition and argumentation, requiring a number of arduous and often nontraditional interpretive strategies such as the collation of verbal and pictorial elements, they pose important challenges to current theories of narrative as well as to established approaches to reading and

interpretation. Responding to these challenges, “Books as Archives” develops an archival poetics—a poetics of documentation and preservation, of curation and transmission—that examines a range of techniques presented in different types of book-archives. I offer readings of book-archives produced by contemporary authors such as Bill Bly, Mark Z. Danielewski, Anne Carson, and Warren Lehrer, modeling how each of these authors construct different types of book-archives for different audiences and effects. Building on research in multimodal narrative theory (Herman, Ryan, Gibbons, et al) as well as digital media studies (Hayles, Pressman, Starre, et al), I contextualize the emergence of book-archives within different literary genealogies (e.g., the epistolary novel, encyclopedic fiction, artists’ books, electronic hypertext, and graphic narratives) to explain why and how so many contemporary books have taken this form. I argue that by including collections of textual material inside their covers, contemporary authors draw attention to how subjectivity, knowledge and cultural memory are increasingly configured through distributed networks of people and artifacts in different social and institutional spaces. They explore these dynamics by experimenting with the material resources and expressive possibilities of the book—distinctly *not* “dead,” as so many thought—as an expressive artifact.

BOOKS AS ARCHIVES: ARCHIVAL POETICS IN POST-1980
EXPERIMENTAL WRITING AND BOOK DESIGN

by

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Preface

During the Q&A portion of a panel I participated on at the 2017 Narrative Conference in Montreal called “Multimodal Books as Archives,” I was asked by multimodal media and videogame theorist Jan-Noël Thon just *how far* the metaphor implied in the panel’s title went. In other words, Thon was pressing me, and the panel as whole, to articulate how accurate it *really* was to compare a small manufactured aesthetic object to that of a physical brick-and-mortar institutional space designed to preserve and organize heaps of textual artifacts. Surely this was an exaggeration or a categorization error, Thon and others in the room (which included Marie-Laure Ryan and Alison Gibbons) seemed to want to tell our all-graduate-student panel. I was presenting a short paper on Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) called “The Literary Compendium” that would become the foundation for the current project. My fellow panelists were discussing Thresa Cha’s *Dictee* (1982), Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s World* (2005), and Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* (2012)—books that employ archival tropes or procedures to various degrees, but in obviously different ways. At the time, I did not have a very good response for Thon. I remember comparing common procedures archivists do, like collecting, collocating, cataloging and cross-referencing to the ways these books compile artifacts and to the kinds of tasks they ask of readers. I’m not sure how persuasive I was, and the truth is I did not know at the time how far the book-as-archive metaphor really went, how accurate it was, or how heuristically productive it could be for the study of contemporary experimental literature. Since then, however, I have come to observe just how much

of contemporary art and intellectual discourse around knowledge production, information storage and media—and not just experimental literature—is permeating with the language, tropes and aesthetic forms of the archive. So much so that one is tempted to agree with Ernst van Alphen’s claim that “the archive has become [a] dominant cultural and symbolic form” of the contemporary period (van Alphen 2013: 7). In a sense, I suppose the impetus for this dissertation ultimately sprang from a desire to provide a better answer to that initial question posed in Montreal: what would it mean to define a book, even if only metaphorically, as a kind of archive?

At first I thought this dissertation was going to be a descriptive poetics of an emergent genre or mode, which I call *archival fiction*, but over time I realized that such a project was simply too big for what I was going to be able to accomplish during my time as a graduate student. I discovered that many of the literary objects I would come to describe as *book-archives* were not even works of fiction, but works of poetry and memoir and that many of the archival fictions were also constituted with poetry, photographs, drawings and various other kinds of documentary artifacts that, even if presented as being embedded within a fictional world, were clearly medial indexes of the “real” world. Multimodal and/or hypermedia book-archives turn traditional ideas of genre on their head, retooling the book as a multifaceted material and expressive medium fit to tell the kinds of stories that need to be told in a twenty-first century media ecology. But even though these authors work in or with different bookish mediums, genres, and modes, they still have something in common, they employ an *archival poetics*: a poetics of documentation and preservation, of curation and transmission.

As a literary scholar who has found himself engaging in current debates on the value and status of the book as a cultural and aesthetic object, I've come to adopt a broad and elastic understanding of what can constitute as "a book" in order to include all of the bookish things permeating in contemporary culture that are not traditional print-bound codices but that still employ an *archival poetics*. Just as there is no single definition of literature, let alone a consensus of what the object of literary studies is or should be, I don't think we'll ever have a single definition of The Book, but only of different *types* of books. There are simply way too many bookish things anymore that do not physically resemble the traditional codex but that are clearly its cultural offspring for which many of us clearly have no problem referring to as books. Just as we seem to have no problem calling a digital file an *e-book*, which we thumb through on our smartphones and tablets as if they were scrolls, I have no problem calling an electronic hypertext or a 100-foot sheet of cardstock folded into 200 pages a *book* either. A book can be a physical print-bound codex, but it can also be an electronic hypertext displayed on the internet, or a digital file one accesses through a library's database. Which is to say, we no longer consider the book as being a medium specific thing anymore, for we recognize the book as being constituted more by the conventions of organizing and reading both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication than by the specific medium information is conveyed through.

The book can be manipulated in all kinds of new and unusual ways to structure and deliver both verbal and nonverbal forms of representation, but books are not merely used to represent things, they can be used as instruments for creating, preserving, and examining things as well. As contemporary authors increasingly

employ archival devices in the construction of their books, the *lexicon* of the archive—collecting, compiling, preserving, curating, appraising, transmitting, listing, arranging, cataloguing, inventorying, collocating, juxtaposing, cross-referencing, xeroxing, fragments, bits, traces, gaps, lacunas, redactions, palimpsests, attribution, authentication—seeps into the language of literariness, bookishness, and textuality, and thus into the critical and scholarly discourse of contemporary literature.

There is still much more work to be done, for it turns out that the book-as-archive metaphor goes much further than I had expected. But I hope this dissertation makes an appealing case, and a lasting impression, for how reading books as archives can improve our understanding of what contemporary multimodal literature is, does, and can be in the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgements

Although this project began in late 2016, it didn't begin to take shape until 2017 when my advisor, Matthew Kirschenbaum, first introduced me to the work of hypertext author Bill Bly as well as to The Bill Bly Collection of Electronic Literature housed at The Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH). At that time I was mostly invested in the work of Mark Z. Danielewski, and it wasn't until I began reading Bly's work alongside Danielewski's that I realized this project was going to be about archival poetics in one way or another. If not for MITH's relationship with Bly, whom I'm now honored to call a friend, this project would have never been possible or else would have taken a very different shape than it did.

Dissertation writing can be discouraging, but what always gave me hope and direction was Matthew Kirschenbaum's thoughtful criticisms, generosity and continual support at every stage. At one point he encouraged me to create printouts reading "It's about the archive, stupid!" as a reminder of what this project was really about, which I did, and which are still plastered on the walls of my office space. I never left one of our meetings without feeling energized and excited to get back to work. I would also like to thank Lee Konstantinou who provided helpful feedback of several drafts at various stages and whose research and criticism I greatly admire. Brian Richardson, Oliver Gaycken and Kari Kraus all joined the project later down the road, but their insights and criticisms helped me think more critically about the scale and scope of the project and how to potentially revise it into a book manuscript.

A special thanks to Cameron Mozafari, friend and colleague, whose consultation and companionship kept me sane and organized during these last few

years of graduate student life. At different times and in different ways, Eric Zakim, David Wyatt, Jonathan Auerbach, Ralph Bauer, Linda Kauffman, Martha Nell Smith, Shirley Logan, and Tita Chico provided intellectual and emotional support that helped me escape various moments of personal and intellectual floundering. I've made many friends at the University of Maryland who have also helped me sustain a sense of community, especially during times when dissertation writing can overshadow every aspect of your life. Lauren Albright Flanigan, Steve Beaulieu, Kyle Bickoff, Kirk Greenwood, Paul Cote, Kathryn Kaczmarek Frew, Setsuko Yokoyama, John Kim, John Macintosh, Jesse Brooks, and Martin Camper deserve special mentioning.

I'd also like to acknowledge my Narrative peeps, those who participated in Narrative conferences with me on the topic of multimodal book-archives and/or who responded to my papers by pushing me to think more critically about what this project was about. Torsa Ghosal, Corey Efron, Eric Loy, Alison Gibbons, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Jan-Noël Thon in particular helped shape my thinking about what it means to read books *as* archives.

My parents, Kathleen and Terry Mong, Barry and Terri Davis, always encouraged me with love and compassion. I never would have got this far in life or as a scholar without their endless support and understanding.

And then there's Alia Nasier, who knew nothing about multimodal book-archives two years ago but is now practically an expert herself—against her will of course. Her love, compassion, and tolerance have enriched my life more than she knows. This dissertation is dedicated to her.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction: Reading Books as Archives.....	1
1. From Text to Book-Archive.....	1
2. Archive Fever.....	15
3. Chapter Outlines	21
Chapter 2: “If this document is authentic”: On Bill Bly’s Archival Poetics	26
1. A Tale of Two Archives	26
2. A System of Networks: From Storyspace to the Internet	37
3. The Writings: Production, Reception, Transmission.....	47
4. Historical Authenticity and Belief	60
Chapter 3: The Literary Compendium: On Mark Z. Danielewski’s <i>House of Leaves</i>	76
1. A Bookish Archive	76
2. How (Not) to Read the (Fictional) Publication History of <i>House of Leaves</i>	83
3. The Literary Compendium.....	98
4. Bookish Figures, Archival Tropes	118
Chapter 4: Instrumentalizing the Book: On Anne Carson’s <i>Nox</i>	126
1. From Scrapbook to Manufactured Reproduction: A Biography of a Book.....	126
2. Object, Form, Procedure, List.....	133
3. Lateral Poetics and Archival Tropes	148
4. Flickering Moments of Authenticity.....	164
Chapter 5: Beautiful Short Cuts: On Warren Lehrer’s <i>A Life in Books</i>	171
1. How to Build a Compendium	171
2. Why (Multimodal) Metonymy Now?	177
3. Bleu’s Life in Books: A Metonymy.....	184
4. The “Reality Affects” of Lehrer’s Fictive Objects	208
Chapter 6: Coda: From Book-Archives to Artifactual Narratives	220
Bibliography	225

Chapter 1

Introduction: Reading Books as Archives

1. From Text to Book-Archive

In an early scene from Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Johnny Truant, one of the novel's central protagonists, breaks into the apartment of a deceased writer named Zampanò. Reflecting on his first impression of Zampanò's apartment, Truant writes the following:

What hit me first was the smell...It was extremely layered...the actual source of which had long since evaporated. Back then it had overwhelmed me...These days I can no longer remember the smell only my reaction to it. Still if I had to give it a name, I think I would call it the scent of human history—a composite of sweat, urine, shit, blood, flesh and semen, as well as joy, sorrow, jealousy, rage, vengeance, fear, love, hope and a whole lot more. All the windows were nailed shut and sealed with caulking. The front entrance and courtyard doors all storm proofed. Even the vents were covered with duct tape...My best guess now is that he sealed his apartment in an effort to retain the various emanations of his things and himself. (*HoL* xv-xvi)

Zampanò has transformed the interior space of his apartment to mimic the material conditions of an archive, a space that, according to Truant, was meant to preserve not only Zampanò's "things" and "himself," but the very conditions needed to create those things to begin with, the "various emanations" of his life and work. Tucked

away in a corner of one of Zampanò's rooms, Truant discovers a "black, unremarkable, paint spattered trunk" (*HoL* 20) containing his life's work, what amounts to years' worth of writings and scribbles made on practically every writing surface imaginable pertaining to a documentary film called *The Navidson Record*. This casket-like trunk constitutes what textual scholar G. Thomas Tanselle would call a "personal archive" (Tanselle 2002: 405), but more importantly, this scene in Danielewski's novel represents what we might think of as the primal scene of the "found archive," the moment when a character (Truant) discovers an archive or manuscript (Zampanò's) which then substantially influences the consciousness of that character, as well as the direction and purpose of the narrative in question as a whole. Many of what I call "book-archives" discussed in this dissertation, whether fictional or autobiographical, feature similar moments or scenes. In the case of *House of Leaves*, Zampanò's manuscript becomes an obsession for Truant, transforming him in unimaginable ways, sending him down into the underworld of Zampanò's "The Navidson Record" (Zampanò's manuscript has the same title as the film it purports to examine). Zampanò's archive lays the foundation for Danielewski's novel and not only at the level of plot but at the material level of the page, for *House of Leaves* is not merely about Zampanò's writings, it is a reproduction of those writings as well as of a number of other textual artifacts, including Truant's commentary of Zampanò's manuscript and various notes provided by the novel's fictional Editors at Pantheon Books. *House of Leaves*, in other words, archives the textual procedures by which a collection of writings is produced, transmitted, edited and transformed into a novel (about a novel about film).

House of Leaves is obviously a work of metafiction, but unlike many of its forebearers in that genre it is also an exemplary of what Alexander Starre calls “metamedia,” a “literary work” that “uses specific devices to reflexively engage with the specific material medium to which it is affixed or in which it is displayed” (Starre 2015: 8). Many contemporary book-archives, and indeed much of contemporary literature more generally, makes use of metafictional devices, and although I draw attention to such devices when necessary, the weight of my analyses is often placed more on the *metamedia* side of things than on the *metafictional* side of things. This is because the questions and challenges makers of book-archives pose to readers tend to prioritize matters concerning the material, expressive, and epistemological possibilities of the book as object over matters concerning the representational paradoxes of language or the illegitimacy of master narratives. Contemporary cultural objects are permeated by what Werner Wolf calls “metareference,” “a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference” which extends from the aesthetic “artefact to the entire system of the media” in question (Wolf 2009: 31). In the case of contemporary book-archives, these acts of metareference point readers to the structure and mechanics of book-objects, to various forms of what Jessica Pressman calls “bookishness” (Pressman 2009, 2018), and how they instantiate the book as archive organized by certain devices and techniques that are deeply tied to the technological affordances and modes of representation of specific books.

Contemporary writers of experimental book-archives adopt a wide variety of mediums and representational modes in the construction of their books and thus present varying aspects and degrees of *multimodality*. Whenever a book’s

“meanings[s] are realized through more than one semiotic mode” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 183), or whenever a book “feature[s] a multitude of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives” (Gibbons 2012b: 421), it is by definition “multimodal”. In addition to employing different discourse types in their use of verbal modes (e.g., narrative, description, expository, persuasion, and argumentative), book-archives may also include facsimiles or reproductions of nonverbal, pictorial, or multimodal discourse, such as photographs, paintings, drawings, handwriting, x-rays, maps, diagrams, charts, newspaper clippings, encyclopedia entries, and so forth. Book-archives are often compendiums of literary genres and period styles as well, often incorporating letters exchanged between characters in the tradition of the epistolary novel, long elaborate explanations of ideas, histories, professions and theories typical of the encyclopedic novel tradition, sequences of primarily non-verbal modes as in graphic storytelling and the photo novel, as well as elaborate use of typography and page layout in the tradition of concrete literature and artists’ book. In other words, contemporary-book archives do not merely exploit the material and expressive resources of the book to collect and represent worlds and characters, they are storehouses of entire cultural forms and traditions, often repurposing such forms and traditions for novel effects.

Wolfgang Hallet suggests that the compendium-like nature of multimodal literature “represents and makes accessible the multimodality of cultural archives, knowledge, and memory” (Hallet 2009: 136-37). Which is to say, because human interaction and the expression of knowledge and information occurs in non-verbal as well as in a variety of multimodal forms of discourse, multimodal literature both

represents and provides greater access to a wider and more inclusive world of knowledge and history. Although readers will occasionally find examples of multimodal books produced before 1980 that incorporate such non-verbal or pictorial objects in their otherwise linguistically represented worlds or that even treat the book as a place for storing texts and other artifacts, the multimodal book-archive as a type of literary mode is a distinctly post-1980 phenomena, a product of new media and digital technology. In leveraging the technological affordances of contemporary media, including the use of software like QuarkXPress and Adobe's InDesign and Photoshop, writers of the past few decades not only incorporate practically all forms of visual media in their books, they deploy verbal signs as devices of visual expression and spatial orientation in ways that far exceed what mid-twentieth century writers of concrete literature could produce. No longer limited to the pen or even the electric typewriter, contemporary writers are able to integrate the representational possibilities of virtually all existing media into a single object—the book—with personal computers. The page of the book is no longer merely a vehicle for delivering verbal messages—top to bottom, left to right—the page is a malleable canvas that can accommodate a range of reproduced materials and expressive forms. Consequently, reading contemporary book-archives requires more than simply scanning the pages with the eyes. Reading the books discussed in this dissertation often requires a degree of dexterity; readers must physically manipulate these books with their hands in all sorts of ways, which not only defamiliarizes the experience of reading but can be physically exhausting as well.

Contemporary book-archives are greatly influenced by the hypertextual structures and multilinear narratives witnessed among works of early electronic literature. Indeed, hypertexts by John McDaid and Bill Bly represent some of the earliest experiments in what I call archival fiction. For instance, *House of Leaves*, with all of its recursive footnotes and forking paths, is not only an exemplary *multimodal* book-archive, it is an extremely complex *print* hypertext. So, although the vast majority of literary objects I would call “book-archives” are print-bound codices, my sense of what “the book” can be is elastic enough to accommodate all sorts of bookish objects, including electronic hypertexts. In *Digital Poetics*, Loss Pequeño Glazier offers a persuasive argument in support of this perspective, pointing out how the mechanism and function of the electronic “hyperlink” “is operationally identical to the codex with its footnotes, index, table of contents, *see also*’s, lists of prior publications, parenthetical asides, and numerous other devices of multilinearity” (Glazier 2002: 94). Glazier also makes the distinction between “hypertexts” and “hyperbooks,” both of which are “hypertextual systems of linking,” but whereas “the hyperbook consists of stand-alone, presumably self-contained, universe of writings that are inter-referential,” the “hypertext... refer[s] to a larger, uncontrolled universe” like the Internet (Glazier 2002: 86-87). Glazier goes on to claim that the majority of Storyspace hypertexts—which I focus on in greater detail in the next chapter—are technically “hyperbooks” because they present “closed hypertext universes” bound to the “controlled environment” of floppy disks (Glazier 2002: 88).¹ In short, first

¹ Although Glazier makes a compelling case for the bookishness of electronic disk-based hypertexts, I will hold on to the term “hypertext” throughout this dissertation as a matter of familiarity and convenience.

generation Storyspace hypertexts are in many ways functionally equivalent to print-bound codices at the level of user-object interface.

Here, I want to stress that in following textual scholar D. F. McKenzie, my understanding of what a “text” is includes not only “verbal” signs but “visual, oral, and numeric data, in the forms of maps, prints, and music, or archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography” (McKenzie 1986: 5). Which is to say, contemporary book-archives (no matter their material medium) are not merely “texts” or “works,” nor do they merely represent other texts or works. As heterogeneous collections of textual objects, they foreground the materiality of their own bookishness, including the expressive possibilities of different modes of representation and how the book’s topographic patterning and typographic layout can inform the meaning making process. Book-archives actively deploy what textual scholar Jerome McGann calls “bibliographic codes” (McGann 1991: 13), what other scholars have called “codex codes” (Portela 2013) or “graphic devices” (White 2005), and which I sometimes refer to as bibliographic forms.² At their most rudimentary level, bibliographic forms include any book’s particular aesthetic design and physical properties, including page layout, paper, ink, typeface, and binding (Greetham 1992).

² My preference for the term “bibliographic forms,” which is sometimes employed synonymously with bibliographic devices or techniques, rather than McGann’s “bibliographical codes,” is twofold. When textual scholars refer to “bibliographical codes” they are typically referring to the scholarly conventions and practices of bibliography, whereas I am primarily talking about the deliberate use of bibliographic material for expressive ends and how they signal generic literary-historical markers to the reader. The word “code” also implies a kind of secrecy, which must be interpreted or deciphered, whereas “form” is a more neutral category informed by the study of poetics.

Unlike conventional novels and poetic sequences, makers of book-archives tend to exploit the possibilities of their mediums to build complex narrative structures and textual sequences to represent the distributed networks of subjects and objects that constitute our media economy, illuminating how non-verbal forms of expression and sense making are just as common and legitimate as verbal ones, even within the space of the novel. Here, we can see how authors such as Danielewski model their bookish structures, implicitly and explicitly, on various *archival techniques*, employing what I call an archival poetics: a poetics of documentation and preservation, of curation and transmission. Authors of multimodal book-archives, in other words, tend to produce *collections* of textual objects in their works, organizing them according to techniques such as collation (the combining and comparison of textual objects), cataloguing (the listing and inventorying of various things, verbally as well as through images), annotation (commentary and diagrams of textual objects), cross-referencing and intertextuality (the citation of text in other texts), indexicality (how textual objects point to specific places and contexts in the world), and conceptual metonymy (how textual objects come to *stand in* for larger psychosocial complexes, spatiotemporal continua, textual-material properties, and/or literary-historical traditions).

When it comes to Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, its multilinear narrative structure is largely determined by the novel's 450 footnotes, which if the reader follows will observe how Danielewski's overtly dialogical novel is a *compendium* of inherited literary and bibliographic forms representing a polyphony of dialects—it is an archive of bookishness. The electronic hyperlink, which is functionally equivalent

to the footnote, is employed in John McDaïd's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* (1993) and Bill Bly's *We Descend* (1997-present) and works to connect each hypertext's assortment of writings, whether it be chronologically, dialogically, thematically, or referentially. There are also relational database and list-like structures found in Harry Mathews' *The Journalist* (1994), Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006), Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010), and Matthew Roberson's *List* (2014), and indeed, efforts to catalogue verbal signs, ideas and various artifacts is commonplace among book-archives more generally. For example, in Warren Lehrer's *A Life in Books* (2013), Lehrer lists chronologically, with excerpts and paratextual material embedded throughout the book, all of its fictitious protagonist-writer's 101 published books. In Reif Larsen's *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* (2009), maps, drawings, and diagrams from Spivet's green notebooks reproduced along the book's margins are numerically indexed. Handwriting, marginalia, and arrows are also featured in Larsen's book to establish continuity between the verbal narrative and Spivet's other modes, guiding the reader through the textual worlds of the page. Handwritten marginalia and arrows are also heavily employed in Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams's *S.* (2013) and to a less extent in Lance Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014). In both cases, similar to how Truant's footnotes digress from Zampanò's "The Navidson Record" in *House of Leaves*, the marginalia in these works often concern issues not directly related to the textual object at hand. Many book-archives, most notably *House of Leaves*, *We Descend*, *Nox*, Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets* (1968-1999), and Matthew McIntosh's *theMystery.doc* (2017), invent ways of representing

redacted, absent, or damaged text, whether that be with blank space, black ink, *text sous rature*, ellipses or other kinds of symbols.

In addition to functioning as methods for organizing and presenting textual objects/artifacts in purposeful and meaningful ways, these documentary or archival techniques offer readers navigational tools for maneuvering across the textual domains/worlds of the book. However, it is also quite common, as in the case of Carson's *Nox*, for textual objects to be juxtaposed in ways that are not immediately obvious to parse out. Book-archives can be very disheveled and disjunctive, how texts potentially interrelate beyond their physical proximity can sometimes be obscure. When relationships between textual objects are unclear, readers can consider how figurative juxtaposition, cross-referencing, intertextuality, or other mechanisms might inform the process of meaning making, but not all interpretive activities, as Torsa Ghosal reminds us, "are reducible to the pursuit of meaning" (Ghosal 2019: 210). Book-archives offer readers a wide range of experiences that sometimes defy the conventional patterns of linguistic comprehension, textual processing, and narrative construction. The epistemic depletion one sometimes encounters in book-archives is a reflection of how real archives, whether personal or institutional, are always incomplete and filled with fragments. Not all textual objects necessarily mean or communicate anything. The reader's struggle to determine a character's intentionality, who created a particular object, what the possible meanings of a particular object might be, or what the causal-logical relations are between objects, at times makes the reconstructive and interpretive process of reading quite strenuous.

This takes me to an important aspect of how contemporary book-archives are often not only physically interactive or “ergotic” (Aarseth 1997: 1-2),³ they tend to elicit an active process of *reconstruction* from readers. The reader’s activity of “reconstructing” the chronology of any narrative’s story (*fabula*) from the displaced order of a narrative’s discourse or textual sequencing (*syuzhet*) has always been a crucial part of effective narrative communication and textual processing, which the Russian Formalists pointed out a century ago (Shklovsky 1990: 147-170). Literary history, from the perspective of historical poetics, is the slow and steady accumulation of new reconstructive textual activities placed on readers through the invention of new formal devices. The repertoire of reconstructive activities during the nineteenth and twentieth century not only immensely increased, the reader’s activity of reconstruction itself became foregrounded and in many instances troubled by modernist and postmodernist strategies of consciousness representation and worldbuilding (e.g., see Culler 1975: 131-160; McHale 1992: 61-86). Makers of book-archives often recapitulate the strategies and devices of these earlier periods, but they also extend their repertoire of devices in one very specific way, and that is through the global development of what we might call *textual worldness*: the projection of worlds grounded in and mediated by textual artifacts. In a very trivial sense, all literary fictional worlds are mediated by book objects, but with book-archives the page of the book does not simply act as an invisible window into an

3 In *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth defines “ergodic literature,” as the “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages” (Aarseth 1997: 1-2).

imaginary world, verbal and nonverbal signs are typically presented in the form of reproduced artifacts or else the act of writing-as-documentation is foregrounded through various bibliographic markers so that readers are always aware of the book's materiality. Whereas most works of art and literature throughout history have been designed with what Bolter and Grusin call "transparent immediacy," that is, "a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium," book-archives typically self-reflexively foreground their own medium, marking them as "metamedia" objects as we have already said, but they are also "hypermedia" objects, in so far as they lay bare their status as "reproductions" or "remediations" of other media (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 272-273).

Because many of the textual objects reproduced in contemporary book-archives are represented as the product of fictional characters (or actual people in case of *Nox*), there is often no single narrator or authorial perspective in these books, resulting in the proliferation of narrational perspectives mediated by the objects these characters have created. Authors obviously organize objects in particular ways, there is still a highly structured experience being offered, but readers are still required to do a lot of reconstructive work. In general, this aspect of reading books as archives, of sifting through collections of heterogeneous objects produced by a number of characters in order to determine how they all play a significant part forming a larger whole (even if many lacunas remain in the end), is one of the most analogous activities to sifting through the documents of real archives. Book-archives foreground the activities of reading, writing, interpreting, attributing, authenticating, editing, curating and transmitting textual objects. Not only do characters produce textual

objects, they attempt to make sense of the textual objects produced by other characters, forming a multilayered and multidirectional interpretive schema that readers are interpolated into and must actively reconstruct. One of the recurring themes in this dissertation, then, is the process and activity of textual interpretation, which often tip over into matters of *textual authenticity* due to the pressures documentary evidence inevitably places on characters' understanding and perception of the past as well as on their personal commitments in the present.⁴

For illustrative purposes, consider *House of Leaves* once again. Characters in Danielewski's novel constantly weigh their interpretations of Navidson's film, Zampanò's manuscript, and Truant's footnotes over and against one another. Navidson explores and films the house on Ash Tree Lane in the hopes of unlocking its mysteries; Zampanò analyzes Navidson's film from practically every possible theoretical perspective; and Truant, drastically affected by reading Zampanò's manuscript, is tasked with discovering material evidence to support the authenticity of Navidson's film. In other words, *House of Leaves* "is about interpretation," for it is a novel, as Steven Belletto writes, that "toys with various kinds of interpretation, from intuitive, emotional responses to measured, rational analyses" (Belletto 2009: 100).

⁴ In Bill Bly's short essay "Learn Navigation: Doing without the Narrator in Artifactual Fiction" (2000), he makes a case for what he calls "artifactual fiction." According to Bly, works of "artifactual fiction" "deliberately replace the single-voice narrator with many narrators, who often compete with and contradict one another" (34). The voices of these multiple competing narrators are mediated by material "artifacts," meaning the content in "artifactual fiction" is "shown rather than narrated" (34). Bly's conception of "artifactual fiction" is grounded on the absence of an omniscient narrator, and although many artifactual/archival fictions do indeed employ a polyphony of first-person character-narrators, one could point to many examples that are clearly not archival fictions that share this feature. This is perhaps merely a matter of emphasis, but the issue of textual mediation would seem to be a necessary condition of the mode, whereas the absence of a single narrator is found among texts from a variety of literary periods.

Belletto also claims no interpretation within the novel is presented as having a “final authority” (Belletto 2009: 100), implying that no interpretation is more legitimate than any other. Though this latter point is obviously *also* open to dispute, Belletto’s observation about *House of Leaves* is metonymical of contemporary book-archives as a whole, for they often reveal how the communal activity of interpreting or authenticating an object often comes down to matters of power and authority and not merely rhetorical persuasiveness. Just as there are, according to Medievalist and book historian Bonnie Mak, “no absolute criteria” for authenticating historical documents in the field of *diplomats*—the systematic study of documentary evidence (Mak 2012: 2)—determining the authenticity of an object in a fictional book-archive, that is, whether it is real or fake, genuine or a copy, is rarely straightforward. While reading *House of Leaves* one is repeatedly confronted with the challenge of deciding whether or not to believe Navidson’s film is a documentary or a hoax, whether Zampanò’s manuscript is about an actual film (regardless of its ontological status) or if he just made it up, and whether Zampanò is even a real person within the world of the novel or if Truant made him up as he is prone to doing at various junctures. *House of Leaves* even presents itself as a 2nd Edition, and although there is no “real” 1st Edition, that has not stopped real readers from attempting to track it down. The point is, epistemological uncertainties and ontological instabilities in *House of Leaves* are largely a consequence of the novel’s commitment to undermining the authenticity of its reproduced textual objects, including the very novel itself, and we find similar dilemmas in Bly’s *We Descend* and Dorst and Abrams’s *S.*, as well as more

peripherally in books such as Lehrer's *A Life in Books* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005).⁵

2. Archive Fever

In the concluding essay of *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, David Herman and Ruth Page ask, "What is the relationship between multimodality and literary practices more generally" (Herman and Page 2009: 218)? This dissertation argues that much of contemporary multimodal/multimedia/hypermedia literature tends to be inherently bent toward an archival poetics, transforming the book into a physical site for archiving things as well as people's relationship to those things and each other across various distributed networks. Thus far, I have focused primarily on the formal and historical poetics of contemporary book-archives, pointing out which literary genealogies and technological advancements this new mode of writing stems from; however, the "archival turn" (Simon 2002) in contemporary art and literature is also indicative of larger intellectual trends and material-technological forces of the past several decades.

One way of framing the rise of archival thinking in literature as well as in certain intellectual circles, because of the way narrative in book-archives tends to lean heavily toward multilinearity and fragmentation as a result of its emphasis on the textual artifact, is as a general response to the "incredulity toward" what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv), the grand or master

⁵ The Shakespeare authorship controversy is one of the great real-world examples and one that is sometimes referenced in book-archives, but strictly literary inspirations would include Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) and Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1980).

narratives modern industrial societies tell themselves to legitimate their own scientific practices and knowledge which are incapable of self-legitimizing. As trust and belief in metanarratives, according to Lyotard, has been in slow decline since computerization began in the 1950s, taking their place in computerized societies are self-legitimizing “little narrative[s],” narratives that “define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do” (Lyotard 1984: 60, 23). Book-archives tend to favor little narratives over grand narratives, but many book-archives, as we will see in the following chapters, attempt to put the pieces of a fragmented past back together by compiling and ordering them into the malleable space of the book. Literary scholars have written at length how postwar literature is permeated with incredulity and cynical irony (e.g., see Hutcheon 1988; Konstantinou 2016), and when needed I draw on Lyotard’s ideas in my discussion of individual book-archives, but what is more relevant for my purposes is how his ideas are loosely adopted and reconfigured by digital media scholars in discussions about computerized databases. Although paper-based archives and computer-generated databases are obviously physically very different, they share a primary objective: the collection and storage of objects for the purposes of preserving and transmitting information and knowledge. In a strictly functional sense, the database is simply a more robust and technologically advanced form of the archive.

The extension of Lyotard’s thinking about *narrative* into the realm of database studies is perhaps most notable in Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media*, where he argues that database and narrative are “natural enemies” acting out their

endgame in a Manichean showdown (Manovich 2001: 225). Manovich believes database will win out in the end. Indeed, he wonders why it's taking so long, how it's even the case that "narrative—still exists in new media" at all (Manovich 2001: 228). "As a cultural form," writes Manovich, "the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order the list," whereas "narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events)" (Manovich 2001: 235). Although both forms "give efficient access to information," writes Ernst van Alphen, "in our computer age it is the database that becomes the predominant centre of creative processes that are deployed to make sense of human experience, cultural memory, and the world in general" (van Alphen 2015: 9). As Manovich puts it, "whether new media objects present themselves as linear narratives, interactive narratives, databases, or something else, underneath, on the level of material organization, they are all databases" (Manovich 2001: 228).⁶ The organizational principles of the database as described by Manovich are strikingly similar to those of the archive, though of course when such principles are adopted by book-archivists they operate in conjunction with narrative techniques, as well as other verbal and nonverbal modes of representation, which—by necessity—readers must process and interpretive with the

6 In pitting database and narrative against one another, I would argue that Manovich makes a mistake similar to that of early hypertext theorists, which is that database (hypertext) liberates authors and readers from the constraints of narrative (print culture), because databases possess—as the story goes with hypertext—no coercive hierarchical structure (order). Sure, the ontological structure of any database is strictly speaking nonnarrative, but the structure of "any database," as Jerome McGann reminds us, is "severely constrained and organized," ensuring that any "free play offered to the user of such environment is as much a function of interface design as it is of its data structure" (McGann 2007: 1588). Any refusal to "order" a database comes from the user, not the database's structure or interface. Furthermore, it's difficult to imagine how one could ever discard even the most basic elements of narrative when attempting to make sense of a database's structure, let alone everything else one might encounter in this world. Whenever we describe or interpret a database or archive, we rely on narrative.

cognitive tools of narrative. As N. Katherine Hayles puts it, “database can construct relational juxtapositions, but it is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful” (Hayles 2012: 176).

Another influential trajectory in contemporary intellectual and cultural history that parallels the decline of metanarratives and the rise of database as a culturally dominant symbol, arguably begins with Jacques Derrida’s “Archive Fever” (1995), where Derrida constructs, then deconstructs, a genealogical survey of archival tropes that circulate in Freudian psychoanalysis.⁷ Derrida, by various turns of phrase, translates Freud’s concept of the “death drive” into what he calls “archive drive,” then “archive fever” (“*mal d’archive*”). According to Derrida, archive fever is a kind of desire or intense need to get to the origins of things through archival research (loosely defined), where authentic knowledge and the beginnings of things is purported to lie but never attainable. Archive fever is a searching for that which cannot be found.

We are *en mal d’archive*: in need of archives. Listening to the French idiom, and in it the attribute “*en mal de*,” to be *en mal d’archive* can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun “*mal*” might name. It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in

⁷ For better or worse, *Archive Fever* was certainly an “event”. The subject of numerous articles and books, as well as of entire special journals and conferences, *Archive Fever* has mobilized a lot of scholars to think more critically about the history, ideology and purpose of the archive. For example, *History of the Human Sciences* published two special issues on archive (1998, 11.4; 1999, 12.2), and 10 out of the 15 essays published in these two issues cite or engage with *Archive Fever* at length. See also Carolyn Steedman’s “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust” (2001), which provides a compelling critique of Derrida’s psychoanalytical notion of the archive.

it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. No desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no “*mal-de*” can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, *en mal d’archive*. (Derrida 1995: 57)

In many ways, as we will see, authors of book-archives dramatize Derrida’s notion of archive fever through characters’ pursuits for truth, knowledge and power in the archive. Whether it’s the creation of an archive, the preservation or transmission of an archive, or the authentication of an archive, the archive is a motivating force that potentially holds promises for those who are committed to its significance.

Both the representation of archive fever and the construction of book-archives more generally can also be seen as a response to postmodernism’s “weakening of historicity” and “waning of affect” (Jameson 1991: 6, 10). Although there is obviously an emphasis on materiality and “surfaces,” which for Fredric Jameson signals postmodernism’s retreat into the “depthlessness” of “the image” (Jameson 1991: 12, 6), archive fever is a form of commitment to the past, motivated by intense feelings and a belief in the authenticity of subjective experience, the creative process, as well as of cultural artifacts. Although book-archives represent various polemical attitudes toward the legacy of postmodern culture and poststructuralist thought, this dissertation *does not* argue that archival poetics, archival fiction, or the contemporary book-archive at large should be understood as representing the dominant mode of the contemporary period, representing some cultural logic of post-postmodernism.

Instead, I argue that multimodal book-archives are one of most understudied and compelling cultural forms of the present needing greater theorization by critics of the contemporary. There is an ever-growing body of scholarship that critically examines the predominant cultural forms and symbols operating in contemporary literature, but what receives too little attention are the poetic and aesthetic forms of archive, which, as my dissertation will hopefully make clear, are increasingly on the rise.

Most of the scholarship to date that examines archival techniques and forms employed by artists in their cultural productions is not to be found in the realm of literary studies but in the realm of contemporary art history and criticism. For instance, Hal Foster (2004), Sue Breakell (2015) and Ernst van Alphen (2015) each demonstrate how visual artists since the 1960s, such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Sam Durant, Tacita Dean, Ydessa Hendeles and Hanne Darboven have been engaging with the archive in their work, but the study of multimodal literature in the context of archive has been slow in catching up with them. Scholars of multimodal literature specifically, such as N. Katherine Hayles, Jessica Pressman, Alison Gibbons, and Alexander Starre demonstrate how contemporary experiments in multimodality provide insight into how human subjects continue to co-evolve alongside new technologies, not only incorporating virtually all of contemporary media into their aesthetic productions, but critically reflecting upon how that media configures human subjectivity and knowledge production through distributed networks of people and artifacts and flows of media and information. From such research, not only is a *cannon* of contemporary multimodal literature slowly coming to take shape, but a recognizable field of scholarly research has emerged as well. However, my

dissertation argues what would significantly benefit this field of research is an examination of how this growing body of literature specifically employs archival poetics to interrogate the physical limitations and expressive possibilities of the book in our current media ecology.

3. Chapter Outlines

Because book-archives are hybrid objects, I draw on several scholarly approaches, most notably the formalist traditions of narrative theory and poetics, but also textual and digital media studies, multimodal theory, diplomatics, and conceptual metaphor theory. Each chapter examines an exemplary book-archive produced in the last few decades, paying particular attention to how individual authors construct books as archives for different audience and effects.

In my first chapter I examine Bill Bly's long-term hypertext project *We Descend* (1997-present), one of the longest running hypertext sagas in electronic literary history. My research into Bly's multivolume hypertext began with Bly's personal archives housed in the Bill Bly Collection of Electronic Literature located at the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities. Soon after my first "dig" through his archives, as Bly might put it, I got my very first taste of "archive fever" and soon acquired a 30-year-old Macintosh computer so that I could read first generation hypertexts in their origin format. Volume one of *We Descend* (1997), a late-first generation Storyspace hypertext, was published and distributed by Eastgate Systems on floppy disk, and volumes two (2017) and three (2020) were published on the Internet with *The New River*. What sets Bly's work apart from other hypertext

fictions, as well as from other book-archives I examine, is how Bly employs the linking mechanism of hypertext software as a means for collating, cross-referencing, and annotating the massive collection of writings housed in his ever-growing fictional archive. As one navigates through Bly's hypertext, one can observe how Bly thematizes the affordances of hypertext software by producing narrative threads whose artifacts or lexia are conjoined by these archival techniques. Beyond the medial components of *We Descend*, at the level of the story, I argue, building on the work of book historian Bonnie Mak, that Bly dramatizes competing methods for authenticating documents symbolized by various characters, and that Bly's primary goal is to convince his readers to *believe*, along with the character known as the Scholar, in the historical authenticity of the his 2000 year old archive. In promoting what Lee Konstantinou calls "an ethos of belief," I argue that Bly's archival poetics doubles as an ethical stance toward the democratization of the archive, compelling his readers with sense of urgency around the need to rescue artifacts, and thus history, from material decay, technological obsolescence, and corrupt institutional authorities. That electronic literature, such as Bly's, is itself on the cusp of technological obsolescence makes this last point all the more exigent.

In my next chapter, "The Literary Compendium: On Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," I argue that, similarly to how Bly asks his readers to become amateur archivists, if only symbolically, Danielewski invites his readers to actively assume the responsibilities of amateur textual scholars in its emphasis on the concept of the "edition." There are four different real editions of *House of Leaves*—a black and white edition, a red 2-Color edition, a blue 2-Color edition, and the Remastered

Full-Color Edition—but there are also three fictitious editions (one of which is called the First Edition) that the novel’s peritextual content purports to be real. Readers who become attune to these conundrums are invited to seek out variations among the several real and purportedly real but fictitious editions of *House of Leaves*, which at this point in time are actually quite difficult to come by. Taking up the invitation, readers must visit bookstores and libraries in order to track down the novel’s different editions, and once having done so, become acutely aware of how Danielewski employs all of the book’s bibliographic forms for expressive purposes. In recapitulating much of western literature’s repertoire of inherited forms, encapsulating all of the novel’s editions (both real and fictive) into its fictional world, Danielewski stretches the expressive possibilities of the codex novel to incorporate not only the poetics of the multimodal novel, but the various textual and editorial processes that underwrite the book’s construction, constituting what I call a *literary compendium*. Whereas Bly’s commitment to the archive is primarily a political and ethical one, Danielewski’s archival poetics champions an aesthetics of bookishness.

My third chapter, “Instrumentalizing the Book: On Anne Carson’s *Nox*,” shifts gears in its focus by turning to a work of poetry and life-writing. *Nox* is both Carson’s elegy for her brother Michael and an extended translation of Roman poet Catullus’s Latin poem 101, whose 10-line elegiac couplet Carson dissects and then employs as a kind of palimpsest to order and arrange the various textual materials distributed across this sprawling 200 page accordion book which is packaged inside a cardboard oyster box, symbolizing both the tombstone and casket Michael never received. With *Nox*, Carson demonstrates how the book-as-archive can function not

only as an instrument of psychological rejuvenation, a tool for what Michael Silverblatt calls “grief-work” (Silverblatt 2000), but as an instrument for documenting, ordering, and juxtaposing disparate bits of information and memory into cathartic self-knowledge. Carson’s archival poetics is deeply personal, filled with private meanings that remain forever obscure to readers. Nonetheless, if grief is a kind of chaos, then Carson’s archival poetics, I argue, instrumentalizes the book as a tool for ordering that chaos into something manageable, even beautiful.

My fourth chapter, “Beautiful Short Cuts: On Warren Lehrer’s *A Life in Books*,” demonstrates how Lehrer deploys PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymies—verbal, conceptual, and multimodal—as organizing principles to structure his entire book-archive. *A Life in Books* is a fictional memoir and retrospective monograph of a made-up author and bookmaker named Bleu Mobley that documents Bleu’s entire creative universe, including excerpts from 33 of his 101 published books, photographs of each of his 101 personally designed book covers, as well as book reviews, catalogue copy, and personal archival materials. Whereas verbal metonymies in literature, as well as in everyday speech, provide access to larger spatiotemporal continua and psychosocial complexes by highlighting smaller and more particular details of things, events, ideas, and so forth, in *A Life in Books* it is the reproduction and interaction of individual textual objects placed in a *multimodal* semiotic system that tends to fulfill these metonymical functions. Readers are invited to imagine possible worlds while reading Bleu’s narrative, but they are also invited to imagine possible books based on what can be extrapolated from the novel’s numerous intertexts. These activities, I argue, are metonymical in nature. Readers are provided

partial information pertaining to fictive objects and worlds, and are invited to build worlds around those objects, including the actual book-objects themselves, from that partial information. In laying bare the novel's organizing principles, as well as how its numerous textual components are logically, causally, and physically connected, *A Life in Books* foregrounds the cognitive activities required in building a book-archive. Lehrer's construction of the book-as-archive establishes clear contiguities between the life of an artist and his art, which the reader is required to construct during the reading process. As such *A life in Books* is as much about one man's life creating books as it is about how the books he creates write himself.

In my Coda, which I wrote after the dissertation defense took place, I outline some of steps I would like to take in the next phase of the project, as well as pose some research questions I believe scholars of multimodal literature should pursue in order to expand our field of study and improve our breadth of knowledge.

Chapter 2

“If this document is authentic”: On Bill Bly’s Archival Poetics

Authentication, it seems to me, in the end always comes down to what is or isn't *believed*.

—Bill Bly (2019)

1. A Tale of Two Archives

In the Bill Bly Collection of Electronic Literature housed in MITH at the University of Maryland, there is a Xerox of a handwritten document inscribed with the phrase “If this document is authentic, then a complete reappraisal will be necessary” (BBCEL).⁸ Originally written in a leather-bound journal with a fountain pen in 1984, this phrase would become the foundation for Bly’s first electronic hypertext novel, *We Descend: Writings from Archives Pertaining to Egderus Scriptor, Volume One*, published and distributed by Eastgate Systems on floppy disk in 1997. Between 1984 and 1996, when Bly submitted the final digital hypertext version of *We Descend* to Eastgate, he wrote and produced several minor plays, published a handful of poems, and taught drama, poetry, and composition at universities in New York and Pennsylvania. It wasn’t until the early 1990s, when Bly read Robert Coover’s *New York Times* companion pieces, “The End of Books” (1992)

⁸ All citations for material housed in the Bill Bly Collection of Electronic Literature will be cited as BBCEL.

and “Hyperfiction: Novels for the Future” (1993), that he first learned about the Storyspace school (Joyce, Swigart, Moulthrop, Larsen, Jackson, McDaid, et al.), and the small but influential world of electronic hypertext. When in 1995, through various correspondence with Storyspace authors, Bly discovered that hypertext writer and scholar Robert Kendall was offering a course at The New School called “Hypertext Poetry and Fiction,” he enrolled in the course and over the span of two semesters transformed his 10-year collection of notes to his “document-authentic project” into the first volume of what would become an on-going multivolume hypertext novel (Davis and Bly 2019).⁹

As one of the longest running hypertext sagas in electronic literary history (1997-present), *We Descend* is also an early exemplar archival fiction. Set in a distant post-apocalyptic future, *We Descend* concerns multiple generations of writers, scholars and curators preoccupied with authenticating (or disauthenticating) an ever-growing body of writings that may or may not conceal knowledge about ancient writing systems, as well as secrets about the causes for the global cataclysm that wiped out much of Earth’s human population. Each generation of writings reflects the writing culture, textual media, demise, and socio-political institutions of its historical age, though over the course of the archive’s transmission, after endless copying and remediation, everything has come to be digitized into electronic hypertext by the archive’s most recent transcriber and curator, a man named Bill Bly. Complete with

⁹ All biographical information, including reference to Bly’s writing process, is drawn from my published interview with Bly, “Descending into the Archives: An Interview with Hypertext Author Bill Bly,” *Electronic Book Review*, March 3, 2019. Readers are encouraged to read the interview as an extension to this chapter.

critical commentary, glosses, and annotated cross-references, *We Descend* masquerades as a scholarly edition of a real archive similar to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. Many writings are fragmented or truncated, there are lacunas everywhere, often signaled by ellipses (...) or filled in by brackets ([...]); scholars and curators across generations argue over the veracity, genuineness, and authenticity of these writings, anticipating the kinds of responses and interpretations real readers are likely to have (also similar to *House of Leaves*). Because hypertext software and markup languages underwrite and link all of the writings to each volume, systems of networks are responsible for how writings in Bly's fictional archive are displayed, organized, and ultimately read. Several key writings are only accessible through particular links; readers must carefully navigate each volume in order to discover them. More generally, "locating any single lexia of the story amid the dense stack" of writings is not only "difficult," writes Dene Grigar, navigating *We Descend* "reflects the messy detritus of existence" and the "need of archeologists to dig deep—descending, so to speak—to find the truth and meaning amid the layers of remain" (Grigar 2017: 213). Grigar, here, is alluding to the argument Bly himself has repeatedly made, in which he compares the reading experience of *We Descend* and other "artifactual fictions" like John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* (1993) to that of conducting an "archaeological dig": "everything at a given level, along the horizontal axis, is more or less contemporaneous; while on the vertical axis, the further down you go, the older is the material you find" (Davis and Bly 2019).¹⁰

¹⁰ Bly's arguments about "artifactual fiction" and his notion of the "archaeological dig" are first outlined in "Learn Navigation: Doing Without the Narrator in Artifactual Fiction" (Bly 2000).

As an archive of disparate documents stacked on top of one another requiring a lot of clicking and reshuffling to access and read, *We Descend* certainly incorporates into its formal and technological devices tropes of vertical depth. But *descension* in Bly's post-apocalyptic hypertext is not only figured in terms of digging through the strata of earth or the lexia of a hypertext. Descension in *We Descend* also has to do with the search for truth and authenticity, going inward or down into the depths of the self; it symbolizes the conditions of moral depravity, the leveling of civilization, of going underground, as it were, to survive and transmit secrets in a world run by authoritarians. Survival, a topos of dystopian fiction, in *We Descend* is also bound up with genealogical notions, with the need to transmit artifacts, ideas and knowledge from one generation to the next, in order to save the species from various forms of demise.¹¹ In *Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, Brian McHale pits archaeology and genealogy against one another as binary oppositions in his analysis of postmodernist poetry. "Genealogy," McHale writes, "permits the uninterrupted telling of historical narratives," whereas "archaeology is aggressively, offputtingly antinarrative and antihistorical" (McHale 2004: 132).¹² Bly employs both archaeological and genealogical devices, but Bly's attitude toward narrative is decidedly positive, even if *We Descend* as a whole seems incredulous toward metanarratives, for such incredulity is a consequence of its textual-artifactual nature,

¹¹ Issues pertaining genealogy and transmission are everywhere, obviously, but see *WDvol2* "Legomenon for Last One" and *WDvol3* "this work" for explicit discussions connecting human ancestry with knowledge transmission.

¹² McHale's structural, tropological formulation of these domains of inquiry function in the service of outlining what he calls "archaeo-poetics," of which the postmodernist variety is decidedly "antinarrative" and "antihistorical."

the necessarily incomplete and fragmented quality of an archive that has been lost and found and copied (over and over) across generations following a global cataclysm. So while *We Descend* is highly fragmented, pluralistic, polyvocal, and centerless, lacking a consistent narratorial authority as a result of its textual heterogeneity and hypertext structure, it is not simply a belated exercise in postmodern skepticism.¹³ If anything, Bly is trying to put the pieces of a broken world back together, to establish new and meaningful connections between people and things, if only symbolically, a task which he inevitably places at the feet of his readers. In this context, *We Descend* participates in what Wolfgang Funk calls “the aesthetics of reconstruction,” a contemporary literary practice invested in the “effects of authenticity in the reception of literary texts,” a practice that asks readers to engage in “the customary protocols of mourning” as well as believe “in the power of sign systems to actually convey experience rather than reflect the workings of the sign system themselves” (Funk 2015: 3-5).

In *We Descend* there is always lurking in the background concerns over how political power and ideology, coupled with the manipulative possibilities of digital technology, threatens the stability of its archive to be a reliable, factual record of history. In *We Descend*, as well as in many archival fictions, the ontological and epistemological boundaries that demarcate fact and fiction, truth and falsity, belief and doubt, document and hoax are often intentionally blurred inviting a range of

¹³ *We Descend* does not pit archaeological and genealogical discourse against one another. The limitations of one mode at certain instances is able to be uplifted or complemented by the other. This is one of the strengths attributed to archival fictions and contemporary book-archives more generally, how their genre-busting, and often multimodal discourse, opens up new channels for critical inquiry, socio-political commentary, and aesthetic experience.

responses by characters and readers alike that are put into conversation with one another. In the absence of any single, stable authority, interpolated into these either/or dilemmas in *We Descend* are amateur archivists, characters who are driven by the compulsion to rescue textual artifacts from the dangers brought on by material decay, technological obsolescence, and/or corrupt institutions. More specifically, archivists like Egderus and the Scholar, two of *We Descend*'s primary characters, *believe* in the authenticity of the archive, that the narratives and testimonies represented among its writings are true even when the objects in question may be copies and not originals, providing access to relevant historical and political knowledge which orients their perceived purpose and action in the world. These archivists' commitment to the archive's authenticity demonstrates their "courage," to borrow words from Alessandro Ferrara's *Modernity and Authenticity*, "to stand by one's ethical intuitions even in the face of one's contingent inability to work them out in the language of abstract reflection" (Ferrara 1993: 136). Placed in opposition to the archivists are various authorities—Goliards (kings), Eparchs (bishops), Inquisitionists, and Councils—representing various religious and/or state institutions whose primary goal is to confiscate or destroy the archive. Then there is the archive's first commentator, the Scholiast (in some cases referred to as the Editor), who briefly comments on many of the writings and who tends to be skeptical of the archive's authenticity. Finally, there is the Legomena (diplomatic elucidations), which offer the most systematic examination of the archive's materials. I refer to the unnamed writer(s) of the Legomena as diplomatists (those who critically study archival sources).

In keeping to the conventional practice of dystopian fiction's reluctance or inability to fully explain how a catastrophe happened in the first place, the details about the past Egderus and the Scholar believe to be true are never fully disclosed to readers. None of the textual objects in *We Descend* reveals the full content of their belief, and so in a sense the content of their belief is less important than their ability to believe itself. This particular lack or absence of content somehow manages to drive much of *We Descend*'s global narrative and functionally resembles what poststructuralists call an "empty center" (also sometimes referred to as empty middles or floating signifiers).¹⁴ Belief is not targeted at a specific idea or object (or at least those ideas and objects not presented to readers), and yet everything seems to circulate around it, structuring the reader's experience and response to the hypertext as a whole and the question of authentication in particular. The primary effect of this absence and its related devices, by virtue of the way *We Descend*'s metafictional narrative inculcates readers into the world-building process is to turn us into "believers," to believe what the archivists believe, not what the opposition claims about those beliefs. Similarly to what Lee Konstantinou argues in *Cool Characters* about the figure of the postironic believer in novels by David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers, I argue that *We Descend* promotes "a general ethos of belief," one that helps the archivists combat "the unavoidable destructibility of life" (Konstantinou 2016: 174, 166).

¹⁴ See Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," which is largely a critique of structuralist concepts, such as the notion of organizing principles and binary oppositions.

The individual archivist's ability to believe in something or someone that authorities have repeatedly told him not to becomes an ironic way of substantiating his commitment to his belief. When the Council confiscates the archive from the Scholar, he realizes they must "believe the Archive's important enough" or else they wouldn't have "take[n] them away from me" (*WDvol1* "Scholar's Farwell"). That the Scholar is forced to hand over the archive and forbidden to ever speak of their contents again, suggests the archive is in fact genuine, true, *authentic*. In this context, Grigar argues that Egderus "eventually ascends" to a higher social position precisely because he "is willing to question authority and risk punishment to speak the truth—brave enough to be authentic to himself when others rely on him to be otherwise" (Grigar 2017: 211-12). Indeed, Egderus is guided by a very simple principle: "Believe what seems to your heart to be true, but be prepared to abandon that truth the instant it plays you false" (*WDvol1* "Egderus at Mountain House").¹⁵ In turn, *We Descend* asks its readers to cultivate their "capacity to believe" in the authenticity of the archive, as well as in the benevolence of its archivists (Konstantinou 2016: 183). If the powers-that-be fear what might happen if the archive is made public, then the archivist's lack of power and authority are indicative of their moral superiority, perhaps even the rightness of their belief. In *We Descend*, truth-telling and commitment to beliefs are not merely political-ethical stances, they are dangerous leaps of faith.

In mapping a positive "ethos of belief" onto the institutional dynamics of textual authenticity, Bly does not simply reenact a Hegelian master-slave dialectic,

¹⁵ Citations for *We Descend* will include the volume number (e.g., *WDvol1*, *WDvol2*, *WDvol3*) as well as the name of the lexia where the text appears (e.g., "Loading the Document," "Scholar's Diary").

however enticing such allegorical interpretations might be. Instead, he seems to argue that the act of authenticating some object is ultimately a matter of individual belief. In “Descending into the Archives,” my interview with Bly, he writes that “authentication...in the end, always comes down to what is or isn’t believed” (Davis and Bly 2019). In this context, Bly also argues that the “decision whether or not something is true is made (and enforced) by some kind of authority,” but “if you don’t accept the authority of the entity that authenticates the evidence,” “then the ‘evidence’ has no validity for you: it ‘proves’ nothing” (Davis and Bly 2019). Bly’s notion of textual authenticity, here, as being largely determined by power and authority informs his treatment of authenticity in *We Descend*. Indeed, what underwrites much of the conflict in *We Descend* is less a matter of credulity than how institutions wield their own power as a form of self-legitimization to sustain their authority and dictate what constitutes acceptable behavior and knowledge. That questions of authentication are determined by matters of authority makes sense from an etymological point of view, but more importantly Bly’s archival poetics wants to break down our confidence in certain institutional norms and procedures associated with the generation and transmission of historical knowledge and supplant them with something else. If, as Foucault writes, the archive is typically “controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures” dictated by state authorities, “whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (Foucault 1972: 216), then *We Descend* wants to democratize the archive, liberating it from the shackles of authority, providing everyone access to its interpretation.

In the summer of 2011, Bly donated his personal archives to MITH, which in addition to handwritten notes, typed drafts, and digital files pertaining to *We Descend*, includes hundreds of floppy disks, an original Macintosh SE/30 needed to read the disks, and various other artifacts and ephemera. According to Matthew Kirschenbaum, curator of the Bill Bly Collection, Bly's personal archive is a "living archive" (Kirschenbaum 2011), and just like the ever-growing fictional archive *We Descend* attempts to contain and transmit to future readers and curators, Bly's personal archive must be rescued from various forms of material demise and technological obsolescence. Since 2011, Bly has contributed additional materials to MITH as he continues to discover more artifacts distributed across various locals, but his archive at MITH also continues to grow because *We Descend* continues to grow as well.

Bly began writing volume two of *We Descend* in 1999, which was eventually published and displayed in 2017 by *The New River* on Virginia Tech's Internet server under the title *We Descend: New Selected Writings from Archives Pertaining to Egderus Scriptor, Volume Two*.¹⁶ In 2012, Bly began writing volume three which was again published by *The New River*, in 2019, as *We Descend: A Preliminary View of Further Selected Writings from Archives Pertaining to Egderus Scriptor, Volume Three*. An ever-growing living archive, the subtitle to volume three ("Preliminary View") suggests a fourth volume may be on the horizon, but in any case, this is one of the benefits of constructing an alternative fictional world: once the foundations are

¹⁶ However, in 2015, when Bly had initially completed volume two, he had ported the hypertext from Tinderbox to HTML and CSS in order to make it available on the Internet.

laid for an alternative world and a narrative is set in motion there is practically endless possibility for authorial creativity and invention. One has only to look at the increasing number of science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian novels published over the past few decades where sequels, prequels, and trilogies are often industry standard to see just how often writers of these genres exploit the initial world-building required to put such a story in motion for the production of subsequent novels. *We Descend* is set in a post-apocalyptic future and thus bears resemblance to novels among speculative traditions, but Bly's hypertext project is relatively unknown outside of the electronic hypertext community and is not easily consumable, for better or worse, like many of these other book objects. For one, outside of places like MITH and the Electronic Literature Lab at Washington State University, whose objectives are in part to preserve and make accessible to students and researchers media of earlier generations, if one does not have access to a working vintage Macintosh computer, one simply cannot read "first generation hypertexts" (c. 1987-1997) such as *We Descend, Volume One* in their original format (Ensslin 2007: 66-89).¹⁷ Furthermore, even if one does have access to such hardware but is accustomed to more up-to-date technology and the connectivity rates of high speed internet, reading *We Descend* on a sluggish, vintage Macintosh computer with a 9-inch black and white screen can be tedious and frustrating. Beyond the difficulties associated with access, interface design, and speed, learning how to effectively navigate a network of lexia to a first

¹⁷ Although a version of Volume One was distributed by Eastgate for Windows 95 and was later updated with newer software and distributed on CD for both Macintosh and Windows, portions of this chapter that focus specifically on *We Descend, Volume One* will be limited to the original version created in Storyspace 1.0-1.5 for Mac SE OS 7-8.

generation Storyspace hypertext takes time and effort, and the same is true for volumes two and three even though these are published on the Internet and designed with more recent software. Hypertextual networks are by definition multilinear, disjunctive, and fragmentary, they defamiliarize the conventional reading practice of print. In short, what distinguishes *We Descend* from other works of archival and speculative fiction are the hypertext's linking mechanism which not only physically support Bly's multivolume novel, are employed as a means for collating and annotating the archive, thematizing the hypertext apparatus into the archival structure of *We Descend*'s storyworld.

2. A System of Networks: From Storyspace to the Internet

Storyspace was coauthored by Michael Joyce, Jay David Bolter, and John Smith in the mid-1980s, who also happen to be the early progenitors of electronic hypertext literature and hypertext theory (Kirschenbaum 2008: 160-178). Between 1989 and 2001, Eastgate Systems, the principle publisher and distributor of Storyspace hypertexts, headed by Mark Bernstein, published and distributed 27 Storyspace hypertexts, including canonical texts such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon* (1990), Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1992), and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995). Beginning in the late 1990s, and increasingly so after the turn of the millennium, hypertext authors, including Bly, pivoted more toward Internet-based hypertext and hypermedia because of the ease with which it allowed authors to integrate and link text with graphics, video, and audio, but also because it allowed authors to reach a global audience on their own terms, for little cost and without the

needs of a publisher/distributor. The possibilities for digital literature at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century have long surpassed what was possible in the 80s and 90s, but Storyspace will always remain synonymous with the that period in electronic hypertext history (Ryan 2006: 136). Compared to the kinds of born digital artifacts that circulate today, Storyspace and the hardware needed to run original first generation hypertexts may strike one as being fairly primitive, but that fact should have no bearing on their cultural and aesthetic value.¹⁸ If anything, contemporary readers should be amazed with how well first-generation Storyspace hypertexts are “able to house [such] extensive material and generate [such] intricate structural configurations” (Bell 2010: 3).

Early theories about the nature of electronic hypertext and what it was going to do for the literary world were greatly influenced by poststructuralist thought and were for the most part largely exaggerated. Perhaps most notably was the claim that electronic hypertext could liberate writers and readers from the linear, coercive, and hierarchical structures of conventional print-based media (e.g., see Bolter 1991, Delany and Landow 1991, and Moulthrop 1991). This revolutionary spirit ascribed to electronic hypertext, regardless of the number of criticisms scholars have consistently made in response (e.g., Aarseth 1997; Ryan 1998, 2006; Kirschenbaum 2008; Bell 2010), is still defended in George Landow’s *Hypertext 3.0*, where he maintains that in

¹⁸ In “23 reasons not to read *We Descend* by Bill Bly,” Jan Van Looy claims *We Descend* is a “static” hypertext that “can hardly be called interactive” (2002). Besides being a highly uncharitable reading of *We Descend*, Bly’s hypertext lays no claim to being “interactive,” though it should be noted that it does foreground the temporal and ontological dynamics of Storyspace and there are several gated lexia that readers must discover in order to access to key writings. Van Looy seems to hold *We Descend* to a set of criteria (perhaps digital interactive fictions from the early 2000s?) that do not inform the hypertext under consideration.

“all hypertext systems...the reader is not locked into any kind of particular organization or hierarchy” (Landow 2006: 38). However, with electronic hypertext, as with all media, there’s always going to be structural and technological constraints, even if they’re not immediately obvious. Storyspace, for instance, organizes text according to a dual data structure, what Kirschenbaum calls “hierarchical tress” and “associative nodes or clusters” (Kirschenbaum 2008: 173) that readers can view and somewhat interact with. Early hypertext theorists were mesmerized by the novelty of the medium, but the liberating aspect was mostly ideology, what Bly himself suggests was “a polemical position more than anything” (Davis and Bly 2019). In discussing the challenges of learning how to write and read hypertext, Bly says that “liberating” is “just not the word that comes to mind when [he] read[s], or write[s], or even think[s] about hypertext” (Davis and Bly 2019). Confronted with what Bly refers to as hypertext’s “tyranny of abundance—all the choices we’re required to make, constantly,” he decided to go a different route with *We Descend* by attempting “to make things hospitable for the reader,” though as he admits, Storyspace “often made this hospitality work very tricky” (Davis and Bly 2019).

Although Marie-Laure Ryan, a pivotal scholar in multimedia narratology, was one of the first to criticize arguments lauding the liberating effects of hypertext (e.g., Ryan 1998), she maintains that “Storyspace hypertext[s]” are “faithful to postmodern aesthetics” because they “prevent the formation of a complete picture, or they may lead to the construction of many conflicting partial readings” (Ryan 2006: 144). However, as Alice Bell points out, “the generic diversity of Storyspace novels” makes “it is difficult, if not impossible, to classify all hypertexts as postmodernist” (Bell

2010: 18). Indeed, as one of the most widely used hypertext software up until the late 1990s, Storyspace was adopted and employed by authors in a variety of ways for different literary, ideological, and aesthetic purposes. To describe a text that is fragmentary and that engages in narrative perspectivism as being “faithful to postmodern aesthetics” on the face of it seems simply wrong. One has only to look at modernist texts by the likes of Faulkner or Stein or virtually anything from the historical avant-garde to see how these techniques were around long before the postmodernists arrived. Bell’s insight that some hypertext scholars tend to be “committed to making general conclusions about the hypertext medium rather than linking them to the narratives that they contain” (Bell 2010: 6) is rather apropos in this regard. *We Descend* is sympathetic to the traditions of autofiction and metafiction, and is skeptical of legitimizing power structures supported by dogmatic metanarratives, but Bly’s hypertext project also seems determined to overcome the kinds of uncertainties and noncommittal attitudes associated with postmodern skepticism through the figure and activity of the archivist, and Storyspace helps, not hinders, Bly’s attempts to achieve those ends.

Volume one of *We Descend* was written in Storyspace 1.0-1.5 and requires what would now be considered a vintage Macintosh computer running an OS 5-7 to read the original version. As the floppy disk for *We Descend, Volume One* loads in Storyspace Reader a screen appears informing us that Bly’s hypertext consists of 598 lexia (pages or nodes) connected by a total of 864 hyperlinks, averaging less than two links per lexia (*WDvol1* “Loading the document”). Once the disk has loaded a default lexia appears displaying one of *We Descend*’s three graphics (*WDvol1* “Sky

Banner”).¹⁹ Clicking the cursor anywhere on the graphic takes the reader to the next lexia, the dedication page, where an additional click will take readers to the Title Page. The title page introduces a few navigational choices for the reader because all of contents listed (Foreword, Directions, Inventory, and Just Start) contain hyperlinks (see Figure 1). Assuming these links are arranged this way for a reason, the reader clicks on Forward first. In the Forward readers learn that the lexia to *We Descend* have been arranged to produce two central navigational paths, what Bly calls the “default path” and “off-path writings” (*WDvol1* “Forward”). To begin the default path, readers simply follows the Just Start link on the title page. Once readers reach the end of the default path, they are sent back to the title page which will then have an additional link, “Begin anew,” which leads to the “off-path writings.” Bly suggests following these paths on a first reading because they introduce all of the archive’s historical ages as well as most of the archive’s characters. “Dead ends” and “inescapable loops” are employed sparingly, and only a handful of “gated lexia” exist, writings that are only accessible through a single unidirectional hyperlink (*WDvol1* “Forward”). Most notably, the Forward informs readers to anticipate “one of the hidden story lines” concerning “the sequence of characters, including... the Editor,” who “will gradually emerge from the writings” and seem “to be (or seems to believe he is) in charge” (*WDvol1* “Forward”). The character referred to here as the Editor is later designated in volume two by the diplomatist as being the archive’s scholiast and thus the archive’s first annotator of record (*WDvol2* “Scholia”). What

¹⁹ The graphic provides a partial view of what we later learn belongs to a monochromatic bookplate produced by Fredric Garrison Hall in 1903 that Bly repurposed and slightly modified (*WDvol1* “Credits”).

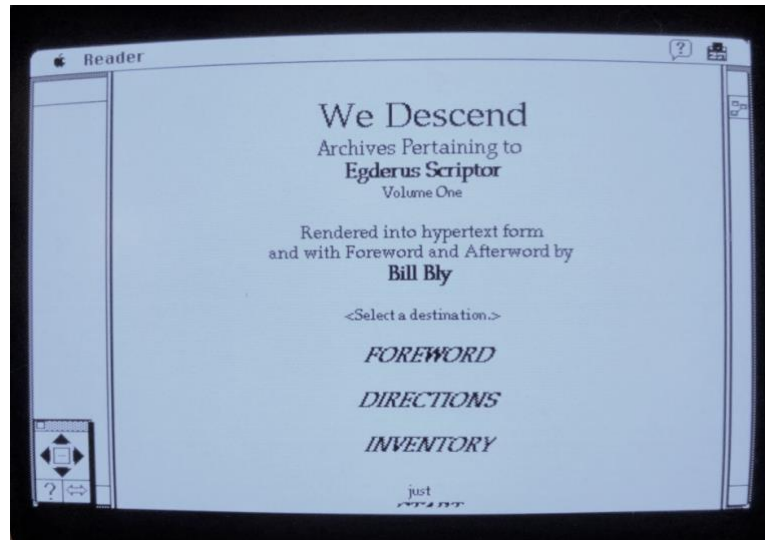


Figure 1: Screen shot from *We Descend*, Volume One, Mac SE OS 7 (WD1 “Title Page”)

these preliminary statements highlight are *We Descend*’s interest in textual authenticity and attribution, which are closely tied to issues of authority.

While the Forward foreshadows to readers key themes in Bly’s hypertext, the Directions provides a brief tutorial for how to navigate *We Descend*’s application of Storyspace’s affordances. Storyspace Reader offers readers two views (i.e., windows), a text view and a map view, facilitated by a small navigation palette that allows readers to traverse within and across each view. The text view presents the contents of the archive, including peritextual material like the Forward and Directions. The reader navigates in and out of lexia by either by clicking on the directional arrows located on the navigation palette or by clicking on a hyperlink which are only made visible when holding down the Option and Command keys simultaneously. Not all lexia feature hyperlinks, but some lexia feature several. To switch from text view to map view the reader can either click on the map window

itself or on the toggle tool located in the center of the navigational palette. The map view displays the hypertext's hierarchical network of interconnecting nodes, which are essentially folders-within-folders (within-folders, etc.). Clicking on individual folders or nodes in the map view necessarily changes the lexia presented in the text view. After some traversing, the reader comes to realize that the older a specific writing is within the archive the deeper its node is buried within the hypertext's nested and hierarchical structure. Furthermore, the younger a writing is the closer it is to the surface of the screen. These observations illuminate how Bly's application of Storyspace formalizes the hierarchical data structure of the software into the fictional world's historical and spatio-temporal thematics. The older a writing is, the further down we must go into the depths of the archive to retrieve it. Here is where Bly's notion of the "archeological dig," echoed by Grigar, again becomes relevant. And although these observations linking vertical depth to historical time figuratively describe the relationship between Storyspace and the contents of the archive, it's important to note that in volumes two and three, because of the limitations of displaying hypertext in HTML, there are no longer any map views available to readers. Consequently, the trope of verticality is flattened by the horizontal structure of the Internet, making the archaeological metaphors less poignant for describing the reader's engagement with the archives.

The Inventory provides access to all writings in the archive with exception to the few guarded writings which must be visited along the reader's tour of the default path before becoming accessible. The Inventory is located at the top of the hypertext's hierarchical structure and lists the authors whose writings are featured in

the archive in descending order, making the oldest writings located at the bottom. Clicking on any name will take you to an inventory of writings belonging to each author. What are not featured in the Inventory and are only accessible through hyperlinks embedded in particular writings (and only visible when pressing the control and commands keys simultaneously), are the Notes (later identified as the Scholia and Legomena in volumes two and three). The Notes are provided by the Editor (again, later identified as the Scholiast in volumes two and three) who Bly informs his readers in the Forward to be suspicious of, for his primary directive, it becomes increasingly clear over time, is to delegitimize attempts made by early scholars and curators to authenticate the archive. Readers are thus asked to collate the hypertext's competing viewpoints in order to decide who it is they should believe.

The interface for volumes two and three is similar to the original Storyspace hypertext, but there are notable medial and structural differences informed by Bly's use of Eastgate's latest writing software, Tinderbox (a web 2.0 version of Storyspace), as well as the affordances provided by the Internet. For one, whereas Storyspace hypertexts, as Loss Pequeño Glazier puts it, are essentially "closed hypertext universes" bound to the "controlled environment" of floppy disks (Glazier 2002: 88), Internet hypertexts can in theory link to anything that doesn't exist behind some form of network security. While Bly does provide links in his Colophon sections to external domains, he does not exploit the hypermedia possibilities of the Internet. However, by virtue of their being displayed on the Internet provides readers the opportunity to integrate and overlap the Internet of things and thus personalize their reading experience. Navigating the archives of volumes two and three is much

easier than volume one, in part because the word-count and physical dimensions of individual lexia is larger; readers can manipulate the dimension and zoom ratio of their chosen browser, and hyperlinks are even color-coded. The navigational palette has also been simplified to provide more or less instant access to everything. In volumes two and three, Bly again provides prefaces and forwards, as well as default and off-path tours, but every lexia is more or less immediately accessible, nothing is gated. There's an Inventory, same structure as before, and in place of Storyspace's map view is an Outline listing all writings in the archive according to author and title, including the Scholia and Legomena.

Technologically speaking, volumes two and three are superior to what Storyspace could deliver when Bly was writing volume one in 1995-96. In addition to all of the aforementioned medial and structural differences, which have affective and aesthetic consequences, Bly has built into the background display of volumes two and three (as well as the Revised Internet edition of volume one that has yet to be officially released) screen shots taken from Tinderbox's map view that have been processed to alter the image's tint and opaqueness (Figure 2). Each image symbolizes in toto the network of links and nodes that underwrite the writings to each volume, with each subsequent volume's image representing more data reflected in their increased levels of noise and opaqueness. Reminiscent of telescopic images of distant galaxies or globular clusters, these images enact what media theorist Alan Liu calls "data pours," the dumping or pouring of unknown quantities and qualities of data which can lead to affective responses critics sometimes refer to as the digital or

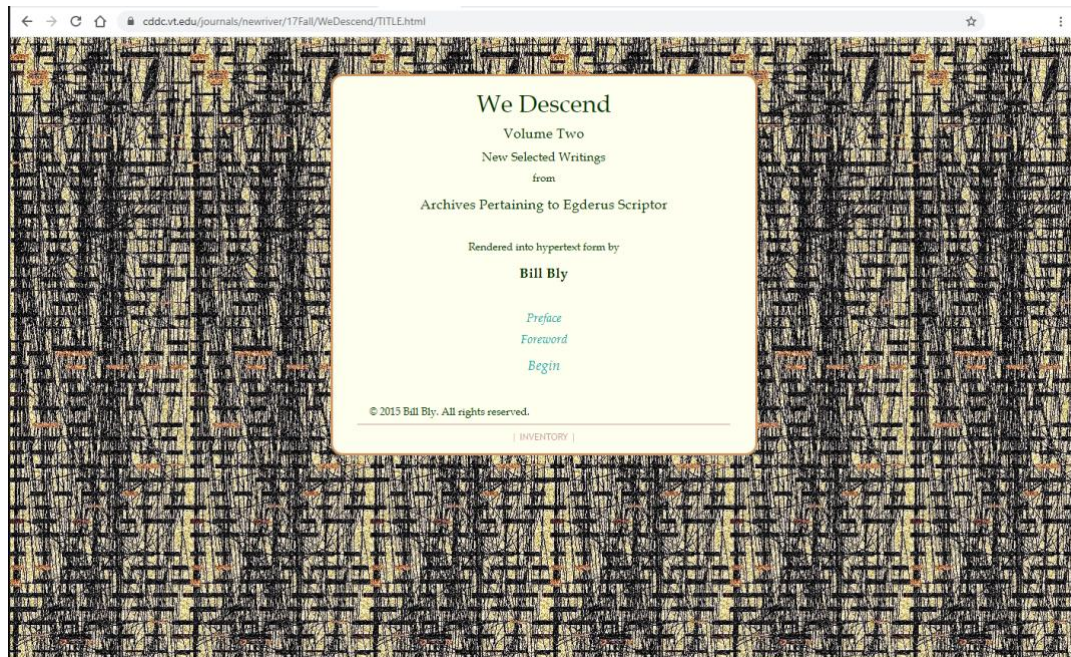


Figure 2. Screen shot from *We Descend, Volume Two* (WD2 “Title Page”)

technological sublime (Liu 2004: 59).²⁰ These images visualize an unknown amount of data, but none the less provide glimpses into what that data looks like when translated into Tinderbox’s map view network structure. These images frame every page or lexia of *We Descend*, but their source is nested or hidden deep in the background code. These images, one might say, present the unrepresentable, which is rather apropos given the archive of writings in *We Descend* could be said to be doing

²⁰ According to Liu, data pours “are code embedded in a web page that is bound to... any data repository located elsewhere.... In the source code of a web page, data islands or pours commonly appear as a congested, opaque concentration of non-HTML code or scripting (or non-HTML grafted onto or interwoven with HTML). Functionally, however, the opacity of the code is really transparency (like looking through an aperture or window) to content located elsewhere” (Liu 2004: 59 fn28). When it comes to data pours in art and literature, data pours “are places on a page...where an author in effect surrenders the act of writing to that of parameterization. In these topoi, the author designates a zone where content of unknown quantity and quality...pours into the manifest work from databases or XML sources hidden in the deep background. Content, in other words, becomes semiotically transcendental” (Liu 2004: 59). Opening up the possibility for a kind of “data sublime,” a “data pour” is enacted or replicated in *We Descend* in these background images (Liu 2004: 73-77).

the same thing in how they attempt to re-present ancient textual artifacts. So, although the thematic trope of verticality in *We Descend, Volume One* that parallels the dual data structure of Storyspace is less pronounced in volumes two and three by virtue of the Internet's horizontal apparatus, Bly finds a way to encapsulate what his hypertext networks looks like in Tinderbox in one all-encompassing image, an image that, in Liu's terms, is "semiotically transcendental" (Liu 2004: 59).

3. The Writings: Production, Reception, Transmission

Bly's longtime interest in ancient Greek drama and medieval Troubadour poetry influence the speculative future and material history of *We Descend's* storyworld (Grigar 2017; Davis and Bly 2019). The historical settings of *We Descend* fall roughly along five different periods or ages: 2000 AD, 3000 AD, 4000 AD, and then two later periods separated by an unknown amount of time. However, the world of 3000 AD tends to resemble the middle ages, and the world of 4000 AD tends to resemble classical antiquity.²¹ Indeed, it takes some time before readers come to

²¹ In volume one of *We Descend* (1997), the Scholar's writing titled "Scholar's Draft" cross references the writings from the Age of Egderus and dates them to "thirty generations ago," which is roughly 900 years ("Scholar's Draft"). However, in volumes two and three, Bly has all of his scribes and archivists refer to writings produced "many generations" ago, forgoing the more approximate dating. In any case, there is every reason to suspect that writings in the archive extend thousands of years, if not millennia. In the Revised Internet edition of *We Descend, Volume One*, that Bly has shared with me but has not made public because of copyright issues with Eastgate, the Directions section includes a note by the Editor that is not featured in the original. Therein he makes a comment about the author of the Directions (which we had assumed was the flesh-and-blood Bill Bly), that he "is responding to a felt need to 'explicate the apparatus'—in this case, a particular reading technology, vanished long ago...what the Ancients...called 'hypertext'" ("Directions"). What Bly has done here is revised volume one in light of the new medium it is displayed in, the Internet, to point out how the directions for navigating Storyspace are no longer applicable. This note is the most explicit statement in the archive that dates the Ancients as contemporaneous with the 1990s, when Bly wrote *We Descend*, before Storyspace became obsolete. Everything that happens after the time of the Ancients is set in the distant future. The irony of course, is that hypertext didn't vanish long ago, not in our world nor in the world of the Bly's fictional archive.

realize *We Descend* is set in the distant future and not the distant past. Bly obviously wants his readers to think about the present historically, as well as the relationship between the Roman Republic and modern day American Imperialism, but more importantly he wants his readers to consider how the medium through which knowledge is inscribed or stored significantly effects the transmission, veracity, and accessibility of that knowledge for later generations. Similar to more well-known dystopian fictions such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *We Descend* is a cautionary tale about how certain socio-technological tendencies could lead human civilization towards its own demise, but Bly's fictional specifically considers how a hypothetical catastrophe would affect the transmission of knowledge in a world where all information and knowledge had become completely digitized. What if for whatever reason the world's computers became inaccessible because of some widespread digital virus? What if the energy needed to run the world's computers became completely depleted? What if the annals of human history and data were all but completely lost? How does one authenticate a physical document once it has been rendered or translated into a digital format? How does one authenticate any document for that matter? What does it mean for a document to be authentic? Who has the authority to authenticate a document and who gives them that authority? These are the kinds of thought experiments *We Descend* runs, even if most of them are implied instead of explicitly stated.

Several generations after the global cataclysm a theocratic state comes to power which successfully institutionalizes a supernatural explanation for the cataclysm allowing them to legitimize and sustain their dominion over the population.

All the while, however, a Fellowship of scribes and archivists have been compiling an archive that counters this supernatural narrative containing writings, including hypertexts, belonging to those who existed before and after the global collapse. In short, what emerges from the collation and cross-referencing of writings in *We Descend*'s three volumes is a kind of Manichean allegory built upon binaries of competing parties and semantic oppositions (e.g., science vs. religion, preservation vs. destruction, belief vs doubt, legitimate vs. illegitimate, powerful vs. powerless, etc.). Susana Pajares Toska writes that *We Descend* "is a profound meditation on the meaning of history and its relation to power and human nature" (Toska 1998). This is true, but just as those who own the means of production control the principle means of wealth, those who control access to the archive control the transmission of human knowledge and memory. Around the same time Bly began writing in earnest his "document-authentic project," Jacques Derrida writes that "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory." "Effective democratization," Derrida goes on to say, "can always be measured by...the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation" (Derrida 1995: 11fn1). The archive's *raison d'être*, *We Descend* would seem to argue, is not simply a matter of preserving documents that no longer serve their original institutional function. In *We Descend*, whoever controls the archive determines how society is governed, what becomes law, how history is told and written.

Although new writings and characters are introduced in each subsequent volume, *We Descend* can be divided into three types of writings: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary writings are the foundational writings of the archive. These

include poems, songs, epigrams, meditations, sermons, testimonies, anecdotes, longer narratives, interview transcripts, textual scholarship and theory. To the extent there is anything resembling story or plot in *We Descend*, these can be found in and across the disparate and often fragmented primary writings, but causal and thematic relationships among writings is usually fuzzy and often impenetrable. *We Descend* is less a work of narrative fiction than a collection of disparate artifacts, compiled together by the mere fact that they have all ended up in the same place at various historical moments. Consequently, *We Descend* does not have a single narrator, instead there are many, some of whom comment on, challenge, and contradict one another. As Grigar points out, “to read *We Descend* as a hypertext is to assume it will deliver something it is not intended to. For it is not precisely a nonsequential work of fiction, but rather a compilation of interconnected archives relaying bits of information as incompletely as one would expect of an ancient text” (Grigar 2017: 205). Primary writings index at least five distinct historical ages or periods, sometimes separated by multiple generations (Figure 3). In volume one, each historical period is established; the primary writings, characters, settings, and plots that belong to each period are introduced, and then in volumes two and three additional writings are discovered for old and new characters which build upon and complicate initial interpretations of volume one. Secondary writings consist of Scholia and Legomena. The Scholia cross-reference the writings in the archive and offer brief commentary on many of the archive’s primary writings. The Legomena, produced by the archive’s diplomatists, are essentially an updated and more sophisticated version of the Scholia, focusing primarily on issues of authenticity and

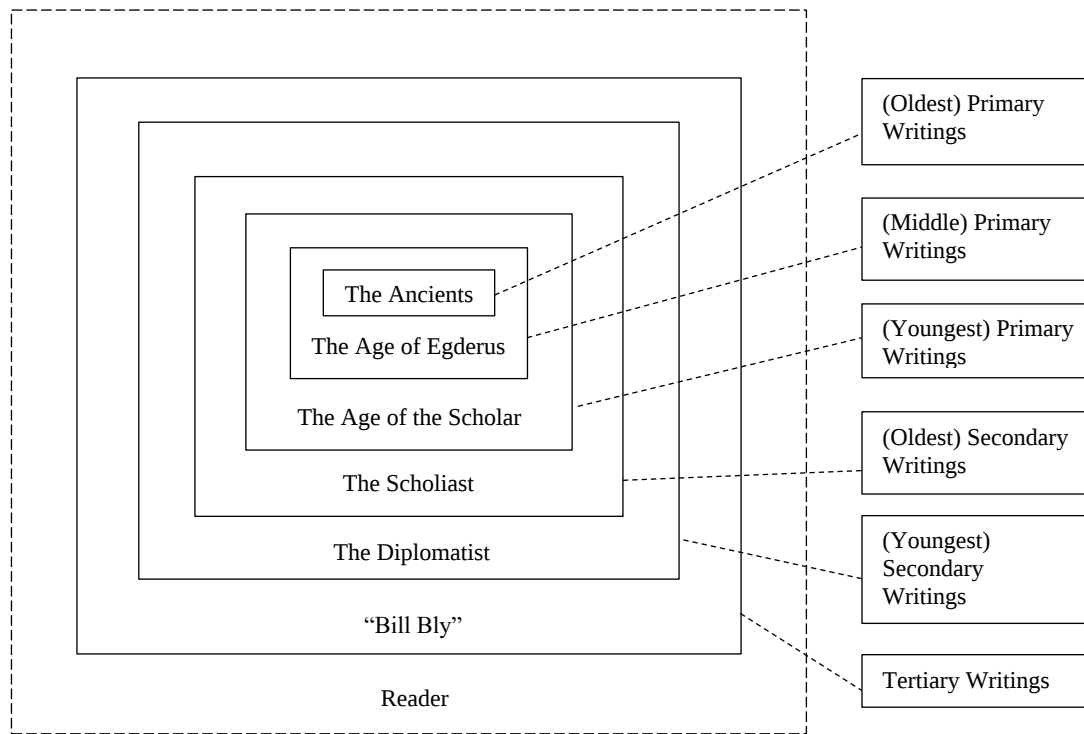


Figure 3. Narrative layers and historical periods, including readerly figured layer.

attribution. Tertiary writings include prefaces, forewords, and directions for navigating the hypertexts. Some of these writings are signed by Bill Bly,²² whose name is listed on each volume’s title page as the one who “rendered” the archive into electronic “hypertext form.”

The youngest collection of primary writings belongs to the Age of the Scholar, which is set in the distant future some 2000 years from the actual present (c. 4000 AD). In volume one, readers encounter the writings of an unnamed Scholar who

²² Because Bly figures himself into the world of *We Descend*, readers are led to believe this is the flesh-and-blood Bly’s fictional doppelgänger. As with Lehrer’s *A Life in Books*, Bly’s project enters the domain of autofiction, but there isn’t enough material to work with to make prowling this element of the project worthwhile.

has discovered a previously unknown collection of writings, attributed to a scribe named Egderus, that are approximately 1000 years old (*WDvol1* “Scholar’s Diary”). Egderus’s writings lead to an even older collection of writings dating back an additional 1000 years to the time when the global cataclysm occurred (*WDvol1* (“Egderus and ‘The Historian’, Part 2”). These writings are assumed to have been first compiled by a man who in volumes two and three is called Last One who then passes them along to a character named Boy before he dies (*WDvol3* “return”). In short, the Scholar believes he has come to possess a collection of writings that once belonged to a magnificent, and until now unknown, ancient civilization (presumably twentieth century America). Among the collection of writings there are a “handful” of what the Scholar calls “ante-cataclysmic hyper-texts,” that is, hypertexts that pre-date the global cataclysm and that maybe point to the real “causes and events and ideas that have long been lost” (*WDvol1* “Of the demise...”). The Scholar *believes* by authenticating the archives, he can not only verify the existence of this ancient civilization, he can prove they invented both “the computer” and electronic “hypertext” (*WDvol1* “Of the demise...”), and that these technologies likely played a significant role in the global cataclysm that all but annihilated the human species (*WDvol1* “Scholar’s Address”). This belief, however, is not well received. When the Scholar comes to argue for the archive’s authenticity at an academic convention, he is reprimanded, someone tries to poison him (*WDvol2* “The Locust Grove”), is forced to hand over the writings to some unnamed successor, and is forbidden to discuss the archive ever again of (*WDvol1* “Scholar’s Farwell”; *WDvol2* “Scholar’s Confessio”).

It's unclear how many hands the archive passes through once it leaves the Scholar, but two figures during his age seem to have possessed it after him, one referred to as the Unnamed Curator (*WDvol2* "archive under threat"), the other the Voice from the Locust Grove (*WDvol2* "Peripatikos Soter"). The Unknown Curator claims to have "cop[ied]...every writing in the archive" as well as written as much that "could be deduced about its author, his intention in writing it...and the circumstances under which it was produced" (*WDvol2* "archive under threat"). Reading this, the diplomatist in volume two postulates that the Unknown Curator could be the one responsible for writing all of the scholia, as well as their inventories (*WDvol2* "Legomenon for Unknown Curator"). These comments pose potentially irresolvable problems for attributing authorship to many writings in the archive. Because so many characters are unnamed, including those who produce the annotations and elucidations for each volume, it is impossible to know how many individuals have handled and/or contributed to the archive across generations, how many times individual writings have been copied, and what kinds of writing technologies and surfaces were used along the way.

The primary writings that pre-date the Scholar's by a millennium (c. 3000 AD) belong to those who lived during the Age of Egderus (*WDvol1* "Scholar's Draft"). Egderus is a humble, disabled scribe who lives in a secluded mountaintop monastery called Mountain House during an age of Goliards, Eparchs, inquisitionists, stratiote (soldiers), scribes and hermetic monks.²³ There is a rather large cast of

²³ Although the lexicon of *We Descend* can at times evoke the world of Medieval Latin, this is more a sign of the fictional world's post-apocalyptic anachronisms that result from corrupt authoritarianism and the misuse of history than they are signs of real-world historical landmark.

characters from this period, with intertwining plots dealing with queer romance, ethnic persecution, religious inquisition, and war, but all paths lead to Egderus and his archive in one way or another. Egderus is a key figure in *We Descend* (Bly features him in every volume's title), and yet his story, like everyone else's, remains much a mystery. Readers know that Egderus was "donated" to Mountain House as a boy (*WDvol1* "Egderus at Mountain House") shortly after an "inquest" began (*WDvol1* "Egderus' Secret"), but we don't know much more. He walks with a limp, gradually climbs the ranks at Mountain House, and dedicates himself to its mission (*WDvol1* "Egderus at Mountain House"). We can infer from various testimonies that Mountain House is a kind of penal colony for cripples, outcasts, and insubordinates, and that some of its members, including Egderus, are part of a "Fellowship" who have for many generations been secretly preserving an archive of writings under the floorboards that they believe authentically index the historical period immediately following the global cataclysm (*WDvol1* "Egderus' Last Writing" and "Egderus at Mountain House"). Among these writings, which Egderus calls the "Treasure of the Ancients" (*WDvol1* "Egderus' Secret"), includes the Historian's "notebook" (Egderus's lover) detailing his sojourn with the Remnant, a tribe of nomads who may be the direct descendent of the Ancients (*WDvol1* "Historian's Notebook"). Egderus's archive also includes a handful of "objects," the likes of which Egderus "had never seen before," which readers are invited to believe are floppy disks originally belonging to the Ancients, the very ones the Scholar discovers generations later: "a dozen or so objects, each about the size and shape of half a flatbread...made of metal and some unidentifiable material" (*WDvol1* "Egderus and 'The Historian', Part 2").

It's difficult to imagine how a collection of floppy disks, let alone anything else, could survive 2000 years and remain legible, but readers are invited to consider how "neglect" can become the optimal conditions for "preserving things" (*WDvol2* "Peripatikos Soter").

In both Egderus's and the Scholar's age, the population is led to believe the Ancients were deities, not humans, who destroyed human civilization in the name of divine retribution. In Egderus's age this narrative is enforced by the likes of the Good Doctor and the Missionary, "agents of the Inquirer General, whose charge it was to ensure the proper reverence for the deities, by whose authority the Golias was said to rule" (*WDvol2* "Writings of [The] M[issionary]" and "M Part Two"). In the Scholar's age this narrative is enforced by a shadow group known only as the "Council" (*WDvol2* "Scholar's Confessio"), the same group that confiscates the Scholar's "treasure" at the Conference and that openly declared the "whole thing a silly hoax" (*WDvol2* "The Retreat House"). On other side of this Manichean war, fighting against these religious and bureaucratic authorities, is the Fellowship, led by generations of archivists, which at one point was Egderus (*WDvol1* "The First Sermon of Egderus"). As Egderus puts it, "the Ancients...were not gods at all, but rather plain human beings like us...who had somehow mysteriously destroyed themselves....[O]ur puny towns and fortresses are built upon—indeed, fashioned from—the residuum of their unimaginably glorious but wholly mortal civilization" (*WDvol1* "Egderus' Last writings"). Egderus, the Scholar, as well as the other members of the Fellowship, believe the archives are evidence for this. The mission of Mountain House (also called "House" during the age of the Ancients, and "Retreat House" during the age of

the Scholar) and of the Fellowship more generally, is to preserve the archive. This mission is repeatedly implied throughout *We Descend*, but is perhaps most succinctly stated in a speech Egderus gives the Fellowship on the brink of another war, perhaps another cataclysm: “we must persevere: the continuance of our race depends upon us—you **must** feel this, or you would not be here tonight....Together we **will** prevail, if not in our own persons, then in the persons of those who come after us, for whom we do our work” (*WDvol3* “this work”).

The oldest primary writings belong to the Ancients (c. 2000 AD). Writings attributed to the unnamed Ancient in volume one consists of lyrical fragments, as well as end-times observations of a world in crisis, leveled into ruins. Some of the writings attributed to the Ancients from volume one feature lines from traditional folksongs such as “Warfarin Stranger” that the author says he “used to sing” a “long long time ago,” presumably before the cataclysm (*WDvol1* “Wayfarin’ Stranger”). These writings act as additional cultural-historical referents, making it more obvious that the Ancients are us, Bly’s contemporaries, reminding us again of Bly’s cautionary motives. More generally, the writings in volume one attributed to the Ancients all tend to express some kind of loss or nostalgia for the past, for the ways things were before the cataclysm.²⁴ Volumes two and three introduce writings from the Last One and his adopted Boy, as well as additional writings by unknown Ancients that may or may not be the same unnamed source attributed to the writings in volume one. The man who comes to call himself the Last One, may or may not be acquainted with the

²⁴ For example, “My despair” longs for authentic being, “Storms & Haze” for environmental stability, “Catastrophe” for stable linguistic meaning, New Ecclesiastes for reliable historical knowledge, and “Wayfarin’ Stranger” obviously longs for companionship (*WDvol1*).

author of the other writings from this period, wanders around a waste land theorizing about the nature of textual knowledge in ways that seem inflected by the demise that is all around him (*WDvol2* “the ghosts” and “The Perpetrated World”; *WDvol3* “enemy”), theories that briefly come up generations later in writings by the Scholar and the Voice from the Locust Grove (*WDvol2* “hands” and “The Retreat House”). There are also “Fragments” attributed to the Ancients in volume one that are actually modern English translations of the Holy Bible, and the fact that none of the archive’s handlers, curators, or scholars at any given point are able to identify them as such suggests that Judeo-Christian mythology and scripture have been completely supplanted by supernatural doctrines concerning the Ancients. Commenting on passages from Leviticus and Job, presumed to have been written by one of the Ancients, the Editor/Scholiast of volume one writes that they are “Conjectured to be” two of the very “few proper names in the archives,” appearing “nowhere else in the Writings” (*WDvol1* “And as for those that are left” and “For you shall be in league with the stones”).²⁵

The fourth and fifth ages constitute the secondary writings and concern the writings of the Scholiast and the Diplomatist who possess the archive after it is confiscated or handed over from the Scholar. Whereas Egderus and the Scholar contribute their own personal stories to the archive, indeed the archive is about them,

²⁵ Like practically everything else that predates the cataclysm, the Bible is apparently lost from the annals of human history. However, with these two quotes from the Bible, which represent the Old Testament God’s wrath towards those who do not follow his word, are interposed and hyperlinked to the Scholar’s writings that deal with his deliberation over whether or not to present the archive at the conference. In other words, Bly seems to be inviting a similarity between man’s relationship to the Old Testament God and the Scholar’s relationship to the members of the Council.

their life in the archives, so to speak, these writers comment upon or elucidate the material conditions, veracity, authorship, and authenticity of the writings. The individual lives of these writers are not documented, but their writings are an integral part of the archive's reception and transmission history, challenging readers to be more cognizant of how they choose to interpret the archive as a whole (*WDvol2* "Afterword").

There are several writings collectively called Writings of Unknown Provenance (*WDvol2*; *WDvol3*), which are unattributable and that could potentially fall anywhere during, before, or after the established historical ages. The most consequential writings among them are those attributed to the Remnant, but more important than these writings themselves (of which there are only a six across all three volumes) is the fact that writers across generations repeatedly recite "Sayings of the Remnant." The sayings are aphorisms, bits of wisdom, apparently received and transmitted orally, not through writing (e.g., "it is better to be proved a credulous fool than to scoff and then be shown your mistake," *WDvol2* "The Kinds of Wilderness"). In a sense, these sayings are anachronic, statements whose symbolic meanings exist outside of time and therefore their value does not lie in any single object (we will return to these ideas next section).²⁶ Exactly who or what the Remnant are is never

²⁶ The "Sayings of the Remnant" represent something unique in *We Descend*. The wisdom that the sayings embody are not only apparently transmitted orally, they are recited by individuals on both sides of the authenticity debate. The sayings therefore act as counterpoints to the highly limited and fragmentary text-based knowledge that is transmitted by the physical writings, opening up alternative routes and circumstances for generating and preserving knowledge across time and space. Although the reader's access to these sayings is obviously mediated by verbal inscriptions, that they are "sayings" and not "texts," and apparently spoken as frequently if not more so than they are written (many of the writings in which they appear are verbal transcriptions of "speeches"), they seem to belong to an extratextual domain.

disclosed in *We Descend*. They may or may not be the living descendants of the Ancients (WDvol1 “Scholar’s Summary,” “Summary Addendum,” and “More Writings!”). They may be the aboriginal cave dwellers whom the Historian supposedly lives with and writes about in his notebook (WDvol1 “Historian’s Notebook” and “Aric: Gig’s Death”). They may be physical objects, actual remnants from the pre-cataclysm world, or maybe an alternative name for the Fellowship (WDvol1 “Egderus’ Last Writings”; WDvol3 “this work”). Or they may be figments of someone’s imagination, fictional entities (WDvol1 “More Writings!”). In the end, because there is no substantial evidence to support any hypothesis, interpretations for who or what the Remnant are all remain provisional.

Representing the sixth age or generation is the “character” Bill Bly, author of the tertiary writings, who has been slowly migrating the archive from print to digital hypertext over several years. That the flesh-and-blood Bill Bly claims responsibility for “rendering” the archive into hypertext form (*We Descend* is Bly’s intellectual property after all) while also at the same time fictionalizes himself by nesting his name and efforts into the fictional world of *We Descend*, Bly simultaneously claims and disavows ownership of his life-long project, drawing attention yet again to the work’s ambivalent obsession with authenticity and attribution even at its outermost edges. Even when discussing the sequence of curators while being interviewed, Bly disavows himself from his life-work: “One survivor of this catastrophe creates (or accretes) the first clutch of writings that eventually form the archives put together by Egderus: these texts are those subsequently discovered by the Scholar, and later yet rendered into hypertext form by the present curator of the archives, a person named

Bill Bly, who's been working on them for nearly 35 years" (Davis and Bly 2019). Outside of the context of metafiction, the depersonalization on display in the latter part of this passage would be strange. In the context of *We Descend*'s deliberate ambivalence toward ontologies of authorship, however, such disavow is consistent with its ideological concerns. And yet, the reader's only sensible response to such statement is one of disbelief. It is my contention that Bly, here, is inviting his readers to authenticate his work, to attribute *him* as *the author*, and in doing so, is reminded that authors and readers, as Adam Kelly puts it, "really do exist... they are not simply implied" (Kelly 2016: 206).²⁷

4. Historical Authenticity and Belief

In *Framing the Sign*, Jonathan Culler claims "one of the characteristics of modernity is the belief that authenticity has been lost and exists only in the past—whose signs we preserve (antiques, restored buildings, imitations of old interiors)—or else in other regions or countries" (Culler 1988: 160). In a certain sense, the post-apocalyptic future of Bly's *We Descend* dramatizes this particular idea of authenticity. On the one hand, it is symbolized by the archivists who believe the archive's collection of writings faithfully represents or reconstructs what have long been suppressed historical truths. In this context, authenticity is the perceived fidelity

²⁷ That Bly has been working on this hypertext project for "35 years" also implies that he *believes* in the archive too, at least in some artistic or symbolic sense. The capacity to believe, which we witness in characters like Egderus and the Scholar, therefore extends to Bill Bly, the author of *We Descend*, and potentially to the reader to as well, providing more cause to assume one of Bly's intentions as author is for us to believe in the archive's authenticity, or at the very least in the authenticity of the work of fiction.

of representation to a strongly held idea or belief about the past, it is a matter of personally revealed truth or deeply felt sentiment. “I am *persuaded* by these voices,” writes the Scholar. “I know of no way to actually prove the authenticity of all or any of these writings,” but having “spent the emotional and spiritual equivalent of years...with these people,” he “believe[s] in them—whether they existed or not” (*WDvol1* “More Writings!”). In Irmtraud Huber and Sophie Seita’s terms, we might say that the Scholar’s attachment to his belief displays “authenticity of experience” “evoked by the Other, by some external stimulation” (Huber and Seita 2012: 271). On the other hand, this past-oriented notion of authenticity discussed by Culler is symbolized by *We Descend*’s authority figures and institutions whose inherited power, prestige, and privilege legitimizes whatever declaration of authenticity they wish to make. Although the subjective nature of their belief in the Ancients as deities is similar in kind to that of the archivists, their belief is authorized, stamped with a seal of approval by the Goliards, Eparchs, and Inquisitionists. In this context, authenticity is also intrinsically linked to inherited power and authority, which during the ages of Egderus and the Scholar is what carries the most force and determines the social order. What potentially jeopardizes the integrity of both sets of beliefs, in Culler’s terms, is the absolute depletion of “signs” carried over from previous ages, resulting in various degrees of epistemic depletion, as well as disputes, even wars, over who controls and gets to interpret the archive.

We Descend’s use of a premodern and often Latin and Greek inflected lexicon (e.g., “Goliards,” “Eparch,” “scholia,” “legomenon”), including the names of its ages, its settings and institutions (e.g., the age of the Ancients, monasteries, councils,

churches), invites readers to map its speculative future onto an actual historical timeline beginning from roughly the rise of the Roman Empire to the early twenty-first century. The global cataclysm and projected future represented in *We Descend*, unsurprisingly, parallels the fall of the Roman empire and civilization's descent into a Dark Age, the rise and fall of Feudalism during the Protestant Reformation (and Counter Reformation), culminating in a digital age (the age of "Bill Bly") where computers and hypertext have been (re)invented. Like many dystopian fictions, *We Descend* hits civilization's restart button only to have the world repeat similar mistakes and inevitably return to the same pre-cataclysmic world of the Ancients. When it comes to questions of textual authenticity, because modern methods, such as microscopic, microchemical, radiographic, and spectroscopic tests (Nickell 2009: 11, 15-38), now belong to a bygone world, procedures for authenticating textual artifacts in *We Descend* resemble those of the Medieval to Early Modern period. The absence of rigorous scientific methods of authentication in *We Descend* functions in the service of verisimilitude, that of likening a projected future world, its cultural norms and institutions, with that of earlier stages in civilization to caution readers against current trends in contemporary society that could lead to such demise.

In *Authentic Individualism*, R. Phillip Brown's history of the idea of authenticity from Ancient Greece to modern day, he points out how during the Middle Ages, "the ultimate justification for all conduct was not reason, but authority of divine scriptures and institutions" (Brown 1996: 36). As such, ideas that circulated in the public sphere "were shaped by Roman concepts and Christian doctrines....law was given to, not made by the individual" who "became absorbed in the church which

was itself governed by a monarchical, descending, theocratic theme of government and law according to which original power was located in one supreme authority” (Brown 1996: 39). *We Descend* dramatizes this top-down hierarchical structure of social life in the writings belonging to the ages of Egderus and the Scholar, but of course Christian doctrines have been supplanted by new ones and the Judeo-Christian legacy seems to have fallen out of public memory. The new set of laws and doctrines imposed from above and spread by zealots like the Good Doctor and The Missionary are never clearly spelled out, instead it is the unmitigated force of their authority that is emphasized in testimonies by Egderus, the Historian, and Aric, which abstains the Fellowship during this period from publicly authenticating the archive. Public recognition of the archive’s authenticity is simply never possible until it is rediscovered generations later by the Scholar. However, once the opportunity for him to publicly authenticate the archive arises at a Conference, it is confiscated by the Council and deemed a “silly hoax” (*WDvol2* “The Retreat House”). In all cases, and this is the crucial point I am trying to make, once readers manage to reconstruct the various plots in *We Descend*, what stands out are its sequence of courageous *individual archivists* on the one hand, and those who perpetuate the status quo of institutional authorities on the other. As such, *We Descend* arguably becomes an allegory of the historical shift from a premodern Catholic consciousness, where the individual is dominated by tradition and authority, to a more modern Protestant consciousness founded on the assumption of the autonomous individual as the sole source of meaning and truth. As Brown puts it, “Martin Luther’s doctrine undermined the whole hierarchical system of the church and legitimized a universal priesthood of

believers....The authority of the bible, as interpreted by every individual, substituted for the authority of the church” (Brown 1996: 47). *We Descend*’s believers are not priests, but their belief functions similarly. Furthermore, the enlightenment-humanist rejection of tradition and authority in favor of reason and progress are valorized in *We Descend*’s linear conception of history, a history of the real world, not the supernatural world of the deities, which becomes increasingly objectified by textual media and representation.

At the same time, because *We Descend* projects a speculative post-apocalyptic future world and not a counterfactual medieval history, this more modern understanding of the individual and the world is actually a repetition of an early order, albeit in exaggerated form, that leads to the world’s demise in the first place. Therefore, *We Descend* does not argue for a societal return to some modern, premodern, or ancient utopian past, a past that never existed in the first place. That no character in *We Descend* is ever given a real or full name, except for the hypertext renderer Bill Bly, suggests a rejection of the modern notion of the sovereign individual, at least figuratively, in favor of collective anonymous experience where subjects have been replaced by generic denominations (e.g., the Scholar, the Historian). Formal fragmentation, juxtaposition, anonymity, polyvocality, the mystical, the unrepresentable, passion—topoi of postmodernism—are all foci of attention in Bly’s hypertext as well. Most importantly, we see the dissolution of distinctions and boundaries, such as those between document and hoax, truth and falsehoods, subject and object, self and other. If postmodernism is the triumph of the artificial, signifying the end of the natural, the original, the authentic, then *We*

Descend would seem to be simply parodying medieval and enlightenment tropes within a postmodernist framework. And yet, I want to argue that Bly shores up (pre)modern notions of textual authenticity as a means to explore their relevance for contemporary issues. In other words, mimesis is not the only function of *We Descend*'s post-apocalyptic, medievaesque cultural norms and institutions. Textual authenticity in *We Descend*, and what authentication *does* at the social level, doubles as commentary on the adoption of digital technologies for the production, transmission, and preservation of information, particularly the growing anxieties concerning reliability and trustworthiness of digital materials.

Diplomatics is the systematic study of documentary evidence, offering a number of methods for the critical study and evaluation of archival sources, including various types of authenticity. According to Medievalist and book historian Bonnie Mak, the type of authenticity that has informed most discussions of archival sources since the early 1990s, and that has become “a fixture in discussions about the creation, maintenance, use, and preservation of digital records,” is what is known as “diplomatic authenticity” (also sometimes called “documentary authenticity”) (Mak 2012: 3). Diplomatic authenticity is concerned with “examining documents of purportedly common origins with a view to compiling a list of their common characteristics—including material, physical, structure, style of script, system of dating, and orthography” (Mak 2012: 4). Designating a document as “being diplomatically authentic indicates only that a particular record *appears* to meet a measure of consistency with other similar documents” (Mak 2012: 4-5). Although according to Mak diplomatic authenticity has become the most revered type

authenticity in recent years, especially for the study of digital materials, diplomatic authenticity is not the only type, nor has it always been the most regularly applied method by diplomatists since the development of the discipline in the sixteenth century. Documents can also be designated as being “legally authentic” or “historically authentic,” and in both cases the evidence for their diplomatic authenticity may be quite limited and/or of little significance. For a document to be legally authentic it must be “demonstrated to be authentic according to legal code,” which is to say, “accompanied by the attestation of a competent authority” who has “established and recognized as such by the legal system” (Mak 2102: 6). Documents designated as legally authentic carry “limited significance and usefulness outside the context in which the status was conferred” (Mak 2012: 6). On the other hand, documents designated as being historically authentic must demonstrate a “relatively accurate representation of an event, entity, or sentiment,” including another “object, image, text...or attitude” (Mak 2012: 7). An historically authentic document can also be a document that “indicates faithfulness to authorial and artistic intent, to a moment or circumstance now lost, or even a particular passage of time; it may denote whether a source represents the tastes, trends, and habits of the milieu in which it was produced or circulated” (Mak 2012: 7).

What these different kinds of authenticity reveals is that the value and usefulness assigned to archival sources is context-dependent and can substantially change given the social and institutional standards by which sources are appraised. Mak’s discussion of these different types of authenticity occurs within the context of disputes among hagiographers in France during the seventeenth century, where

“emerging communities” used “different notions of authenticity to reframe sources in order to create a place for themselves in the social order,” while “more established communities employed similar methods to fortify their reputations” (Mak 2012: 15-16). Mak concludes that challenges brought forth by various scholars toward the authenticity of archival sources “was an accepted means of challenging the status quo, used to stimulate change even if it did not guarantee a positive outcome,” and that such debates were not “limited to trustworthiness of documentary sources; they were perhaps more centrally about power, privilege, and prestige” (Mak 2012: 16)

We take this little detour into the field of diplomatics because *We Descend* dramatizes the three types of textual authentication outlined by Mak, placing them in competition with one another, but also to point out that there are no absolute criteria for authenticating documents, meaning questions of reliability and trust many people have about digital materials are not particularly unique within the larger historical context of diplomatics. Furthermore, and as Mak points out, disputes over the authenticity of archival sources have historically tended to emphasize less what authenticity *is* than what authenticity *does* within the larger social context of a given authenticity dispute (Mak 2012: 2). What tends to matter most, in other words, is how authenticity functions at the socio-political level, how it challenges or legitimizes existing social norms, and how it affects the integrity and authority of state, religious, and other social institutions.

In *We Descend*, the institutions led by the Goliards and Eparchs are stand-ins for the principles of legal authenticity. The doctrine that posits the Ancients as deities, which “was universally believed” during Egderus’s era (*WDvol2* “Legomenon for

Egderus”), doubles as the law of the land, making civic law identical to religious law, as was the case in premodern western societies governed by theocratic orders. Because the writings contained in Egderus’s archive are believed to pose a direct challenge to the metaphysical presuppositions of the state’s law, a challenge that if made public would likely lead to both his execution and confiscation of the archive, Egderus never attempts to authenticate the archive in any capacity beyond the Fellowship of believers. While Edgerus and the Fellowship continue to compile, study, and copy the archival sources, a war breaks out and what happens to the archive, Egderus, and those at Mountain House is anyone’s guess (*WDvol3* “this work”). Generations later, “a copy, made very recently” (*WDvol1* “Scholar’s Diary”) of Egderus’s archive mysteriously falls into the hands of the Scholar whose attempt at historical authenticity at a Conference results in him being convicted of “We Descend Heresy” by the Council (*WDvol2* “Legomenon for the Scholar”). During the Scholar’s age, the Council possesses the authority to enforce laws and doctrines once held by the Goliards and Eparchs (though of course the Council could be the name to a branch of the same longstanding theocratic institution headed by the Goliards). During both ages, Egderus’s and the Scholar’s, legal authenticity is imposed on the archive by an authority who is not interested in either its historical or diplomatic authenticity. When the Council stamps the archive as “a silly hoax,” it becomes useless within the context of the society’s legal/religious system, as well as inaccurate in its representation of or attitude toward historical events.

The Fellowship, those who believe in the historical and in some cases diplomatic authenticity of the archive, stands in direct opposition to powerful

authorities who enforce legal authenticity. Needless to say, there is no room for negotiation between the two groups. However, because *We Descend* is an archive *pertaining to Egderus Scriptor*, not the Goliards or the Council, readers are presented with far more information in the form of testimonies, narratives, transcripts, and speeches in support of arguments for the archive's historical authenticity than for its legal authenticity. That the archive's materials are written, compiled, copied, and transmitted by ordinary men, minority figures cast into the margins of their communities, instead of saints, hagiographers, or new age *euangelikos*, is not incidental. *We Descend* privileges those who are modest and meek, which makes them, we might say, authentic, for they not only show commitment to their beliefs, they possess the courage to challenge the status quo. As such, and as I argued above, characters like Egderus and the Scholar resemble what Konstantinou terms postironic believers. Bly invites his readers to believe the sincerity of these characters lays the foundation for opposing powerful, undemocratic institutions, but that that strategy can only really work if alternative institutions are set up to replace them. This is arguably one of the highest objectives of the Fellowship, to supplant current institutions and their violent obfuscation of factual history with communal acts of preservation, remembering, and truth saying. In this context, Grigar points out that "Truth, or *alethe* in Greek, literally means 'not forgetting' and carries with it the idea that things that are true are really just those things we need to remember" (Grigar 2017: 208-09). Furthermore, if "truth," Grigar writes, "is indeed those things we remember, then truth is personal" and "contingent upon our willingness to share it with others" (Grigar 2017: 216).

Whether by default or design, *We Descend* lauds the presupposition of Foucault's concept of *parrhesia*, that "telling the truth is only possible from an exposed and vulnerable position... that truth can only be told to power and from an unprivileged position" (Funk 2015: 33). As such, Bly not only asks his readers to sympathize with his archivist characters, he asks them to submit their doubt to what the archivists believe as well, regardless of the limited number and quality of sources preserved in the archive. Bly tests our belief, however, through the character of the Scholiast. The Scholiast, in a sense, practices a "hermeneutics of suspicion" toward the writings in the archive. Rather than asserting positive statements about the archive or fully committing himself to its historical implications as Egderus and the Scholar do, he grapples with the writings' "oversights, omissions, contradictions, insufficiencies, [and] evasions" (Felski 2012), aspects readers are meant to overlook in their willful suspension of disbelief. The Scholiast's comments are not typically more than a few sentences long, but they accumulate over the course of *We Descend*'s three volumes and as a whole represent a concerted opposition to the archivists. In response to the writing known as "Scholar's Address," one of the two surviving documents from the Scholar's speech at the Conference, the Scholiast poses two concerns. Inviting readers to be "skeptical about the author of the passage," the Scholiast questions if the writing should even be attributed to the Scholar ("whether [it was] made by the Scholar or not remains unresolved"), as well as the historical authenticity of the Scholar's "portrait" of the Ancients, for as he claims, it "diverges rather widely—in spirit if in nothing else—from the various references to be found elsewhere in the archives" (*WDvol1* "Note" for "the Ancients"). Most readers are

unlikely to find these charges persuasive in light of all the corroborating evidence to the contrary distributed across *We Descend*'s three volumes, but that does not stop these writings from functioning as attempts to dislodge readers from believing the Scholar.

Given the mythological and post-apocalyptic context of *We Descend*, one could argue that the Scholiast is a Satan-like figure, for he is a loyal adversary who attempts to coax his readers away from believing in the archivists and in the archive's authenticity more generally. However, if readers can slog their way through the layers of debitage that is *We Descend*, they will be rewarded for their loyalty to the archivists, for the diplomatist, writer of the Legomena, representing the most objective and knowledgeable perspective, slowly assembles a persuasive case for the archive's historical and diplomatic authenticity volume-by-volume. The most definitive statement can be found in the Diplomatist's Legomena in volume two for Egderus:

In the comparatively extensive Writings of Egderus...we find...some of the artifacts he collected and transmitted belong to what is in effect an alien World, that of the Ancients, who in his day were universally believed to be the Deities responsible for Creation. But Egderus evidently came to regard the Ancients as mere mortals like ourselves, and concluded that it was their own actions that brought about the demise of their world; further, it was the Ancients whose descendants, ultimately, we are. This is the so-called "We Descend" heresy that was for so long so explosive, resulting in the Scholar's expulsion from the Conference of his peers—and which also adumbrates a

body of wisdom that had to be preserved and passed on in secret over the course of many generations. Today we have little difficulty accepting that we are merely the latest in a long line of civilizations that arose from and then fell back into the earth of our island home. But the lessons to be drawn from the *transmission* of these tales of our ancient forebears have yet to be fully realized... (WDvol2 “Legomenon for Egderus”)

Although lacunas and unattributable writings prevent readers from asserting with absolute certainty who was responsible for particular writings or how particular sequences of events might have unfolded, the Diplomatist, whose meticulous scholarship presents the most systematic analysis of the archive as a whole, including references to contemporary diplomatists and their opinions, confirms the veracity of the historical beliefs that for centuries was suppressed by dictators to underpin their own power and authority. As Grigar points out, “heresy” in *We Descend* “is specifically *historical* heresy,” for the scribes at Mountain House “are expected to write the past as it should have been” according to the Goliards and Eparchs wishes, “not as it was” (Grigar 2017: 210). The tragic irony, of course, is that those who persecute the members of the Fellowship for heresy are actually the ones committing crimes against history (and humanity). The archive that is *We Descend* becomes the foundation for rewriting history, supplanting a false, bastardized understanding of the past with a much more believable one. If there is anything in *We Descend* that

resembles a noble victory, it is the result of countless, humble and patient, archivists working together across the generations.²⁸

If the Fellowship has a primary directive, if there is one “lesson to be drawn from the *transmission* of these tales” (*WDvol2* “Legomenon for Egderus”), it is to rediscover the sense of historical authenticity lamented by the The Last One in the aftermath of the global cataclysm:

History used to be a question of finding out, not remembering. You read books, you studied with a teacher, you watched performances with actors in costumes. Occasionally, after slogging through lists of names and dates and places, you entered the realm of the historian’s delight: you got the feel of a time and place long ago and far away, you came to *know* at least one man or woman who lived there and then. That’s all over. Every time is over now, every place infinitely remote. With no past, what’s the present? In a shapeless present, what future can there be? (*WDvol1* “New Ecclesiastes”)

This lament about the demise of history obviously echoes many literary and cultural critics’ concerns about the waning of affect and historicity during postmodernism (e.g., see Jameson 1991), but it also participates in the end-times rhetoric that characterizes a lot of the political and artistic thought since mid-twentieth century,

²⁸ However, Bly is no Marxist. *We Descend*’s idea of history suggests the inevitability of repetition and self-annihilation. As such, *We Descend* is arguably more in harmony with the philosophy of Nietzsche, particularly his version of “eternal recurrence” (Nietzsche 2001: 161-62, 341-42), which for Nietzsche is achieved through “*amor fati*,” the love of fate: “that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity” (Nietzsche 2005: 99). It is difficult to imagine, however, that *We Descend*’s post-apocalyptic future represents a world Bly wants his readers to aspire toward. Instead, and in keeping to the conventions of dystopian fiction, Bly asks his readers to contemplate the precipitating circumstances that would allow such a world to come into being. *We Descend* is a cautionary tale that seeks to generate greater historical consciousness.

especially the past few decades. But what worries the Last One here (and Bly), I would argue, isn't the loss or waning of history as such, but the loss of intellectual and cultural traditions, which can provide anchoring for the individual in the present while also providing tools for grappling with history and mapping the future. What *We Descend* attempts to sow in its readers is an historical consciousness aware of both the necessity and fragility of tradition as well as the distance (and depth) that must sometimes be traveled to preserve them.

Discussing the import of Bly's hypertext for reflecting on the consequences of new media and the Internet for generating and transmitting knowledge and information, Grigar suggests *We Descend* provokes us to consider how it is "we can make sense of our past when the information comprising our present is nearly impossible to sift" (Grigar 2017: 214). This question alludes to discourse on what is often referred to as "information overload," a term coined by Bertram Gross in *The Managing of Organizations* (1964) to explain the difficulty of understanding an issue and making decisions when confronted with too much information, a topic that Paul Stephens convincingly shows in *The Poetics of Information Overload* (2015) can be traced back to modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and Charles Olsen (both of whom employed archeological and archival tropes). I would argue that Bly's response to such concerns are the same as those the Superius Frater offers Egderus for the problem of authenticity: "Believe what seems to your heart to be true, but be prepared to abandon that truth the instant it plays you false" (*WDvol1* "Egderus at Mountain House"). *We Descend* is emphatic in its belief in the reliability of subjective intuition, which, it should go without saying, is very different from dogma. Being able to

“abandon” a truth that “plays you false” requires enduring a painful process of defamiliarization, a constant questioning of assumptions and negotiation with one’s self, with one’s social reality. Bly’s archivists—Egderus, the Scholar, the Scholiast, the Diplomatist, perhaps even the reader as well—like Andrew Keen’s “noble amateur” outlined in *The Cult of the Amateur*, are figures who rise above the chatter of “the crowd” and become symbols of knowledge and truth in an age lacking reliable experts (Keen 2007: 92).

Chapter 3

The Literary Compendium:

On Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

House of Leaves is what I would call a centripetal book. It's about interiorities and history and progeny and ancestors.

—Mark Z. Danielewski (2007)

1. A Bookish Archive

Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), similarly to Bly's *We Descend*, explores issues surrounding textual authenticity at length, even though Zampanò, one the novel's primary character-scribes, attempts to push such issues into the periphery in order to deflect potential questions his readers might raise toward the authenticity of his manuscript or his credibility as an author. Zampanò's academic manuscript titled "The Navidson Record" takes as its primary object of study a "documentary" film of the same title (*The Navidson Record*) produced by a photojournalist named Will Navidson that may or may not actually exist and that may even be an elaborate hoax, that is, a work of cinematic archival fiction. Despite employing a common metafictional device in naming his manuscript after the film it studies—and indeed, ontological metalepses and narrative intrusions abound across this recursive Chinese-box novel—Zampanò makes the deliberate effort of beginning his text by undermining questions concerning the film's authenticity and ontological

status, emphasizing instead the supposedly more relevant issues of interpretation, attempting to, one assumes, stave off any similar criticisms toward *his* work.

While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, “authenticity” still remains the word most likely to stir debate. In fact, this leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth.... Though many continue to devote substantial time and energy to the antinomies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, document or prank, as of late the more interesting material dwells exclusively on the interpretation of events within the film. This direction seems more promising, even if the house itself, like Melville’s behemoth, remains resistant to summation. (*HoL* 3)

Zampanò does not avoid questions of authentication altogether, but he does not pursue them nearly as much as Johnny Truant does, the primary reader-editor of “The Navidson Record” and curator of Zampanò’s personal archive. Issues related to textual authenticity in Danielewski’s highly multimodal novel only multiply as the narrative moves outward from the world of Navidson’s film to Zampanò’s verbal remediations of that film, which then only increase once we get to Truant’s more autobiographical-based footnotes to Zampanò’s manuscript. Then there’s the fictional Editors at Pantheon Books who provide additional footnotes, appendices and an index and who may or may not be responsible for novel’s misleading peritextual materials that undermine the stability of the “Edition” of the novel the actual reader happens to

be in possession of, instabilities that, in typical *mise-en-abyme* fashion, fold back into the Borgesian underworld represented in Navidson's film. The reader, in other words, confronts narrative information that has been remediated, edited and fed through recursive metafictional devices that potentially undermines any truth or authenticity readers might want to attribute to any of the novel's textual artifacts even if Zampanò, the novel's predominant scribe, attempts to table such questions in pursuit of more "interesting" ones having to do with interpretation.²⁹

If readers are to believe Truant's interpretation for why Zampanò seems uninterested in authenticating Will Navidson's films, that in the end it "doesn't matter" if the film is real or not, fact or fiction because the "consequences are the same" (*HoL* xx), then readers may also likely feel inclined to believe the same is true about Danielewski's novel as a whole, that it doesn't matter if we can't authenticate anything and so getting bogged down in such pursuits would be to misread the author's intentions—it's fiction all the way down anyways, right? Many scholars of Danielewski's novel tend to agree with Truant on this point—and indeed, this passage from Truant's Introduction to "The Navidson Record" is often discussed by critics—but I want to argue that if we follow certain threads having to do with *textual authentication* brought on by the novel's treatment of the bibliographic notion of the "Edition" we come to realize how Danielewski explores the material and expressive

²⁹ That questions of interpretation are initially judged by critics (including Zampanò) of *The Navidson Record* as being "more interesting" than other possible intellectual pursuits strike one as being rather apt in light of Sianne Ngai's recent work on the aesthetic category of "the interesting." For Ngai, the interesting "begins with a feeling—inquisitiveness, curiosity, wonder—falling somewhere between an affect and a desire." It is a judgment that relies "not on an existing concept of the object but on a feeling, hard to categorize in its own right, that in spite of its indeterminacy...discerns or alerts us precisely to what we do not have a concept for (yet)" (Ngai 2012: 116).

possibilities of the print-bound book as an aesthetic and commercial object in an effort to construct a kind of literary compendium, a book that compiles and lays bare the bookish poetics of the contemporary novel.³⁰ There are multiple English editions to Danielewski's novel published on both sides of the Atlantic. There are also fictional editions, editions the novel wishes its readers to believe are real but are obviously meant to misdirect readers—these are textual red herrings. Readers are initially cued to this bibliographic plot in the book's peritexts (i.e., dustjacket blurb, copyright and title pages, etc.), aspects of a book that are not typically part of a novel's fictional world and that many readers often overlook or skim. Determining which editions are real and which are fictive is one of the many challenging tasks this novel insists upon its readers. Readers must not only become accustomed to the eclectic nature of Danielewski's compendium, they must be willing to seek out and juxtapose its varying editions, both real and fictive, assuming the responsibilities of an amateur textual scholar, similar to Keen's notion to the "noble amateur" (Keen 2007: 92).

In showcasing "what print can be in the digital age" (Hayles 2002a: 112), *House of Leaves* presents itself as a kind of book-sized literary museum. In putting on display both old and new literary and bookish forms, Danielewski's novel acts as a bulwark against literary and bookish obsolescence, intended to not only be read but

³⁰ McHale suggests that *House of Leaves* "lays bare the poetics of the novel" much in the same way that Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* does (McHale 2011: 142-43). In the spirit of Viktor Shklovsky, McHale argues that *House of Leaves* is "the most typical novel in world literature...a hypermediated updating of Sterne's [*Tristram Shandy*]" that "shows us how every novel is made...because it subordinates *mimesis* to its own aesthetic laws" (142-43). I agree, but *House of Leaves* is also an archive of the contemporary multimodal novel's bookish poetics, a distinction that emphasizes the textual materiality of the book.

admired, looked at, and contemplated as an aesthetic artifact almost like a rare book stored in a special collection.³¹ Even if, as Hayles suggests, none “of the dynamics displayed” on the pages of *House of Leaves* “is entirely original” (Hayles 2002a: 112), Danielewski’s novel deserves credit for initiating a new kind of interactive and archival reading and writing practice that has influenced dozens of writers (far more than Bill Bly, obviously), anticipating many of the readerly and writerly activities that have become ubiquitous within today’s multimodal, multimedia culture. Although earlier scholars of *House of Leaves* (e.g., Hayles 2002a, 2002b, 2008; Hansen 2004; Pressman 2006; and Chanen 2007) were keen to highlight elements in the novel that bare the mark of “the digital,” how digital technology underwrites the production, circulation, and reception of the novel, we shouldn’t lose sight of the novel’s versatile and specifically bookish qualities.

Similar in form to the medieval bestiary, the dossier, as well as the modern critical edition, *House of Leaves*, like *We Descend*, is a heterogeneous collection of literary-textual artifacts organized to demonstrate overlap and interaction through collocation and annotation, but for specifically narrative purposes, even if its many narrative threads at times become digressive and recursive. No doubt Danielewski would have needed up-to-date computer software capable of typesetting such a typographically complex novel, but the kinds of textual objects re-presented or

³¹ According to museum studies scholar Carol Duncan, museums are “ceremonial monuments” that preserve a “community’s cultural heritage,” physical sites where citizens congregate around a common good and practice the “secular rituals” of “art appreciation and spiritual enrichment” (Duncan 1994: 279-86). *House of Leaves* is a compendium of inherited literary and bibliographic forms, and like works of art collected and experienced by patrons in museums, they represent a literary heritage that readers can examine and experience.

reproduced in *House of Leaves* have material-textual histories that span thousands of years. Consider a brief account of some of its textual objects, including their material conditions, as well as some of the more obvious literary-generic forms, discourse types, written languages, and bibliographic devices featured among them: an academic monograph/faux academic novel consisting mostly of narration and exposition featuring more than a dozen written languages set in numerous kinds of typeface from modern American English to Braille and Sanskrit, from Bookmen to Ancient Greek and Aramaic Square Script; damaged documents (burnt, blood- and ink-splattered, shredded, and crossed out); palimpsests (repurposed and effaced documents); incomplete documents, including instructions for writing projects never completed; fragments and partial documents; poetry (lyrics, free-verse, concrete, stepped, open field); journals; epistles; transcripts of tape- and video-recordings; photographs of documents, drawings, maps, houses, and landscapes; typed and handwritten notes in multiple languages; various lists, catalogues and inventories; exhibits; appendices; index, and so on. Cataloguing these textual features, we become acutely aware of Danielewski's preoccupation with archiving, how at every narrative level, and on every page, characters in this novel are preoccupied with documenting, preserving, editing, curating, transmitting, and so forth. *House of leaves* is, what we might call, an archive of bookishness.

Although some critics claim *House of Leaves* is a realist novel (Hayles 2002a, 2002b; Hansen 2004; Pressman 2006), the ways in which Danielewski compiles and recapitulates the inherited conventions and techniques of literature and bookmaking tends to foreground style at the cost of projecting a mimetic fictional world. *House of*

Leaves never lets its readers forget they are holding a book about books or reading a work of fiction (about another book/work of fiction). No matter how immersive the narrative can be, or how life-like its characters seem (though readers should certainly have a difficult time squaring the fact that Zampanò—who is blind—could have ever written “The Navidson Record”), the whole literary apparatus, from cover to cover, is on full display at all times. Danielewski’s musealization of literature *à la* the multimodal book-archive, how his novel recapitulates and showcases inherited literary and bookish forms, also functions as a kind of literary constraint, perhaps even a centripetal constraint given all of the novel’s recursive features and intertextual citation. In other words, regardless of all its sprawling encyclopedic knowledge and Melvillian digressions, Danielewski’s novel tries to contain itself within the internal logic of literary history and within the physical parameters of the book object itself. *House of Leaves*, as Danielewski himself puts it, is “not so much an experimental novel as it is what comes *after* the experiments” (McCaffery and Gregory 2003: 106). Recapitulating a slew of earlier experiments puts *House of Leaves* in the company of earlier canonical texts that do the same with their own respective literary inheritances (e.g., Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and McElroy’s *Women and Men*). As such, similarly to how T. S. Eliot’s protagonist in *The Waste Land* shores up “fragments” from poetic tradition “against [his] ruins” (l. 430), Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* shores up a collection of its own, fortifying for them a dwelling, a book, a *house of leaves*. But of course, whereas archaeo-poetry was the ideal form for Eliot (McHale 2004: 102), for Danielewski it is the multimodal

codex novel, a far more suitable medium for capturing today's new media world than the mostly verbal poetry of Eliot's early twentieth-century high modernist poetics.

2. How (Not) to Read the (Fictional) Publication History of *House of Leaves*

Alison Gibbons, alongside Hayles, is one of the most prolific critics of Danielewski's work. Two articles in particular, "This is not for you" (Gibbons 2011) and "Crossing Thresholds and the Exploring Reader of *House of Leaves*" from *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature* (Gibbons 2012a), are devoted entirely to *House of Leaves*. The title to Gibbons' first essay, "This is not for you," is taken from novel's dedication page and is discussed in both of these articles.

Although Gibbons examines the significance of the phrase in both articles, her initial point that the novel "opens with this extraordinary admonition" (Gibbons: 2011: 17), that it is the novel's "first sentence" (Gibbons 2012a: 51), would seem to overlook the fact that the novel's foreword, contents page, title page, copyright page, and dust jacket blurb are all part of the novel's fictional world. As Starre points out, all of *House of Leaves*' peritextual content (material that is physically attached to a book but is not typically part of a book's content) is part of the novel's fictional world (Starre 2015: 131-39).³² The reader's entrance into the novel's world, in other words, precedes the dedication page and is thus not *technically* the novel's first sentence.

The Remastered Full-Color Edition of *House of Leaves* published by Pantheon in May of 2006 (*HoL* back cover) features a black monochromatic image of a

³² Gerard Genette (1997: 1-15) divides the paratextual into the "peritextual" and the "epitextual" (the latter concerns content such as advertisements and interviews published outside of the book).

labyrinth whose outer boundaries extend beyond the parameters of the cover, as if the book itself is unable to contain its own expansiveness (Figure 4). Located at the center of the labyrinth is a logarithmic spiral, a mathematical representation of self-similarity as well as a graphical representation of *mise-en-abyme*. Positioned in the center of the spiral is a compass rose—a red and gold colored navigational symbol typically found on maps, blueprints, and nautical charts—devoid of cardinal directions. Because the compass has directional points but lacks the specific directions associated with Earth’s geomagnetic field, the image seems intent on estranging us from ordinary navigational resources. When we turn to the first page within the book we observe a high gloss facsimile of a multichromatic photograph featuring a collection of disheveled objects (Figure 5). Among the objects are measuring tapes, stamps, unwound and knotted yarn, drawings and cartoons, ammunition, Tylenol PMs, rolling papers, paper scraps (some ink-spilled, some blood-stained), aeronautical charts, and other miscellaneous objects. Positioned approximately at the center of the image is another compass—this time an actual compass, not a computerized image as on the front cover—and though there are cardinal directions, its glass casing is shattered, and its directional arrows are missing. Although the reader is initially unaware of how significant these elements are, they come to symbolize several of the novel’s themes: navigation, memory, inscription, representation, and perhaps most importantly for my purposes here, collecting. Eventually readers learn that this photograph was taken by Truant, that it belongs to the fictional world of the novel, and that the items listed above, carefully arranged in the image, belong to Truant as well.

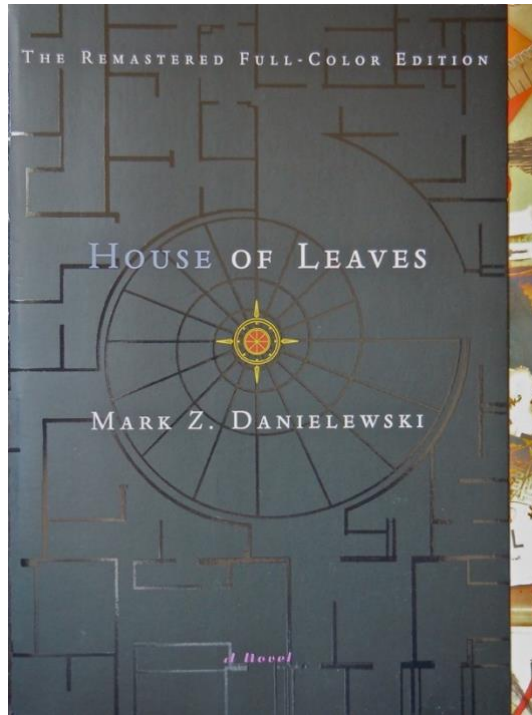


Figure 4. Front cover of Remastered Full-Color Edition (2006)

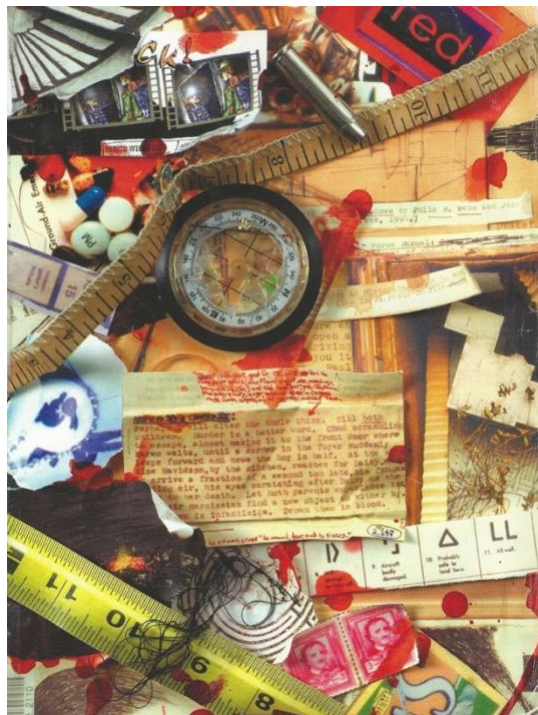


Figure 5. Photograph of Truant's "Junk"

The title page (*HoL* ii-iii) resembles what book historians call a title-page spread, because it stretches across two pages, the verso and the recto:

MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI'S

HOUSE OF LEAVES

By
Zampanò

with introduction and notes by
Johnny Truant

2nd Edition
Pantheon Books New York

This is a most unusual title page. Danielewski's name comes first, not last, as is more typical, and is marked possessive as if declaring at the outset who the real or authentic author of this book (about a book about a film) ultimately is. Notice also how there are five discreet textual domains. In addition to *the* author's name on the verso, we have the title of the novel, said to be written by Zampanò, with additional writings by Truant and the Editors at Pantheon Books. Readers will come to discover that the Editors will never meet Truant, that Truant never actually meets Zampanò, and Zampanò *can't* ever meet Danielewski because he's a fictional character. Indeed, in time we'll learn that *everything* is to be interpreted as fiction—that this is *Danielewski's* fiction all the way down (and up), not Navidson's, Zampanò's, or Truant's. What I want to focus on for now, however, is what makes the novel a "2nd Edition" and what its differences are from the supposed 1st Edition.

Toward the bottom of the copyright page in *every* copy of *every* edition of *House of Leaves* there is a chart titled "A Note On This Edition" (*HoL* iv) indicating the novel has gone through *four* textual editions since its first publication, not *two* as

indicated on the title page (Figure 6). There are details provided that distinguish the editions from one another with a box drawn around which of the four editions the reader possesses. The four editions are listed from left to right (newest to oldest): “Full-Color,” “2-Color,” “Black & White,” and “Incomplete.” The first conundrum one might encounter once doing some cursory research about these various editions comes from learning that Pantheon actually never published a Full-Color Edition of *House of Leaves*. Between 2000 and 2006, there was only the Black & White Edition and the two different 2-Color editions (Red & Black, Blue & Black). In 2006, Pantheon published The Remastered Full-Color Edition, which is printed toward the top of the front cover of that edition, but there never was a Full-Color Edition to be Remastered, the only full color edition is the Remastered Edition. Nonetheless, on the

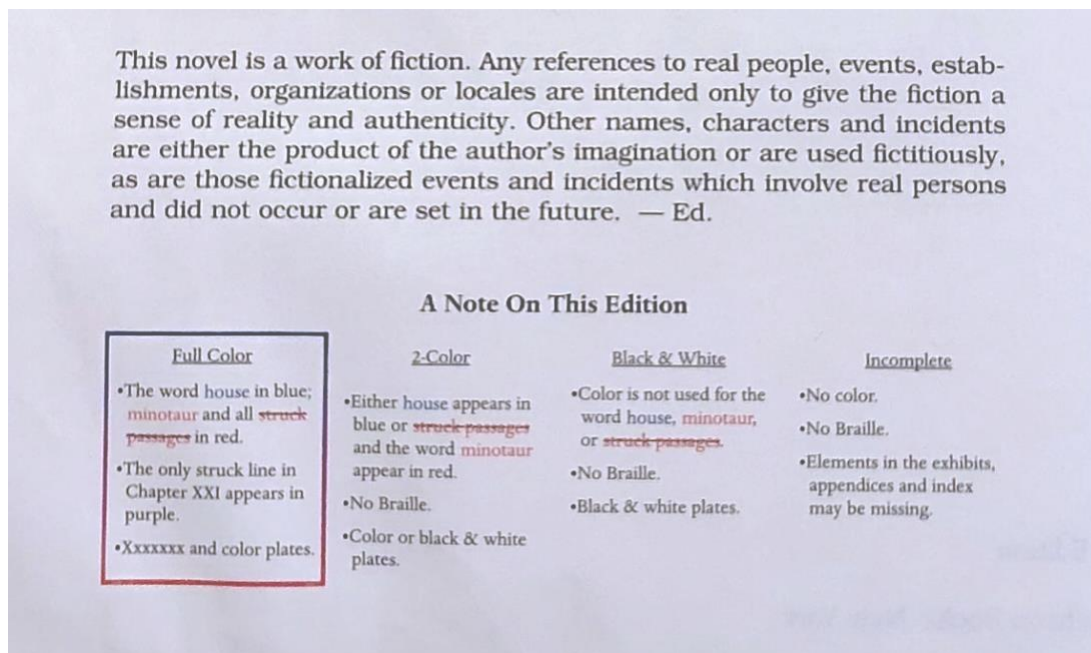


Figure 6. Copyright Page to The Remastered Full-Color Edition

copyright page to the Remastered Edition the box is drawn deceptively around Full-Color, and of course there is no box for the so-called Remastered Edition on any copy of *House of Leaves*. To make matters even more confusing, *all* editions published by Pantheon—the Full-Color (i.e., Remastered), the Red & Black 2-Color and the Blue & Black 2-Color—have the same ISBN, and the title page of *every* edition, including the Black & White Edition (Doubleday 2001), is a 2nd Edition. In other words, not a single copy of *House of Leaves* was ever published with a title page listing it as a 1st Edition. Furthermore, given there are no copies of *House of Leaves* with the box drawn around “Incomplete” means at both ends of the spectrum there are incongruities that could potentially undermine the stability of all editions, including the so-called Remastered Edition.

Danielewski invites his readers to be amateur textual scholars, seeking out and comparing all of the novel’s “real” editions, looking for variations that define each one. Once readers learn that neither Pantheon, Double Day, nor Anchor ever published a 1st Edition of *House of Leaves*, in light of all the ontologically deceptive devices employed throughout the novel, the only place left to look for this 1st Edition is within the fictional world of novel itself. Unsurprisingly, this leads to additional contradictions that only make matters more confusing.

Toward the end of the novel, Truant recounts his encounter with a band of musicians at a bar who possess of a “First Edition” of *House of Leaves* (HoL 513).³³

The title page to their manuscript reads:

³³ In the fictional world of *House of Leaves*, there are actually two instances where characters encounter a book titled *House of Leaves*. The first instance occurs when Navidson, while making his final trek through the labyrinthine House toward the end of the novel, finds himself alone in a dark

House of Leaves

by Zampanò

with introduction and
notes by Johnny Truant

Circle Round A Stone Publication

First Edition

At first glance, one might think this scene provides an authentic instance of *mise-en-abyme*, the collapsing of boundaries that separate the reader's actual world and the novel's fictional world; that the "First Edition" readers seek exists in both worlds, which may in fact be the same world. But there is another paradox worth pointing out here: how could it be that these musicians possess a copy of a manuscript Truant is still compiling and has yet to publish? The chapter where this particular scene occurs comes from Truant's journal presented in Chapter XXI, Truant's final commentary within "The Navidson Record" and the only section outside of his Introduction that presents his inscriptions only. Within these pages, in an explicit address to his reader, Truant admits that he has been writing *fiction* in his *autobiographical* journal dating from "September 2 thru September 28": "Are you fucking kidding me? Did you really think any of that was true...I just made all that up. Right out of thin air" (*HoL* 509). Here, because Truant openly admits to his unreliability, the reader has good

and narrow tunnel and pulls out a copy of *House of Leaves*, burning each page as a means for light as he simultaneously attempts to read the pages quicker than they burn (*HoL* 465). Because Navidson is a fictional character constructed by Zampanò and not a *real* character within the world of the novel, this scene is not consequential for making sense of the novel's publication history. In other words, Navidson's possession of *House of Leaves* is a *pseudo* rather than legitimate instance of ontological metalepsis. Consequently, this scene *mimics* the recursive effects produced by *mise-en-abyme*, but no ontological violation technically occurs within the *real* world of the novel.

reason to be suspicious that his encounter with the “First Edition” of *House of Leaves* (HoL 513) never *really* happened. Indeed, this occasion is one among many that problematizes Truant’s authorial reliability.³⁴ Discussing this very scene, Pressman claims that “Truant is confronted with two equally unlikely and unsettling options: either these musicians have seen the elusive film ‘The Navidson Record’ or they have read Zampanò’s *The Navidson Record*, which Truant is currently editing and has deposited in his trunk for safe keeping” (Pressman 2006: 113). But why is there not a third option, that these musicians are actually in possession of a First Edition (or 1st Edition) of *House of Leaves*? We know they “found [it] on the Internet some time ago” (HoL 513) which the Remastered Edition’s front dust jacket also mentions alluding to an early edition of the novel. Furthermore, the description of the manuscript (“a big brick of tattered paper”) also resembles the description provided on the Remastered Edition’s front dust jacket (“a badly bundled heap of paper”). Clearly, we are invited to produce a *third* strategy for how we might interpret this scene. Because Pressman believes the musicians’ copy of *House of Leaves* is paradoxically “the book on which Truant is working” at the moment when this scene occurs, she reads this scene as metaphorical; it serves as another moment of “intense recursivity” in which “reality and fiction converge as both readers realize that this book cannot be constrained by its bindings or by the trunk of Truant’s car” (Pressman 2006: 114). Although this may be true, when we examine Truant’s journal in more detail we observe that this event takes place *later* than when Pressman has most likely

³⁴ Further examples of Truant’s unreliability can be found on pages 16 fn18, 43 fn50, 69-72 fn77, 323-327 fn276, 495-96, 507-509.

presumed it to have occurred: it occurs not before, but *after* Truant publishes a First Edition of the book on the internet, in August 1999. By October 1998, almost an entire year *before* the scene at the bar takes place, Truant has already finished the book: “I gather up the finished book in my arms and climb out the window” (*HoL* 516). Truant has even made photocopies of the manuscript: “The book is burning. At last. A strange light scans each page, memorizing all of it even as each character twists into ash... Had I meant to say memorializing” (*HoL* 518)? The chronology of Truant’s journal is intentionally misleading (October ‘98, May ‘98, June ‘98, July ‘98, September ‘98, October ‘98, November ‘98, August ‘99, and October ‘98), and Truant never explicitly acknowledges publishing a First Edition with Circle A Round Stone on the internet, but there is sufficient evidence suggesting he has. The bar scene with the musicians not only functions metaphorically, as Pressman claims, it suggests that the First Edition only exists within the fictional world that Truant occupies, not the *real* world.

And yet, in a statement printed on the Remastered Edition’s front dust jacket (and on many, if not all, of Pantheon’s 2-Color editions), we encounter conflicting evidence suggesting there was a First Edition that circulated within *our* world. In order to be persuaded by the evidence, however, requires a misreading of this statement’s ontological status because it alludes to the First Edition that circulates within the *fictional* world of the novel, not the *real* world.

Years ago, when *House of Leaves* was first being passed around, it was nothing more than a badly bundled heap of paper, parts of which would occasionally surface on the Internet. No one could have anticipated the small

but devoted following this terrifying story would soon command. Starting with an odd assortment of marginalized youth—musicians, tattoo artists, programmers, strippers, environmentalists, and adrenaline junkies—the book eventually found its way into the hands of older generations, who not only found themselves in those strangely arranged pages but also discovered a way back into the lives of their estranged children. (*HoL* front inside dust jacket)

According to lore surrounding the initial publication of *House of Leaves*, Danielewski circulated his novel, or at least parts of it, on the internet as a PDF before publishing it in 2000. According to Hayles, “*House of Leaves* was published on the Web before being instantiated in print” (Hayles 2005: 105), which is corroborated by Starre in *Metamedia* (2015: 275 fn8), but the veracity of this claim is practically impossible to verify because no trace of this earlier “electronic” edition seems to exist, or at least is no longer accessible to the public. According to Hayles, who interviewed Danielewski in 2001, she “was astonished to learn from Mark that the publisher accepted the manuscript when it was a continuous typescript, without any of the design elements that would become such a prominent feature of the published book. During production he tried to communicate to the press’s designer what he had in mind and found it impossible; the design was too complex. So he flew to New York and sat for a month in the press’s offices, typesetting the book himself on a computer” (Hayles 2002a: 126). However, whenever Danielewski discusses the initial publication of *House of Leaves* in interviews he never discusses having publishing early drafts on the internet. What he emphasizes is that he wrote *House of Leaves* longhand in pencil and when it came time to publish it was he who did the typesetting

because no one at Pantheon knew how to typeset such a typographically complex book (McCaffery and Gregory 2003: 117-18).³⁵ No public record shows Danielewski stating he produced an intermediary document between when the penciled draft was finished and when he used a computer to typeset the document for Pantheon. If there is such a document, we do not know how it was produced or how it compares to what Pantheon published. To the extent there is a real First Edition of *House of Leaves*, perhaps this allusive document (or PDF) is it, but until Danielewski's archives become available to the public it is best not to speculate any further.

Within the fictional discourse of the novel itself, however, there is additional evidence to suggest this First Edition is purely fictive. For one, Danielewski's name is not featured on the First Edition Truant encounters. Why does this matter? Because Danielewski "the author" makes sure to toe the line between fact and fiction and not completely blur them. But perhaps more telling, there is a statement from The Editors on The Remastered Edition's dust jacket cover that is highly suspect: "Now, for the first time, this astonishing novel is made available in book form, complete with the original colored words, vertical footnotes, and newly added second and third appendices" (*HoL* front dust jacket). The problem here is that these features were not first introduced in the Remastered Edition. With the exception of the UK-published Black & White Edition, all editions of *House of Leaves* have colored words (red or

³⁵ According to Lily Brewer, "after finishing the penciled rough draft, [Danielewski] spent three weeks in a Pantheon editing studio learning and using QuarkXPress, the industry standard page-layout software in 2000" (Brewer 2013), but Brewer does not provide any evidence for how she knows this. One imagines Brewer simply assumes Danielewski used QuarkXPress because in 2000 it was "industry standard." As for how she knows it took Danielewski "three weeks" to typeset, that remains a mystery, because according to Hayles it took him "a month."

blue or both) and every single published edition of the novel contains vertical footnotes as well as the second and third appendices, so these statements do not correspond with the actual textual history of *House of Leaves*. So even if the lore surrounding the PDF discussed above remains open to dispute in the absence of stable and accessible public record, the only plausible edition where any of these features would have been initially absent would have to be the fictive First Edition that circulates within the fictional world of the novel. As such, none of these editorial statements appear to correspond with the actual textual and reception history of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. We must therefore conclude, if ultimately provisionally, that this "badly bundled heap of paper" that was "first being passed around" and read by various "marginalized youth" refers to Truant's First Edition and his first readers, not Danielewski's.

From these inquiries into the status and whereabouts of the novel's First Edition we come to see how all of the novel's peritextual content function as literary devices and play into its concern with the notion or authenticity of the First Edition. Danielewski deploys the print-bound book-object's conventionally non-expressive peritextual forms for highly specific expressive ends. As bibliographic elements that take on functions *within* the world of the novel, thus negating their typical benign factual status, these elements foreground the novel's interrogation of its very own publication history, problematizing any neat distinctions one might make between real, fictional, and non-existent editions. Exploring the literary possibilities of conventional as well as typically non-expressive bibliographic forms, Danielewski expands the physical boundaries of a book-object's projected fictional world. Starre

interprets the novel's deployment of peritextual devices as evidence for its "textual stability" (Starre 2015: 133). As he puts it, when we place side-by-side the Remastered edition with the earlier editions "all the fundamental bibliographic codes used in the novel remain as they were... No substantially diverging versions of the book exist" (Starre 2015: 133). Obviously, it's not the case as Hayles claims that each edition of the novel is "significantly different from the others" (Hayles 2005: 105),³⁶ but *House of Leaves* is certainly no bastion of "textual stability," as Starre claims, either. Depending on what edition the reader encounters there are clearly interpretive and affective responses that would not be possible under the bibliographic conditions of alternative editions.³⁷

The most affective consequence for some readers, however, from there being multiple editions of *House of Leaves* is that they become eager to seek out all of its various editions (both real and fictive) in the hopes of discovering their textual variations as well as solving potential bibliographic mysteries, such as the one

³⁶ Not only are the "real" four editions of *House of Leaves*—"Black & White," red "2-Color," blue "2-Color," and "Remastered Full-Color"—not "significantly different" from one another, Hayles also seems to take for granted that the four editions indicated on the copyrights page of *House of Leaves* refer to "real" editions when she says that the novel "exists in four different editions" (Hayles 2005: 105).

³⁷ In the Remastered Edition as well as in the blue & black 2-Color edition, the word "house" is always set in blue ink, establishing a color motif that foregrounds the visual and tactile features of the text's signifiers. As scholars have pointed out, the blue "house" color motif visually resembles a digital hyperlink, so it not only functions as visual motif, from a digital perspective it suggests that a network of links may be potentially linked to it. The blue color motif also functions as an associative marker that connects the signifier "house" and all of its mimetic and thematic content with the color blue, establishing an associative constellation among the various contexts in which the "house" appears in the novel. None of these notions are relevant to the red & black 2-Color edition or to the Black & White edition because there is no blue "house" color motif. Likewise, there is a red color motif in the red & black 2-Color edition, which is not present in the blue & black edition. Clearly, certain responses are only possible with respect to certain editions because there are textual differences among them. Although the respective differences do not destabilize or significantly alter the ontological status of the novel's projected world, the textuality of *House of Leaves* is not *absolutely* stable either.

surrounding the ontological status of the First Edition. As we have said, *House of Leaves* invites its readers to become amateur textual scholars, encouraging them to seek out variations in page layout, typeface, color, footnote numerals and the like, as well as potential differences within the novel's narrative world itself.³⁸ Beyond these kinds of readerly activities, the deceptive and misleading bibliographic notations invite readers to be more cognizant of how bibliographic forms are deployed for expressive ends more generally. And this is the point I really want to emphasize henceforth. *House of Leaves* demands a reading practice that considers all of the book's material and expressive forms, including those that are typically non-literary, as part of a novel's semantic field.

Scholars frequently stress how the novel's incessant remediations problematizes the veracity and authenticity of certain characters, events, and documents, but readers would be wise to take Truant's advice on the matter: "See, the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (*HoL* xx). I want to argue that we should read this statement as applying not only to Navidson's film but to the entire novel itself. Discussing this frequently cited passage, Hansen argues that the "consequences" Truant refers to are the "reality affects" experienced by the "embodied reader"—*real* readers—which come about regardless of the film's authenticity (Hansen 2004: 622).

³⁸ Because both the 2-Color and Black & White editions are now long out of print, such tasks have become increasingly difficult for ambitious readers and collectors alike. But nothing likely matches the frustrations experienced by readers in 2006 when the Remastered Edition first came out, which for the first time brought to readers' attention the existence of a Full-Color Edition, which doesn't exist (see Starre 2015: 140-44).

Because the veracity of everything in the novel is suspect, Hansen wants us to shift our focus “from the text (or film) as a referential object to...the ‘*necessarily* real’ impact that it has on the embodied life of its reader” (Hansen 2004: 622). In the absence of any stable referential object, Hansen suggests that the reader’s focus is invited to shift from issues of veracity to affective response: “lacking the force of indexicality, these mediations can only acquire the force of conviction by eliciting embodied reactions in their fictional and actual readers” (Hansen 2004: 599).

However, rather than trying to account for the infinitely subjective responses brought on by reading *House of Leaves*, in focusing our attention on the deictic marker “here” instead of “consequences” I believe we can further illustrate how Danielewski’s novel is as equally interested in the history and medium of the book as a cultural object as it is in the subjective experiences of encountering such objects. The word “here” refers to the rules, conventions, and possibilities of fiction on the one hand, and to the *medium* of the print-bound book on the other. Indeed, Danielewski’s commitment to exploring the possibilities of the book as object speaks more to Pressman’s “aesthetics of bookishness” (Pressman 2009, 2018) than to arguments put forth by Hansen (2004) and Hayles (2002a, 2002b) who draw emphatic comparisons between *House of Leaves* and digital media and the computer, respectively. *House of Leaves* obviously interrogates issues posed by new media, including problems of textual authenticity and authentication, but Danielewski’s novel is far more preoccupied with older media—photography, film, video, type, ink and paper—and above all else the reading and writing of print-bound *books*, than it is with digital technologies.

3. The Literary Compendium

When Viktor Shklovsky argued in *Theory of Prose* that Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* was "the most typical novel in world literature" (Shklovsky 1990: 170), what he meant was that in "laying bare" the devices of its own construction Sterne's novel self-reflexively prioritizes its own narrativity over conventional verisimilitude making the poetics of the novel itself the focus of his text. Indeed, in foregrounding its very own constructiveness Sterne's novel implicitly demonstrates how all novels are constructed, in that they are the result of artificial devices—rhetorical, poetic, narrative, aesthetic, ideological, and so forth. Other notable novels that operate in a similar way include Joyce's *Ulysses*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Lehrer's *A Life in Books*. All of these novels are what I would call *literary compendiums* because they recapitulate the dominant literary conventions, techniques, and styles that had preceded them into their very own constructions in both obvious and novelistic ways. *House of Leaves* likewise recapitulates a slew of inherited literary and bibliographic forms, but it also illuminates how the book medium and its many affordances underwrites the novel's construction, encapsulating all of its editions (real and fictive) and peritextual material into its projected fictional world, making it the multimodal novel's literary compendium *par excellence*. An additional key element that distinguishes *House of Leaves* from other literary compendiums is how its deployment of bibliographic forms serve the development of individual characters.³⁹ For every significant character in *House of Leaves* is

³⁹ Randall Stevenson points out how Joyce's "fascination for sound" and "phonetic music" influences how each character in *Ulysses* "speaks in its own way," therefore producing a polyphony of linguistic registers (Stevenson 1998: 54). In Danielewski's novel, however, he goes one step further

constrained to distinct bibliographic forms. These biblio-characterological features are foregrounded through the ways in which Danielewski dialogically sequences all of the novel's parts into discreet typographical units, highlighting their similarities and differences. Contiguities and associations begin to form between specific literary and bookish forms and the psychology of individual characters to the point that characters come to assume literary-textual personalities.

Scholars have repeatedly observed how Zampanò, Truant, Pelafina, and the Editors are represented in different serif fonts (Times Roman, Courier, Kennerley Old Style, and Bookman Old Style, respectively),⁴⁰ but many have also neglected to observe that *every* significant character in the novel, and not merely those responsible for producing textual objects, is inscribed and represented differently. That is, characters both *read* and *look* relatively different from one another. And not only have scholars overlooked the fact that most characters in the novel are figured in inherited bibliographic forms, the literary-historical residues embedded in their linguistic representations possess an implicit intertextual engagement with literary-historical forms. Which is to say, characters in *House of Leaves* are not merely fictional constructs, they are summations of a whole slew of inherited literary and bibliographic forms.

by *textually visualizing* the novel's characters, thus foregrounding the plurality of not only its linguistic registers but its inscription technologies as well. *Ulysses* prioritizes the sounds of languages and phonetic diversity, whereas *House of Leaves* prioritizes the visibility of writing and the tactility of the print-bound book. In *House of Leaves*, semiotic possibilities are determined by visual and bibliographic forms and not merely narrative and linguistic forms.

⁴⁰ For examples where scholars discuss some of the novel's different fonts see Hayles (2002b: 780), Pressman (2006: 109-10), Gibbons (2012: 47-8), and Starre (2015: 140-43).

Zampanò's "The Navidson Record," as mentioned, is set in Times Roman (including all of his inscriptions located in his unfinished Exhibits and Appendix I), whereas Truant's inscriptions, which are mostly featured as footnotes to Zampanò's manuscript, are set in Courier (although his Pelican Poems located in Appendix II are suspiciously set in Times Roman). These typographic markers are discussed at the beginning of the novel in a footnote provided by the fictional Editors: "In an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant's footnotes will appear in Courier font while Zampanò's will appear in Times. All matters regarding publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone" (*HoL* 4, fn5). The Editors' inscriptions (copyright page, contents page, forward, footnotes, appendix headings, and index) are set in Bookman Old Style, distinguishing them from Zampanò and Truant. Now, some scholars have pointed out how befitting these typefaces are. For example, Pressman observes how the Times Roman font of "Zampanò's academic commentary" draws associations "with newspapers and the linotype," whereas Truant's Courier footnotes "imitate a typewriter's inscription" and "thematically identify him as the middleman, the 'courier' of the manuscript" (Pressman 2006: 109-110). Pressman furthermore suggests "the terse notations" provided by the Editors "are aptly presented in Bookman" (Pressman 2006: 109-110). Responding to these observations, Starre points out how Pressman "interprets the significance of the fonts both by their visual features and by their telling names. The editors, in this regard, are quite literally 'book-men' who turn the loose pages sent in by Johnny Truant into a coherent book" (Starre 2015: 141). Here, both Pressman and Starre persuasively point out how Danielewski employs specific typefaces for narrative and characterological ends, but

these observations only begin to touch upon the greater significance bibliographic forms have for the construction of characters.

Characters in *House of Leaves* are not only constrained to specific typefaces, they are inscribed in particular bibliographic forms whose conventions are affiliated with particular genres. For example, Truant's mother Pelafina Heather Lievre's inscriptions (*HoL* 587-642), set in Kennerley Old Style, are epistles she writes and sends to Truant. Will Navidson's love letter to his partner Karen Green (*HoL* 389-93) is also set in Kennerley Old Style. Pelafina and Navidson's letters, for the most part, register the tone and diction of a confession; they are written by characters who experience extreme distress, maybe even hysteria, whose tone and diction are guilt ridden and apologetic. Thus, the epistolary genre in *House of Leaves* implicitly displays its status as a recapitulation of conventions from a long line of epistolary novels, such as Richardson's *Pamela*, Stoker's *Dracula*, James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Bellow's *Herzog*, and Updike's *S.* Furthermore, "Tom's Story" (*HoL* 253-73), set in Century is a transcript that mimics the bibliographic forms of a screenplay or sketch comedy routine. Karen Green's "A Partial Transcript of What Some Have Thought" (*HoL* 353-65), set in Calibri is a transcript of numerous in-person tape-recorded interviews. And of course, featured in each of the novel's chapter's epigraphs, as well as in Appendix II, are memorable quotes (e.g., by Homer, Dante, Virgil, and Baudelaire) written in Greek, Hebrew, Italian, German, Russian, French, and even Braille, which are frequently set in Ancient Greek, Aramaic Square Script, among others to give them an aged or even archaic feel, a sense of textual authenticity.

As a device, what we might call *typefacing* (a pun on typesetting), the pairing of characters with specific bibliographic forms, reminds us of the archaic meaning of *character*, “a distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise made on a surface.... A member of a set of symbols used in writing or printing to represent linguistic elements” (*OED*). And indeed, one of the primary functions of typefacing in *House of Leaves* is to imbue fictional human characters with memorable textual markings and personalities—they serve mnemonic purposes for the reader. Thus, we read Pelafina as a writer of letters; she is only knowable through and therefore only exists as a series of letters, she is an epistolary character through-and-through. With Truant, we primarily read and view him as the discoverer, curator, and commentator of Zampanò’s manuscript and as the first reader of “The Navidson Record.” When we read the writings presumably made by Navidson, Karen, and Tom, in these moments they too take on qualities affiliated with the modes and mediums they are represented in: Navidson as epistolary confessor, Karen as investigative reporter, Tom as comic jester. In other words, there are bibliographic conventions that have been inherited from literary and print culture that are typically representative of specific modes and genres, and Danielewski exploits his knowledge of this fact throughout his novel. Indeed, Danielewski did not have to set the transcript containing “Tom’s Story” (*HoL* 246-274) in Century or write it according to the bibliographic conventions of a screenplay. However, because Tom is very much playing the role of a comedian or jester in this section, such conventions establish his character as one that is knowable not only through the meanings we extract from conventional reading practices, but as a character who is only knowable through the bookish forms he is written in. With the

case of Tom, as one could do with any central character in the novel, we can observe how Danielewski builds characters out of conventions associated with bibliographic forms, giving them and his novel more generally an additional layer of complexity that further deviates *House of Leaves* from the conventional novel as well as from other literary compendiums.

At first glance, it would appear a bit ludicrous arguing that *House of Leaves*, like Shklovsky does with *Tristram Shandy* (Shklovsky 1990), is the most typical novel in world literature, and yet the manner in which Danielewski “lays bare” the devices that underlie the construction of his fictional characters makes his novel precisely that. And indeed, when Danielewski suggests in his interview with McCaffery and Gregory that any reader who has “a grasp of the history of narrative can see that *House of Leaves* is really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation,” and that *House of Leaves* is less an “experimental novel” than “what comes *after* the experiments,” he acknowledges just that—that his novel lays bare and is a compendium of a plethora of inherited forms (McCaffery and Gregory 2003: 106). Because characters are constructed from a distinct repertoire of typographic and stylistic devices, and because the diversity of voices represented among the novel’s characters produces a polyphony of linguistic registers, when we focus on the transitions from one character’s inscriptions to the next, observing each transition as the pairing of complex narrative phenomena metonymically representative of each character’s larger patterns of signification, we observe how characters become representations of literary and bibliographic forms and how the novel more generally becomes a compendium of inherited forms.

In Roman Jakobson's influential essay, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," he develops a model for studying literature based upon what he calls "the metaphoric and metonymic poles" of language. According to Jakobson, discourse typically generates along one of two possible "semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate terms for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively" (Jakobson 1987: 109-10). Jakobson extends this hypothesis into a descriptive poetics derived from competing linguistic and poetic principles found in the nineteenth century. Like many literary scholars, Jakobson associates Romanticism and Symbolism with metaphoric processes, but he goes even further in claiming that classic Realism, which falls historically between these two latter literary periods, functions according to metonymic processes. "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from characters to the setting in space and time" (Jakobson 1987: 111). According to Jakobson, metonymy operates according to principles of contiguity, metaphor according to principles of comparison. Many scholars have agreed that nineteenth century realism tends to favor principles of metonymy, and some have applied Jakobson's theory to later literary contexts claiming that modernist poetics, which in many ways was a reaction to nineteenth-century realism, operates according to principles of metaphor (e.g., see Lodge 1977; McHale 1992; Stevenson 1998). Furthermore, we can expand Jakobson's framework, as many have, to accommodate postmodernist practitioners who, although obviously employ

metaphors and metonymies, foreground figures of irony and its principles of incongruity and disjunction (e.g., see McHale 1987; Jencks 2011; Konstantinou 2016). I do not wish to argue that *House of Leaves* is principally organized by any single trope, however, many of the novel's characters, as is witnessed from their writings, tend to privilege certain tropes over others, marking them with distinct tropological characteristics.

House of Leaves has been frequently regarded as a realist text. Hayles claims, for example, that Danielewski's novel "deliver[s] the pleasures of traditional realistic fiction" while simultaneously "devise[ing] a form that locates the book within the remediations of the digital era" where "reference becomes unstable or inaccessible in such an environment" (Hayles 2002a: 128).⁴¹ For Hayles, *House of Leaves* belongs to the "postmodern landscape," and yet in its ridding away any stable notion of what she calls the "originary subject" the novel still manages to recuperate "an intensity of character and narrative through the processes of remediation" (Hayles 2002a: 128).⁴² Elsewhere, Hayles tells us that Chapter X, and by extension much of the novel itself, is "mimetic" because the "typography" is designed to mimic the actions that unfold in the narrative (Hayles 2002b: 796). Although Hayles never explicitly discusses the novel's employment of *metonymy* as an organizing narrative principle, she gestures in this direction when discussing the "intersecting circular pathways of the novel" and how the "model for subjectivity" in the novel is not "individualism" but a "communication circuit" (Hayles 2002b: 803). The defining criteria for metonymy as

⁴¹ In addition to what Hayles has to say about "realism" in *House of Leaves* (2002a, 2002b), see Hansen (2004), Pressman (2006), and Toth (2013).

⁴² Many scholars have tended to echo Hayles' view (e.g., see Timmer 2010, Toth 2013).

an organizing narrative principle is determined by the foregrounding of sequential contiguities in the presentation of casually or logically related bits of information, in which particular details stand in for larger and more general spatiotemporal continuities and psychosocial complexes. As George Levine puts it, “realistic narratives have depended on circumstantial particularity to establish verisimilitude,” in which “the force of the particular is dependent upon the larger context in which it is imagined.... Against the shaping dreams of the characters, particularities imply a multitudinous external world that stands as a permanent irony at the expense of all dreams and wishes—and, ultimately, ideas” (Levine 1981: 151, 153).⁴³ When Hayles describes the inscriptions re-presented in *House of Leaves* as being part of some larger “intersecting” or cross-traffic “communication circuit,” although her description is metaphorical (she compares the novel’s narrative structure to the workings of circuit technology), and although she is referring to the tendency among postmodernists to problematize traditional notions of the individual, the principle of organization she implicitly identifies with the novel’s structure is metonymical.⁴⁴

Zampanò’s “The Navidson Record”—a manuscript consisting primarily of academically stylized prose, descriptive aesthetics, quasi-omniscient narration, and a sizeable amount of exposition on the exigent discourses surrounding *The Navidson*

⁴³ This “irony” that Levine suggests exists between characters’ wishes and the facts of a “real” fictional world does not undermine the metonymical chain that is produced by a realist narrative. Irony or incongruity does not lie in the representation of character or a fictional world, but in a character’s *relation* to or *desires* in that world.

⁴⁴ Pressman’s reading of *House of Leaves*, *The Whalstone Letters*, and Poe’s *Haunted* as the production of the “networked novel” (2006) is an implicit argument for the novel’s metonymical organization because her reading insistently relies upon her observation of *contiguities* that seem to exist across all of these “nodes,” although of course she never speaks in such terms, instead favoring the language of new media, like Hayles and Hansen do.

Record—is predominantly organized by the trope of metonymy. The linguistic and narratological features of Zampanò’s writing—limited omniscient narration, description, literary and filmic interpretation—proceed metonymically, that is, “details stand in for absent continua or complexes...while the ordering of these details in the text reflects...local spatiotemporal relations in some model of the world” (McHale 1992: 169). Although there are physically or logically impossible events represented in Zampanò’s writings, as a character he functions more as a mediating, objective narrator than as a subjective, overtly self-conscious reflector (the latter being a more modernist technique). As a character within *House of Leaves*, Zampanò may not seem like a mimetic or realistic character (how could a blind man possibly do all that Zampanò supposedly does?), but the linguistic principle by which his writings proceed approximates those of classic realism.

Furthermore, and as Zampanò points out, *The Navidson Record* is filmed and edited according to the rules of continuity editing and the style of *cinema vérité* (*HoL* 139 fn181).⁴⁵ Continuity editing, the technical procedures by which individual shots are physically connected together during postproduction to produce causal and logical coherence and contiguity between individual shots, is designed to create an invisible or seamless flow between shots (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 218-65). That is, continuity editing is intentionally deployed as a means for concealing a film’s

⁴⁵ For further examples that help make the case for the continuity principles in *The Navidson Record*, see *HoL* 4, 5, 9, 10, 60, 102, 151, 274, 368, and so forth. However, the film (even though it does not actually exist), we learn from Zampanò, does not always abide according to the rules of continuity editing. Exploration #4 is “discontinuous” (*HoL* 5), “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway” scene features “jump cuts” (*HoL* 60) as does the scene where Navidson crawls through a tunnel toward the end of the novel (*HoL* 454).

artificiality in order to provide viewers with the appearance of contiguity and an illusion of reality. Continuity editing and the aesthetics of classical Hollywood cinema more generally, which continues to dominate much of contemporary world cinema today, is grounded in the principles of metonymy. As Jakobson correctly observes, “ever since the productions of D.W. Griffith”—the father of classical Hollywood cinema—“the art of cinema” has foregrounded “an unprecedented variety of synecdochic close-ups and metonymic set-ups” (Jakobson 1987: 111). In other words, the narrative conventions and cinematic techniques exemplified by Hollywood cinema, which generally correspond to the poetics of conventional realism, are the very same conventions and techniques that hold *The Navidson Record* together, including Zampanò’s extensive verbal commentary of it.

If Zampanò’s manuscript and Navidson’s film have a tendency to lean toward the *metonymic* pole of discourse, representative of a classic realist poetics, then Truant’s writings have a tendency to lean toward the metaphoric pole, representative of a more modernist poetics. In other words, Truant is the novel’s modernist character, constitutive of a more modernist poetics and literary-textual personality. Readers can observe the novel’s adjustment from a realist to a more modernist poetics when the narrative transitions from Zampanò to Truant’s writings, where the novel’s discourse gradually, though sometimes abruptly, shifts from the metonymic to the metaphoric pole, to use Jakobson’s language. Indeed, Truant tends to employ metaphoric language more than any other character in the novel, but it should be noted that the figurative adhesive that typically binds or links Zampanò and Truant’s writings often appears at first glance to function metonymically. The particular word

or phrase that links the two characters writings, in other words, acts at a continuity device, but once Truant's discourse surpasses his initial interjection and digresses further and further away from Zampanò's narrative, including the storyworld of *The Navidson Record*, the discourse of novel tends to shift from a realist to a more modernist poetics, especially with Truant's longer writings.

At one point, Truant even acknowledges his own writings, his responses to "The Navidson record," seem to be shifting over time from the metonymic to the metaphoric pole, though he doesn't say so in exactly these terms. As Truant begins to read more of and identify with Zampanò's writings, he notices "small connections [beginning] to form, minor patterns evolving in those spare slivers of time" (*HoL* xviii), between his world and the world of "The Navidson Record," until he finally observes "connection[s] between [his] state of mind and *The Navidson Record*" (*HoL* 25 fn33). As the novel progresses, however, Truant has an increasingly difficult time connecting the two worlds, even though he feels compelled to do so. As Truant puts it, "the dots...don't always connect.... how does one go from a piece of poetry to a heart wrenching beauty to the details of a drunken one night stand? I mean even if you could connect the dots, which I don't think you can, what kind of picture would you really draw" (*HoL* 117 fn141)? The solution to the problem of connectivity Truant struggles with becomes the language metaphor, that is, the associative style of thinking and writing we tend to associate with modernist literature. Truant's solution to the failure of metonymical discourse to provide continuity across the gaps that exist between his world and the world of Zampanò's writings, is the language of metaphor. If there is a visual representation or "picture" that would most accurately

represent Truant's metaphorical thinking it would be something like a surrealist painting by Dali or Ernst, rather than say, a cubist painting by Braque or Picasso, for the former's methods of representation are grounded in the metaphoric principles of free-association and the dream logic of stream-of-consciousness, whereas the latter's are grounded in the metonymic principles of perspectivism (Lodge 1977: 79-81).

In order to observe the more fine-grained details of this transition from metonymy to metaphor, we need only look at practically any one of Truant's writings. In the latter parts of Chapter IV (*HoL* 34-37 fn41), Truant's writing gradually shifts from recalling one of his sexual exploits into a mixed and extended metaphor whose treatment of temporality foregrounds a metaphorical process of human cognition and memory. As with most of Truant's more associative style of writing, this one begins metonymically and concerns his "particular" research into Zampanò's life and work ("Know what, Latin's way out of my league. I can find people who speak Spanish, French, Hebrew, Italian and even German but the Roman tongue's not exactly thriving I the streets of LA"), but the focus turns gradually toward himself ("We stopped talking about Zampanò then. She [Amber Rightacre] paged her friend Christina...There were no introductions. We just sat on the floor and snorted lines of coke...gulped down a bottle of wine...I even managed to forget about Zampanò..."), and then we are presented with two pages of prose that stands out from anything we have yet encountered in Truant's writings, let alone Zampanò's, in which Truant constructs a temporally complex and imagistic extended metaphor featuring multiple embedded memories from his childhood (see *HoL* 36-37 fn41). Beyond the obvious shift from metonymy to extended metaphor, for the first time in the

progression of the novel Danielewski constructs a stream-of-conscious styled narrative, a technique conventionally known for its ability to represent deep time and psychological depth, hallmarks of modernist poetics.⁴⁶ In the narration that follows this shift in prose style, in terms of its treatment of temporality, we also witness what Genette would call an analepsis within an analepsis (a flashback within a flashback), which is proceeded by a series of prolepses (flashforwards) that mark at least three additional moments in time outside of the moment of the writing itself (Genette 1983: 48-79). In other words, Truant's discourse presents at least six distinctly different temporal moments over the course of less than two pages. Truant's treatment of temporality is nuanced, idiosyncratic, confusing, and unconstrained by a more conventionally realist poetics that would sustain a more contiguous metonymic chain between the particular and the general in the representation of casually related events. Truant's cognitive movements are built on patterns of subjective experience and association and are thus far more reminiscent of novels like as Proust's *Recherche*, Woolf's *The Waves*, or Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*—exemplary high modernist novels—than any conventionally realist novel.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Two primary concerns of modernists were time and consciousness. There are countless studies on modernist techniques of temporality and subjectivity, how they differ from earlier narrative conventions as well as how postmodernists often level the deep time and psychological depth of modernists, and more generally on the influence of thinkers such as Einstein, Bergson, Freud, and James to the modernist project. Some of the more notable studies include Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space* (1983), Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1983), Stevenson's *Modernist Fiction* (1997), and Weinstein's *Unknowing* (2005).

⁴⁷ Just in case the reader is not wholly convinced from this particular example, I have provided a series of additional examples, or at least citations to them, that foreground the principles of metaphor as well as a more abstract or free-associational prose style: 42-43 fn50, 48-49 fn62, 70-72 fn77, 77-78 fn82, 89 fn98, 106 fn119, 107-08 fn120, 296-300, 323-27 fn276, 403-06 fn390, and so forth. Furthermore, throughout *House of Leaves*, Truant's writings are stylized in a high or late modernist poetics in which issues of unreliable narration and/or denarration foregrounding epistemological issues are employed (see *HoL* 16 fn18, 43 fn50, 69-72 fn77, 323-327 fn276, 495-96, 507-509)

Rather than read *House of Leaves* as typically postmodernist or exemplifying some post-postmodernist turn, as most scholars do, Sebastian Huber reads Danielewski's novel for its "pre-postmodernist elements, which intimate and legitimize a modernist reading" (Huber 2012: 124). Huber's argument is a bit teetering, and one comes away from it not quite sure precisely where he stands, but one of the novel's modernist strategies he does vividly point out comes through when he unsurprisingly compares it to *Ulysses* and "The Waste Land," and in particular the role of the modernist reader who must "assemble 'the heap of broken images' as presented in the form of seemingly chaotic collage and thus create a mosaic in which the whole becomes more than its parts" (Huber 2012: 125-26). Huber suggests that *House of Leaves* leans positively toward the typically modernist, and of course Romantic, ideals of unity, wholeness, and authenticity. Although *House of Leaves* is presented as a collection of documents, fragments, and discontinuous writings that sometimes seem to lack meaningful connections, Huber reminds us that the novel builds—in a typically modernist fashion—"a scaffold that holds together and constructs an epistemological metanarrative," "an archive" committed to reconstructing "stable structures for the accumulation and presentation of knowledge" (Huber 2012: 131, 133). Indeed, the novel's commitment to the accumulation and production of knowledge foregrounds the novel's sense of vertically. Rather than level or deconstruct all forms of knowledge production in a typically postmodernist fashion, *House of Leaves* builds vertically rather than horizontally upon history, preserving as well as relying on its own literary inheritance. But Danielewski's novel does not merely build upon and celebrate its literary inheritance, it openly displays

that inheritance on the material pages of its book through the ways in which it exploits the visual, i.e., bibliographic, characteristics of literary form. Huber touches on this point when he claims the novel's deployment of different typeface works to "safeguard" its various "discursive levels" from one another (Huber 2012: 126).

Huber reminds us how each character's writings is not only visually distinct from one another but occupies its own spatially demarcated textual domain on the material pages of the book. Because Huber views this demarcating as working "to uphold a concrete correlation between enunciator and enunciated," he views it as a device for upholding the integrity of subjectivity in line with the "deep interiority" aesthetic of modernism in contradistinction to the "exterior surface" aesthetic of postmodernism (Huber 2012: 127).

Huber illuminates how *House of Leaves* is capable of shifting from a realist to a more modernist poetics, reminding us how contemporary fiction need not necessarily operate according to a postmodernist or even a post-postmodernist poetics. Indeed, contemporary writers have the expressive resources of literary history entirely at their disposal. Poetic styles, topoi, and techniques that come to dominate practices of particular historical periods are not bound to those historical periods any more than writers are bound to the aesthetic fashion of their day. But although Huber's observations concerning Danielewski's use of certain modernist techniques is persuasive, one simply cannot overlook the obvious *jouissance* Danielewski takes in playing with the visual aesthetics of written language and the expressive possibilities of the book's material surface, hallmarks of contemporary "archival" fiction and what Pressman refers to as the contemporary's turn toward the "aesthetics

of bookishness". So although Danielewski is certainly concerned with "saving the subject" from the abyss of remediation, as Hayles would put it (2002b), he is also an exemplary "literary bibliographer," someone who "not only write[s] books" but "write[s] *with* books" (Starre 2015: 168-169). An artistic practice that exploits the book object and its bibliographic elements as expressive resources views the materiality of the book as integral to the bookish arts, a conventional practice for multimodal book-archivists like Danielewski, if unconventional more generally throughout literary history. As a literary compendium, an archive of literary forms, *House of Leaves* recapitulates devices and techniques that clearly exceed the realist and modernist periods and that in some cases could not have been possible without the affordances of digital technology (e.g., see Pressman 2006; Chanen 2007; and Hayles 2008: 159-186),⁴⁸ but that technology is used to update those forms for specific literary and bookish purposes. So, although *House of Leaves* attempts to construct psychologically rich characters and builds upon itself and its literary inheritance vertically rather than level everything like a good old-fashioned postmodernist, Danielewski's novel is self-reflectively about the "surface" of the book and the visual aesthetics of reading literature.

As for the novel's postmodern qualities, one could apply practically any canonical theory of the postmodern or poststructuralist theory to *House of Leaves* and

⁴⁸ Hayles claims *House of Leaves* is a "celebration of the medial flexibility of print," but describes this flexibility in terms of the all-encompassing logic of "the computer" (Hayles 2002b: 781), whereas Pressman configures *House of Leaves* as a "node" within a "multimedia network" of other nodes, which includes *The Whalestone Letters*, the *House of Leaves* website (www.houseofleaves.com), and the musical album *Haunted* recorded by Poe: "connections across and between media forms forge a network aesthetic, foster new reading strategies, and foreground the importance of *House of Leaves* as a print novel for the digital age" (Pressman 2006: 107-08).

churn out a persuasive, if ultimately passé, postmodernist reading. One might, for instance, suggest how the novel's deployment of devices and topoi associated with so many different genres substantiates the popular mythos about postmodernism's blurring the boundaries between high and low culture. This conception of postmodernism, popularized by Jameson, argues that postmodernists deliberately efface "the older (essentially high modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture" (Jameson 1991: 2). And indeed, if one considers the stylistic repertoire the novel is made up of, one's stylistic inventory will account for devices and techniques inherited from numerous literary traditions: realist, naturalist, modernist, avant-garde, high and late modernist, postmodernist, metamodernist, as well as all the "popular" styles that parallel them: detective fiction, science fiction, horror fiction, historical fiction, epistolary fiction, memoir, romance, adventure, academic scholarship, and so forth. From such widespread use of inherited forms one could also conceive of an argument informed by Jameson's notion of postmodernism's turn toward blank parody and pastiche (Jameson 1991: 16-19), the repetition of form for form's sake empty of any significant or historically inflected content (though of course such an argument would have to be mostly fatuous). The compartmentalization of the novel into discreet textual units, including the presence of disjunctive narrative fragments—one of Huber's main points—could just as well be interpreted as constitutive of postmodernism's "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). That individual characters are deliberately represented in different fonts and stylistic devices also appeals to notions of postmodern intertextuality, irony, and double coding (Jencks 2011; Eco 1998). Indeed, and as

Rune Graulund has pointed out, the names given to many of the novel's characters even carry symbolic meanings: Truant is "duty-shirking," Zampanò is "pompous" (from Italian, "to act the big shot"), Lude is "ludic" (Graulund 2006: 388 fn5), and Will Navidson is "rewarded" (from Persian) at the end of the novel for his "courage" or *will* to reenter the house. That characters in *House of Leaves* are very much textual constructs, possessing distinct literary-textual personalities, lends itself to Derrida's infamous claim that there is no outside-text ("il n'y a rien en dehors du texte"). Or, as James Phelan might put it, these characters tend to function "thematically" and/or "synthetically," they represent some "cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical" idea, instead of "possible people" readers are invited to respond to emotionally or ethically (Phelan 2007: 5-6). The ways in which the novel lays bare the construction and pluralization of worlds of discourse, as well as how it problematizes the boundaries between fact and fiction, world and text, and reader and character would also seem to fit squarely within McHale's descriptive poetics of postmodernist fiction, a poetics McHale argues is preoccupied with ontological issues (McHale 1987, 1992, 2015), issues which scholars of the novel have observed *ad nauseam*.

Danielewski's novel, for some scholars, does not merely recapitulate a storehouse of inherited forms for novel purposes (which is my argument, to an extent), it represents a break from and critique of certain postmodernist tendencies and is thus indicative of an emergent post-postmodern style, aesthetic, or ideology. Scholars who focus on the novel's digital and/or multimodal elements frequently make claims to the novel's originality (e.g., Hayles, Gibbons, Hansen, and Pressman all insist *House of Leaves* moves beyond postmodernism in some sense), but for some

of the more periodization-oriented scholars Danielewski belongs to a cohort of contemporary writers who are responsible for ushering in a new post-postmodern style. For example, William G. Little argues, and in ways that parallel Christian Moraru's notion of "poethics" in *Cosmodernism* (2011), that *House of Leaves* wants its readers to consider a new kind of *responsibility* and *ethic* toward the Other, toward the impossible and the otherworldly, in order to overcome certain noncommittal tendencies and indifference prevalent among strains of postmodern thought (Little 2007), whereas Josh Toth argues *House of Leaves* attempts to carve out a space for the possibility of narrative *closure*, challenging the postmodern tendency to defy the possibility of closure and conflict resolution (Toth 2013).⁴⁹ Whether *House of Leaves* really is indicative of some new post-postmodern style or ideology, or more simply deploys inherited literary and bookish forms within a new digital paradigm for novel purposes, Danielewski's novel surely operates in a wide variety of stylistic registers, thematizing the writing and reading of literary and bookish forms into its narrative structure and bookish aesthetic.

This is why the notion of the *literary compendium* is so heuristically useful, especially for thinking critically and historically about how contemporary multimodal literature exploits the material and expressive resources of media. Not exactly a genre or mode because of its overt formal and textual heterogeneity, the contemporary

⁴⁹ In the abstract to Michael Hemmingson's "What's beneath the Floorboards: Three Competing Metavoices in the Footnotes to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*" (2011), published in *Critique*, the author claims the novel "combines fiction with critical discourse to arrive at a formally innovative text of post-postmodern contemporary fiction," but this claim about the novel's "post-postmodern" status is actually never discussed in the article. Much energy is dedicated to McCaffery's "avant-pop" and Federman's "critifiction" (hallmarks of *postmodernist* poetics), but not a peep on what makes *House of Leaves* a post-postmodern novel.

literary compendium's "hypermedia logic" (Bolton and Grusin 1999)⁵⁰ and multimodal aesthetic mixes and fluctuates across multiple genres, styles, registers, and modes with relative ease (as do many postmodernist texts, we should remember). Earlier examples of novelized literary compendiums (e.g., *Tristram Shandy*, *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow*) do not employ an archival or documentary poetics, but more contemporary literary compendiums, which are typically highly multimodal, such as *House of Leaves* and Lehrer's *A Life in Books*, certainly are, for they deliberately transform the book object into a site for archiving textual media for expressive purposes.

4. Bookish Figures, Archival Tropes

The ways in which *House of Leaves* repurposes a diverse collection of literary forms is a testament to the material and expressive possibilities of the twenty-first century print-bound novel. A mobile depository designed for the purposes of preserving and distributing textual media, *House of Leaves* also possesses mnemonic and epistemological functions. As book-archivists like Danielewski tend to consider textual artifacts as physical and expressive extensions of those who produce them, the preservation of writings becomes a symbolic means of preserving the producer of the writings, in addition to their knowledge and memory and not just the physical writings themselves. In this context, textual artifacts and their physical containers—

⁵⁰ In *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin claim that following a "logic of hypermedia," "the [hypermedia] artist strives to make the viewer [and reader] acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgement. She does so by multiplying spaces and media and by repeatedly redefining the visual and conceptual relationship among mediated spaces" (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 41).

books, boxes, archives—become metaphors or metonymies for human beings. In the case of *House of Leaves*, because a variety of conventions from literary and bibliographic history inform the construction of its characters, notions like identity and selfhood become intrinsically tied to textual materiality and linguistic representation. *House of Leaves*, in other words, activates a cluster of conceptual metaphors and metonymies centered around notions of the archive: PEOPLE ARE TEXTS, BOOKS ARE BODIES, BODIES ARE ARCHIVES (metaphors), TEXTS STAND IN FOR THEIR PRODUCERS, BOOKS STAND IN FOR BODIES (metonymies).

The suture between identity and textuality comes through most clearly in Truant's handling of Zampanò's writings which he first encounters when he and Lude break into Zampanò's apartment after he dies. Once Truant and Lude enter "the door to the dead" (*HoL* xv), they discover what Truant later identifies as a "black, unremarkable, paint splattered trunk" (*HoL* 20 fn25) containing Zampanò's "personal archive" (Tanselle 2002: 405).⁵¹ Inside this trunk, there is every sign that Zampanò is a graphomaniac. As Truant writes,

There were reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I'd come across later—on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered

⁵¹ As G. Thomas Tanselle reminds us, "individuals, over the course of their lifetimes, amass archives no different in kind from those preserved by firms, institutions, and organizations. The difference in the professional handling and cataloguing of individuals' 'manuscripts' and organizations' 'archives' is an artificial one" (Tanselle 2002: 405).

with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements; layered, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch taped; some bits crisp and clean, others faded, burnt or folded and refolded so many times the creases have obliterated whole passages of god knows what—sense? truth? deceit? (*HoL* xvii)

Similar to McHale's notion of "the primal scene of archaeology," a recurring motif in archaeo-poetry where "a modern consciousness enters some relation with the past through an encounter with one of its artifacts" (McHale 2004: 98), we might describe this moment in *House of Leaves* as the primal scene of the *found archive*, the moment when a character (Truant) discovers an archive or manuscript (Zampanò's) which then substantially influences the consciousness of that character, as well as the direction of the narrative.⁵² Given Truant's long held "attachment to junk" (*HoL* 129 fn164) and fascination "for abandoned stuff, misplaced stuff, forgotten stuff, and old stuff" (*HoL* 21 fn25), it's unsurprising he drags the trunk home (*HoL* xviii, 20 fn25).

The first time Truant examines the contents of Zampanò's "rusted" and "rotting" trunk, when he grasps what's actually inside, he is terrified, "appalled," because, as he writes, it was as if he "was staring the old guy's corpse" (*HoL* 20-21 fn25). Truant likens Zampanò's writings to a corpse, a dead body, and by extension

⁵² Although I do not have enough space to go into much detail here, Carolyn Steedman's *Dust* (2002), which discusses how the material conditions of archives can psychologically and physiologically effect historians and researchers (19-31), is helpful for thinking about what happens to Truant after he inherits Zampanò's trunk from a more naturalist perspective. As Truant becomes consumed by Zampanò's archive he experiences something similar to what Steedman calls "Archive Fever Proper" (17-19), what Truant himself refers to as his "attacks" (e.g., see *HoL* 43 fn50, 105 fn119, 296, 325 fn276). Although Truant never explicitly refers to *dust* or to any toxins that might have been preserved in Zampanò's trunk, his obsessive and paranoid behavior that develops once he is in possession of it, compounded with his physiological side-effects, is strikingly similar to Steedman's Archive Fever Proper.

the trunk and archival container to that of a casket. Truant's first impression of Zampanò's archive sets in motion the novel's cluster of archival metaphors and metonymies. Once Truant realizes Zampanò's writings amount to an infinitely engaging and affective manuscript that was rejected "over two hundred" times by "various literary journals" and "publishing houses," he assumes ownership of it, concluding that "no one wanted the old man's words—except me" (*HoL* 20 fn25). Whether it's "fate" (*HoL* xi), his interest in "junk," or something else, Truant has an affinity to Zampanò and his archive. In the end, Truant will "finish what Zampanò himself failed to finish," he will "re-inter" Zampanò's writings "in a binding tomb," that is, he will publish it as "a book" (*HoL* 327 fn276).

By the end of the novel, Zampanò's writings will have been curated, edited, annotated and physically relocated from a casket-like "trunk" sequestered in an abandoned apartment to a tomb-like "book" that reproduces and memorializes him and his work (as well as those forms that constitute Danielewski's literary compendium). Faced with many editing and curatorial challenges along the way, Truant attempts to preserve Zampanò's writings and their author's original intentions as much as possible. Sometimes that means not cutting potentially insignificant or digressive passages, other times that means making sense of damaged documents or stitching together truncated fragments. For instance, defending an editing decision made in an early chapter, Truant points out how some passages "could have been cut" and we "wouldn't of noticed the absence," but what would have been "gained in economy doesn't really seem to make up for what you lose of Zampanò, the old man himself, coming a little more into focus" (*HoL* 31 fn36). Zampanò's "wandering

passages” and “oddly canted phrases,” according to Truant, are “markers left by a solitary life,” “to sacrifice them” would mean losing “the angles of [his] personality, the riddle of [his] soul” (*HoL* 31 fn36). In a later chapter, we learn that Zampanò had shredded the draft of what eventually becomes Chapter XI, but thanks to Denise Neiman, a woman who assisted Zampanò with his Hebrew, and Truant’s transcription efforts, the draft was partially salvaged. Neiman recalls seeing pages torn “to shreds” and “stained with blood” lying “in the wastebasket,” “on the floor” and in “the toilet” (*HoL* 248 fn226). Struck by an “impulse to save what was left,” Neiman collects “all the crumpled bits into... a manila envelope” and puts it “at the bottom of that chest [the trunk]” (*HoL* 248 fn226). Reflecting on the contents of the envelope some time later, Truant says he “considered excluding” them, but in “the end...opted to transcribe” and include “the pieces” in the manuscript because they “had enough on them to have some meaning even if that meant not meaning much,” and because “so much of his life” had already “slip[ped] between the lines of even his own words” (*HoL* 249 fn226). Just as readers come to understand how Danielewski marks his characters with specific literary-textual features, in the above two scenes, and there are many more, we see how Truant believes Zampanò’s prose style and narrative techniques reflect or even constitute Zampanò’s personality or spirit. *House of Leaves* wishes to concretize through material-textual means the notion that people never die, that they continue live not only in the memories of those who survive their deaths but through the preservation of their inscriptions. Literacy is the champion here, not orality or the digital, despite all of the potential dangers to authentication brought on by digital reproduction and remediation. As such, publishing Zampanò’s manuscript

as faithfully to the original writings as possible, even if that means including partial transcripts of damaged documents, becomes the best way of ensuring as authentic a representation of his character as possible is transmitted to later generations.

In a later chapter, where Truant is near completion of what will eventually become the First Edition of *House of Leaves*, these bookish figures and archival tropes culminate in a critical passage concerning readers and authors, with Truant standing over Zampanò's writings as if they were parts to a dismembered corpse spread across a table.

[I] return to the body, spread out across the table like papers...The Navidson Record lying there—bloodless and still but not at all dead, calling me to it, needing me like a child....After all, I'm it's source, the one who feeds it, nurses it back to health...bones of bond paper, transfusions of ink, genetic encryption in xerox; monstrous...but nonetheless there. And necessary to animate it all? For is that not an ultimate, the ultimate goal? Not some heaven sent blast of electricity but me, and not me unto me, but me unto it...which is to say...without me it would perish....There's something else...I've been overcome by the strangest feeling that I've gotten it all turned around, by which I mean to say...without it I would perish. A moment comes where suddenly everything seems impossibly far and confused, my sense of self derealized & depersonalized, the disorientation so severe I actually believe...this terrible sense of relatedness to Zampanò's work implies...that this thing has created me; not me unto it, but now it unto me, where I am nothing more than the matter of some other voice, intruding through the

folds...possessing me with histories I should never recognize as my own...forcing me to face the most terrible suspicion...that all of this has just been made up...not made up by me or even for that matter Zampanò. Though by whom I have no idea. (*HoL* 326 fn276)

More than rewriting a canonical scene from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, this scene dramatizes—and critiques—postmodern ideas about writing and authorship, such as those outlined by Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author,” where Barthes infamously declares “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (Barthes 1977: 148). Barthes does not merely advocate for a style of criticism that is reader-oriented and uninterested in authors, he wants to exclude authorial intentions altogether and put in their place a disinterested super-reader who is the source of a text's possible meanings as well as acts as a kind of depository that receives and stores inscriptions. We can observe Barthes' ideas, even some of his terminology, in Truant's passage.⁵³ As a reader, Truant is the one who assembles and animates Zampanò's writings. Without him, as he suggests, the text “would perish.” But one of the main reasons Truant places so much energy into making Zampanò's writings publishable is to share Zampanò's work with the rest of the world and to secure his place in history as an authentic author. But when Truant wonders frantically and suspiciously about possibly being the creation of someone else—*this* is an ironic authorial statement made by Danielewski addressed specifically to his

⁵³ As Barthes puts it, “the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (Barthes 1977: 148).

readers. Truant may not know who created him, but readers surely do. In this moment, Danielewski pulls back the metafictional curtain to remind us that this is all just fiction and that he is author of everything, not Navidson, not Zampanò, not Truant, not the Editors at Pantheon. What at first appears like some form of postmodern skepticism turns out to be an instance of Danielewski communicating to his readers that this is his bookish archive, but that he needs us—his readers in order for it to have any significance. Without the existence and will of real readers, Danielewski's book, like the pages of "The Navidson Record" scattered before Truant, remains lifeless and insignificant as any other document stored in an archive.

Chapter 4

Instrumentalizing the Book: On Anne Carson's *Nox*

I started the book as an effort of understanding, just trying to put strands of things I could say about him into one place and see what it added up to. As it went on, it became what I called an epitaph, a way of praising him.

—Anne Carson (2014)

1. From Scrapbook to Manufactured Reproduction: A Biography of a Book

In 2000, Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson received a phone call from a woman in Copenhagen telling her, “You don’t know me, but your brother has just died in my bathroom” (Wachtel 2014).⁵⁴ This woman was Carson’s brother Michael’s widow. Just a few weeks earlier, Michael had telephoned Carson “out of the blue” (*Nox* 5.1).⁵⁵ It was one the very few times they had spoken since 1978 (*Nox* 8.1), the year Michael fled Canada to Europe with a “false passport,” choosing to live “under other people’s names” rather than go to “jail” for drug possession charges (*Nox* 2.2, 8.2). During what would become the last time Carson ever spoke to Michael, they

⁵⁴ Carson never tells her readers in *Nox* how her brother died, but in her interview with Eleanor Wachtel she says he died of an “aneurism” (Wachtel 2014).

⁵⁵ *Nox* is unpaginated, but there are approximately 200 pages of content. The recto pages, however, are organized into 10 sections, with each section subdivided into smaller subsections following a standard decimal outline. The verso pages feature lexical entries for all of the Latin words featured in Catullus’s Latin poem 101. When referencing material from *Nox*, I will either cite the precise decimal section or the Latin word. When referencing photographs or other textual objects presented in *Nox*, I will cite the decimal section to which it belongs.

decided to meet up in person. It had been 22 years, after all. Carson purchased airplane tickets to Copenhagen, but then one week before she was set to travel, she received the telephone call from Michael's widow telling him he had died (Wachtel 2014). Carson would still go to Copenhagen, though now under very different circumstances, to meet Michael's widow who gave her Michael's old diaries and photographs and took her to the church where Michael's funeral occurred (*Nox* 3.2, 5.4). Carson would wander around Copenhagen in search of Michael in her memories, in the conversations she had with his friends and on the streets of Copenhagen, all the while collecting what Carson calls "bits of muteness," facts that could help explain to her who Michael was (*Nox* 1.3).

In response to Michael's death, Carson began working on *Nox*, a multimodal epitaph and book-archive dedicated to Michael that was eventually published 10 years later in 2010 by New Directions. *Nox* began as a scrapbook. Carson reports that she simply "bought an empty book" and began "fill[ing] it with stuff"—typed out memories about her brother, ruminations about history and language and translation, poetic fragments, bilingual lexical entries, a translation of Catullus's Latin poem 101, photographs, paintings, drawings, a letter from Michael, which she glued and stapled to the book transforming it into an artist's book (Wachtel 2014). "The effort of making a book about [grief]," Carson says in her radio interview with Michael Silverblatt, was "gradually a process of seeing" what kinds of "raw materials" were at hand that could help her "make it [grief] into a thing" (Silverblatt 2010). Carson's attempt to objectify the affect and experience of grief into a "thing," a book object "with a beginning, middle, and end," that would seem "beautiful or pleasurable to

somebody else,” effectively instrumentalizes the book-object as a therapeutic tool for “moving beyond grief” (Silverblatt 2010). While filling up the pages of her scrapbook, Carson says she “made it [her] task on each page to try to do something [she] didn’t know how to do... so that nothing repeated” (Silverblatt 2010). After completing a page, she would “abandon” it, then figure out “how to make a page each time” (Silverblatt 2010). This process of making each page anew is what, according to Carson, made the “process salvific,” what made it a book capable of working “through grief... because it keeps on instructing the maker that you can start again” (Silverblatt 2010).

Once Carson completed her scrapbook, she shared it with people, even travelled with it, for about eight years. During this time, Carson met a German publisher who told her that he could find a way to publish it in “a respectful way” (Wachtel 2014). Carson said okay and handed it over. After some time, Carson reached out to the publisher by email and phone, but they never answered or replied. Three years passed. Carson assumed the book was lost for good, that she would never see it again. “Then one day,” Carson says, “it showed up in a FedEx package” (Wachtel 2014). Out of the blue, the book just appears on her doorstep. Whether the German publisher had the book all that time but just couldn’t find a way to publish it is unclear from interviews where Carson discusses this vagabond period in *Nox*’s life. The book could have passed through many hands, could have traveled around Germany or even the globe for that matter. During this three-year period, Carson experienced intervals of “anguish” about losing the book, but once it came back to her, she thought, “time to make this permanent” (Wachtel 2014).

Once Carson's scrapbook returns to her possession, she and Robert Currie, a sculpturist and installation artist, experimented with the book until they found a way to replicate it into a manufacturable object. Knowing that what Carson had created was a uniquely singular object, a one-off and deeply intimate artist book, their goal was to find a way to replicate the book in its current condition, in all of its decay and fragility, that would elicit approximately the same response from readers as the original had done to all the people Carson had shown it to who found it deeply moving. In Carson and Currie's joint interview with Silverblatt, Currie explains how he figured out how to replicate the original using a Xerox copy machine and scotch tape. After two failed attempts at replicating the book, and in ways that were going to inevitably be too expensive to publish anyways, Currie began running the pages of Carson's book through the copy machine while he and Carson were in Berlin in 2008. Currie noticed that he was able to create different kinds of contrast in the pages by not completing closing the copy machine's lid. Letting in bits of light created the impression of "decay" and "dirtiness" on the pages, effectively mimicking the aged nature of the original scrapbook (Silverblatt 2010). They even soaked parts of the original transcript in tea over night before xeroxing them, yellowing the white paper, giving off the effect of being old, dusty, and faded by oxidation (Wachtel 2014). Currie then began taping the photocopied pages together, realizing that what he was creating was a kind of accordion book, and voila, the prototype for *Nox* was created. Carson and Currie placed the reproduced scrapbook in a box and took it to Declan Spring at New Directions, who transformed it into a mass-produced accordion book, packaged and distributed inside a cardboard oyster box (Figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7. *Nox* and its oyster box.

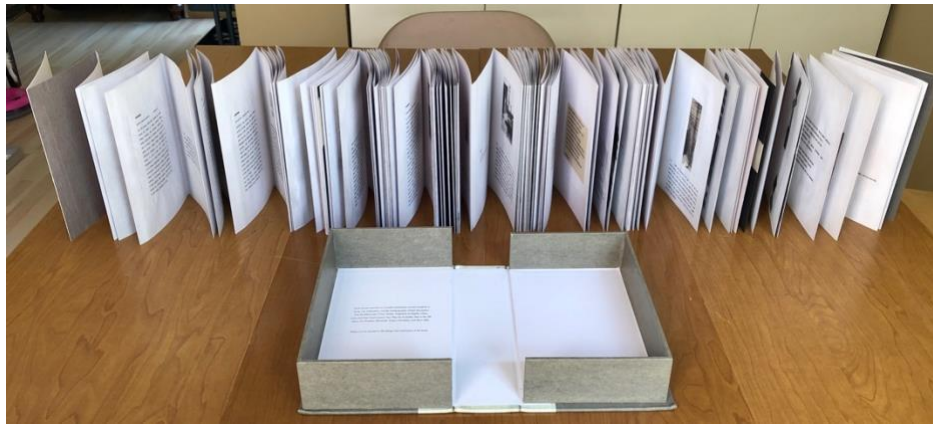


Figure 8. A partially unfolded copy of *Nox*.

The binding technique of an accordion book, commonly employed by artist book and zine makers, imitates the aesthetic and utility of a leporello binding, a parallel folding technique in which the pages of the book form a continuous paper-based concertina or accordion that expands and contracts as readers physically manipulate the book with their hands. Thus, Carson not only instrumentalizes the book as a tool for grieving, with the help of Currie and New Directions, she has created a book that imitates the structure of a musical instrument. Reminiscent of

experimental accordion books like Karen Chance's *Parallax*, Susan King's *Lessons from the South*, and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's *Codex Espangliensis*, when what first appears to be a stack of papers inside a 6 x 9 inch cardboard oyster box is removed (what is called a Crown Octavo), what unfolds is an approximately 100-foot sheet of cardstock segmented by folds that amount to an approximately 200-page accordion book. Although the folds of the concertina are not a binding in any conventional sense, they function as the physical book's principle structural support and offer, to borrow Johanna Drucker's words, "an openness and breathing quality which bound books don't have" (Drucker 1995: 139). A deliberately tactile book, *Nox* must be physically manipulated and grappled by readers in order to fully experience its material and expressive qualities. Furthermore, Carson and Currie's spatialization of the book as a contracting and expanding physical object, one that could quite literally physically dominate an entire room if opened just right, transforms the book as object into a kind of book-installation piece that one could easily imagine being exhibited in an art gallery and in a variety of different ways. In this context, Liedeke Plate discusses "the performances of *Nox* that individuals perform at home," that is, photographs of *Nox* shared on social media and in blog posts featuring Carson's book "unfold[ing] across floors, couches, shelves, and leather armchairs...remade into a diversity of site-specific installations" (Plate 2015: 107). In this context, Gibbons' observation that multimodal literature "literally makes us move," and not just "figuratively" could not be more applicable (Gibbons 2008: 121).

In her interview with Silverblatt, Carson says she did not employ any kind of "method" when filling the pages of her scrapbook. "I made it my task," she says, "on

each page to try to do something I didn't know how to do...nothing is repeated" (Silverblatt 2010). Viewing the page of a book as a kind of canvas to be manipulated anew with each turn liberates Carson from the constraints of conventional print, providing a process that allowed her to work through her grief page-by-page, making the project, as she says, "salvific". While it is true that every page in *Nox* looks and reads slightly different, Carson employs a number of devices that organize the contents of the book, devices that are systematic as well as *archival* in nature. Not only is the book itself a collection of reproduced and carefully manipulated artifacts, the structural principles Carson employs, which unfold and intersect across the pages of the book, are techniques of and for documentation. That Carson tasks herself with treating each page of her scrapbook as a novelty so as not to repeat herself is in itself a form of constraint, i.e., a method, in so far as Carson imposes a supplementary rule to guide her procedures. More importantly, however, is the purpose and functionality of Carson's archival poetics. Treating the book as an archival space, and employing a range of archival techniques, allows Carson to generate new lines of inquiry, to look upon and juxtapose familiar things with fresh eyes and to recognize unfamiliar or overlooked things for the first time. *Nox* is a kind of taking-stock-of-things, a pause and collection of "raw materials," placed under a new "light" (*Nox* 1.0) of scrutiny, recombination, and self-reflection. With *Nox*, Carson demonstrates how the book as archive can function not only as an instrument of psychological rejuvenation, a tool for what Silverblatt calls "grief-work" (Silverblatt 2010), but as an instrument for documenting and ordering disparate information, events, and memories into cathartic self-knowledge. If grief is a kind of chaos, then Carson's book is an instrument for

ordering that chaos into something manageable, even beautiful. The reader's reconstruction of Carson's archival experiment, steered by Carson's lateral and self-referential procedures, highlights what Wolfgang Funk calls "flickering moments of authenticity," instances where "the boundaries of absence and presence, object and subject, feeling and knowledge, the physical and the metaphysical, are obscured" (Funk 2012: 52).

2. Object, Form, Procedure, Lists

One can read *Nox* while keeping it inside its box, folding its pages from the box's recto to verso slot, which is likely the safest way of ensuring the glue applied at every seventh fold holding the book's pages together will remain adhered. But one can also physically remove the book from the box, allowing a more hands-on experience that likely more closely approximates what it was like to read Carson's original scrapbook (though the 100-foot, 200-page, accordion book offers its own unique readerly challenges; one wrong move and the book's potential unwieldiness will reveal itself in the form of an unruly, paper slinky).

The accordion book's cover image and design is identical to that of the box's front or top cover. It features a thin, vertical, rectangular-shaped photograph of Michael as a young boy, altered with scissors so that only the portion of the photograph featuring Michael is presented (see Figure 1 above).⁵⁶ Inside the book,

⁵⁶ Beneath the photo and attached to the surface of what appears to be a facsimile of the original scrapbook's front cover, is presumably a strip of paper or photograph painted over in a rustic or mustard-yellow color, one of the very few colors that reappears in Carson's artwork sparsely distributed throughout *Nox*'s otherwise monochromatic book

following the copyright page, in what effectively functions as *Nox*'s dedication, Carson has hand scripted Michael's name in black paint six times, covering the entirety of the page. Glued on top of the script is a vertical strip of paper, whose dimensions resemble the photograph of Michael on the cover, with three typewritten words in bold and all-caps:

NOX

FRATER

NOX

Readers will come to learn that “nox” is Latin for night, “frater” for brother, and that much of what Carson spends her time filling her book up with are bilingual lexical entries for her English translation of the Roman poet Catullus's Latin poem 101—the lyrical elegy Catullus wrote for *his* brother—featured in its entirety toward the end of *Nox*, making Carson's book a kind of multimodal “rewrite” (Moraru 2001; Plate and Rose 2013) or “hypermediated update” (McHale 2011) of Catullus's poem 101.

Readers will also learn that Carson's archival process for recovering and/or discovering something tangible about her brother becomes analogous to Carson's process of translating Catullus's poem. Out of necessity, from a depletion of resources and shared experiences, Carson objectifies her brother, as she does her grief, by studying him through the photographs he took as well as the representations of him in other photographs. Carson also reproduces bits of transcribed telephone conversation written from memory (“maybe 5 times in 22 years”), examining and memorizing them “as if [she'd] been asked to translate them” (*Nox* 8.1). In other words, Carson approaches the examination of her brother as if he were a slightly

foreign textual object, something needing translation in order to comprehend. As Carson puts it, “I kept finding when I looked up the [Latin] words [to poem 101], and remembered all the processes of thought I’d gone through...it kind of seemed analogous to the process of going back over and over another person” (Silverblatt 2010). *Nox* archives Carson’s process of translating Catullus’s poem 101 as well as her bizarre efforts to understand who her brother was. And because Catullus’s poem 101 “is the crucible within which memories of Michael are transubstantiated,” writes Jill Marsden, “the Catullus poem has become Michael” (Marsden 2013: 197).

What the reader is presented with on what is presumably *Nox*’s first page is one of the book’s tea soaked documents, a facsimile of Catullus’s Latin poem 101 (Figure 9).⁵⁷ However, a reader with no prior knowledge of *Nox*, who cannot read Latin, or who does not perform a web search of the poem, will not know what poem this is until they are about two-thirds of the way through Carson’s book, for it is not until then that she *explicitly* discusses the poem or its significance for the project as a whole (*Nox* 7.1). When the reader turns the page (Figure 10), they encounter on the recto page *Nox*’s first bilingual lexical entry, on the Latin word *multas*, the first word to Catullus’s poem 101. On the verso page readers encounter *Nox*’s first “short talk,”

⁵⁷ Translated by Ryan Gallagher

I have traveled far across the sea and far across this
country to come to this miserable funeral, brother,
to offer a prayer for the future of your death
and to hopelessly speak to your silent ashes.
And since fortune has certainly taken you away from me—
fuck this horrible misery. My brother is gone.
So, accept this trouble and these foolish
prayers that our parents offer.
Accept this brother’s many sad tears
and from now on, brother, hello and goodbye.

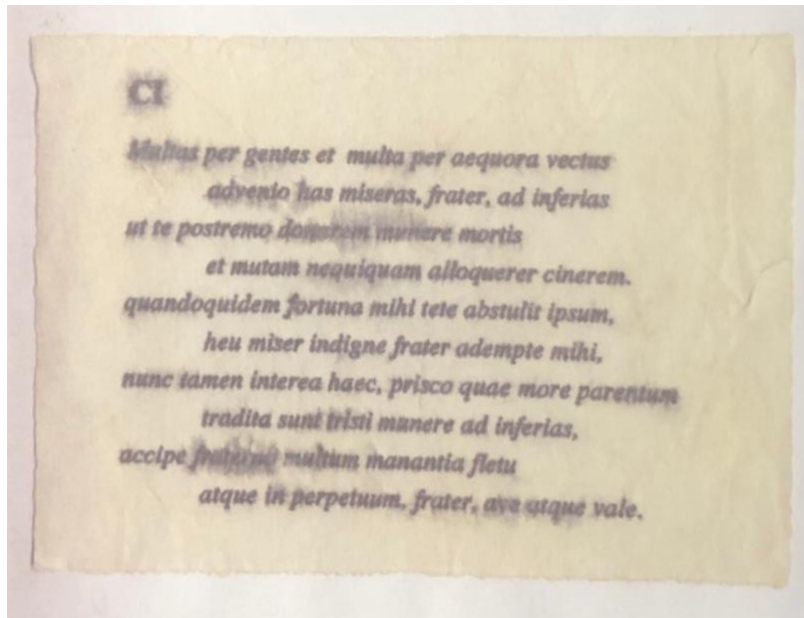


Figure 9. Image of facsimile of Catullus's poem 101

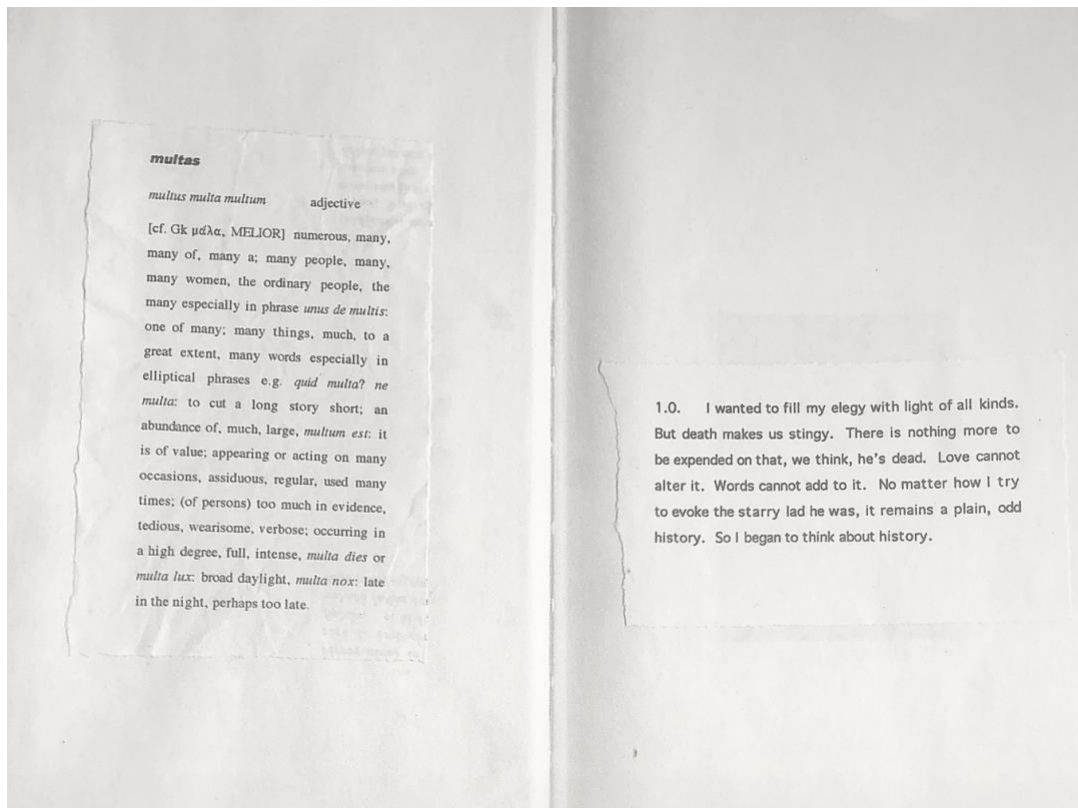


Figure 10. Image of Nox's first lexical entry (*multas*) and short talk (1.0).

Carson's unique essayistic take on the prose poem that she first displayed in *Short Talks* (1992), introducing conventional elegiac themes of presence and absence as well as their commonly associated metaphors (i.e., life is light, death is darkness), which consistently appear throughout *Nox*. Here, Carson also likens the discourse and mood of elegy to that of history, noting the insufficiency of language ("words") and feelings ("love"), at least in Carson's case, to articulate or express who "he [Michael] was" (*Nox* 1.0). Considering the material-visual qualities of these opening pages, one can observe the three-dimensional effects produced by Currie's particular use of the Xerox machine—shadows running along the inner margins, wrinkles and tears on the pasted documents, beneath the facsimiles, traces of ink and the outline of a photograph—impressions of textual objects glued to each original page's reverse side created by the copy machine intended to mimic the singular, hands-on, and grubby look of Carson's original scrapbook.

In creating exhaustive bilingual translations of all 63 Latin words appearing in Catullus's poem 101 over the course of the entire book, Carson anatomizes poem 101 into its smallest lexical units, annotating each word and its possible English meanings as she does her transcribed telephone conversations with Michael. The repetition of this lexicographical process along the verso pages of the book effectively lays bare Carson's own process of translation, revealing, in the words of Kiene Wurth, "the plurality of meanings of every single word of 101 so as to show that a final result cannot be had" (Wurth 2013: 30). Toward the end of *Nox*, Carson provides three separate reproductions of her translation, which is no doubt affected by her own peculiar relationship with her brother. And although the second reproduction is cut

into smitheries and the third one has been soaked in tea so many times it is entirely illegible, what clearly matters is not the final translation itself, but what is constituted by Carson's repetitive and hands-on, bookish procedures, a sense of personal resolve. As for Carson's "translation" of Michael, whereas each Latin word presents an overflow of possible meanings, evidenced by the accumulation of lexical entries themselves, overwhelming the process of translation, the opposite turns out to be true for Carson's mournful efforts to understand Michael. For it is the *sparsity* of meaningful artifacts and memories at Carson's disposal that diminishes her ability "to evoke the starry lad he [Michael] was" (*Nox* 1.0), not a *surplus* of signs and experiences that would otherwise allow her to interpret and express Michael's character and individuality more fully. No matter how hard Carson tries, Michael "resists" her, "refuses to" fit into her "transactional order" (*Nox* 1.3), but that does not inhibit her from trying. And of course, the same is true with Carson's translation of poem 101.

Although Carson declares no "method" was deployed when compiling her original scrapbook, the manufactured commodity sold by New Directions is highly ordered, even if some of the pages are messy or seem off the cuff. It should go without saying that the physical structure and conventional formatting of the book object itself, like any other medium, determine how as well as what kinds of content can be ordered and delivered on its pages, but Carson develops a strategy for constructing the book as kind of semantic field or constellation of interconnecting artifactual nodes, using Catullus's Latin poem 101 as its underlying organizing principle and bibliographical map. Carson effectively deploys Catullus's poem 101 as

a palimpsest, with its 63 Latin words and 10-line elegiac couplets determining the arrangement and order of *Nox*'s discourse and textual artifacts. As we have already said, the lexical entries run along the verso side of the book, from beginning to end. Their length can run anywhere from a couple lines to two pages. The textual objects displayed on the recto side of the book are primarily Carson's "talks," short essayistic prose poems that integrate scholarly and personal reflections aided by the lateral movement of imaginative and figurative discourse. These talks are numbered into ten sections, each extending across multiple pages, corresponding to the ten lines of Catullus's poem 101. Furthermore, the 63 lexical entries pasted to the verso pages are collocated with the numbered talks so that they become grouped into 10 larger sections corresponding to their designated line from poem 101. In other words, as the reader progresses through the lexical entries corresponding to each individual line in poem 101 they will have read approximately one of Carson's 10 prose poems or short talks. There are minor asymmetries here and there, Carson does not strictly enforce this structural constraint to the point of producing a perfect 1:1 ratio between Catullus's poem 101 and *Nox*, but it is clearly a "self-imposed" "supplementary rule" (Baetens 2012: 115), making it difficult to accept the notion that *Nox* does not employ any method. Each page of *Nox* is unique, yes, but they are ordered into larger patterns of organization that operate according to discernable logics of intertextuality, collocation, cataloguing, and narrative sequence.

With the lexical entries, Carson catalogues virtually every possible English sense to each Latin word taken from the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (*OLD*), as well as example phrases in both English and Latin, the latter often quoted from well-known

Latin texts (Wachtel 2014). *Nox*'s lexical entries, taken as a whole, effectively produce a bilingual lexicon of Catullus's poem 101, opening up many possible chains of association by virtue of each word's polysemic status. It is not clear whether Carson memorized these entries in her copying and recitation of them, as she explicitly says she does with other texts she has copied (*Nox* 8.1), but the repetition of images and phrases present in them invite mnemonic techniques of association. Importantly, the recurrence of the word "night," "*nox*," or one of its Latin declensions at the end of most entries (e.g., *nocte*, *noctem*, *noctescit*, *nocti*, *noctis*, *noctium*, and *noctuabunda*), reveals how Carson deliberately manipulates them, adding more night or darkness to them, extending her book's elegiac mood and nighttime atmosphere into the lexical selection process for translating Catullus's poem 101.⁵⁸ In their digression from what is otherwise conventional bilingual lexicographical discourse, something arguably like a voice appears, in the dark, like a character from a Samuel Beckett play, to speak to us about silence and darkness and nothingness. In such moments, the lexicographical discourse becomes epideictic, resembling the aphoristic qualities of poetic fragments in the tradition of Sappho, and to a less extent, Rimbaud. Given the elegiac context of *Nox*, one could argue that these apostrophic calls to "night" (or "*nox*") temporarily recast the book's lexicographical discourse into something resembling the ritual of lyric.

⁵⁸ In her interview with Wachtel, Carson says that "the lexical entries are drawn from the lexicon but a bit fiddled with. . . . I manipulate them to put in more *nox*" (Wachtel 2014). Carson does not, however, add "*nox*" (or "night") to all of her entries. When Wachtel points out that "*nox*" does not appear in the entry for "*frater*" ("brother"), Carson says, "I couldn't add to that one. It didn't seem respectable, or fair. And [it was] a way of putting the boundaries around him that he wanted put there. He wasn't noble, didn't want to be noble, and *frater* is an impersonal word for that" (Wachtel 2014).

Carson's prose poems or short talks featured on the book's recto pages, as we have already stated, are enumerated to parallel Catullus's 10-line lyrical poem, but each of the 10 recto sections is also subdivided into additional units following a standard decimal outline (e.g., 1.0-10.3). Reminiscent of bibliographic classification systems as well as scholarly treatises, in the absence of page numbers *Nox*'s outline offers readers a means of more easily retrieving artifacts and narrative threads, a numerical finding aid of sorts that is functionally equivalent to chapter sections, but that also shares a likeness with the numerical ordering of dossiers, case files, tables, figures, and charts. Joan Fleming writes that the decimal outline of the recto sections "suggests an almost scientific ordering of the evidence at hand" (Fleming 2016: 78). This is a bit of an understatement on Fleming's part, for Carson's careful sequencing of objects, in all of its intertextual complexity, is clearly systematic. If the lexicographical discourse at times steps into a more poetic register to voice *Nox*'s elegiac themes, Carson's prose poems, as John Rosenwald points out, are frequently "epigrammatic" (Rosenwald 2011: 47). There is obviously a narrative being pieced together across the book's many prose poems, albeit a rather incomplete and gappy one, having to do with Carson's coming to terms with the loss of her brother, but Carson is her most evocative and enchanting during these "epigrammatic" moments, where she distills wisdom gathered from her archival procedures into memorable aphorisms about grief, history, elegy, translation, and ultimately the limits of subjectivity. These two elements—the lyrical fragments sprinkled into *Nox*'s lexical entries and the aphorisms found in many of Carson's prose poems—represent some of *Nox*'s most epideictic qualities, connecting Carson's experimental book-archive to

poetic and rhetorical traditions, but there are also procedures in *Nox* which are more closely associated with scrapbook aesthetics and the visual arts.

Placed alongside *Nox*'s lexical entries and prose poems, usually on the book's recto, are approximately 30 photographs. Some are old family photos taken by Carson's parents from the 1950s and 1960s, but most of them are photos taken by Michael as an adult, which he developed himself, that were given to Carson by Michael's widow when she travelled to Copenhagen (*Nox* 3.2). Although Michael's shadow appears in some of these photographs, none of them are of him or other people, they are images of individual objects and landscapes (e.g., a chair, a shed, a tree, a sidewalk, the sea, a field, an empty swing, some stairs, a wall), displaying more absence than presence, their negative space and isolation complementing *Nox*'s elegiac themes. Carson rarely comments on any of the photos directly, instead choosing to collocate them in ways that invite correspondence with the rest of the objects in her book-archive. In this context, as Tatiani Rapatzikou observes, "significance in *Nox* is not to be found in the story but in its traces it leaves behind: in the elliptical or fragmentary pieces of information that readers can combine and pattern in multiple ways by their own tactile and cognitive actions" (Rapatzikou 2017: 58). Furthermore, we do not know the precise number of photographs because Carson has physically altered the majority of them, cutting them into rectangular strips, squares, and other shapes, writing and drawing over them, stapling them together, and distributing them across the book's pages obscuring their original material, representational, and indexical qualities. Carson's purpose in performing these procedures, of cutting up and collaging photographs, is functionally equivalent

to that of Carson's dissection of Catullus's poem 101. No longer bound to a specific context of use, each Latin word becomes divorced from its intentionality within Catullus's poem. Something similar happens as a result of her treatment of these photographs. Not knowing precisely when and where they were taken, under what circumstances they were taken, why, if at all, they possess any salience, severely limits what readers can say about them. These photographs, as Gibbons writes, remain "obscure" and "personal," their "exact details inaccessible to readers" (Gibbons 2013: 184). Consequently, the reader's "examination and scrutiny" of the book, their "search for narrative connection or resonant phrases," becomes so strenuous that the reader's experience of the book "maps onto Carson's own quest for emotional appeasement" (Gibbons 2013: 186). Carson "forces readers into arduous interpretation," inviting readers to experience similar interpretive difficulties Carson did while composing her grief-work (Gibbons 2013: 186). By virtue of the placement of the photographs in an aesthetic object, they are evocative and invite readers to uncover their private meanings, but they are ultimately images of nothing, suggesting little intentionality on behalf of the photographer. The surplus of linguistic meaning represented by the lexical entries that stalls Carson's translation process, and the scarcity of extractible knowledge available in the photographs, demonstrates how having too much information can have the same immobilizing effect as having too little information. By "pulling apart the material evidence of Michael's life," writes Fleming, Carson is able to express "her anxiety about the paucity of her understanding of her brother" (Fleming 2016: 74). The same can be said of Carson's dissection of Catullus's poem 101 into its smallest lexical units.

In addition to lexical entries, prose poems, and photographs, there are additional types of textual artifacts and ephemera reproduced on *Nox*'s pages, including one-line poetic fragments, charcoal drawings and imprints, abstract paintings, doodles, conversation transcripts, envelopes, stamps, and a handwritten letter from Michael to their mother. As with many of the photographs, all of these artifacts show signs of having been torn or cut from a larger textual object and remain mostly ambiguous, but nonetheless correspond, however obliquely, with something written in a nearby prose poem or lexical entry. Each individual textual object in *Nox*, from Carson's lexical entries for poem 101 to her numerically outlined prose poems, from the scattered and cut up photographs to the single line poetic fragments, presents ontological instabilities and epistemological gaps along with the potential to generate and structure little bits of knowledge, signification, and beauty. Each textual object works to propel Carson's grief-work from its unexpected beginning to its inevitable end, establishing a constellation of interrelating and purposeful artifacts along in the process. While Carson clearly structures her book to closely follow the lexicon and versification of Catullus's Latin poem 101, the accumulation, listing, collaging, and numbering of words, objects and poems inside the book transforms the book as object into an archival space where material, aesthetic, and symbolic relationships are able to be generated in and among the things that are archived. Carson does not merely "preserve memories in a box," as Linkis correctly points out, but nor does Carson simply "perform memory by turning the book into a thing" either (Linkis 2019: 168). Carson's treatment of the things she constructs, compiles, and arranges in her book not only produces new things—with the book itself ultimately being *the* thing—but

relationships (and memories) between things, relationships that are not simply remembered or staged but originate from Carson's archival procedures. *Nox's* "bookishness," writes Plate, is "about being and relationality," that is, "interpersonal relations, the relations among things, and those between people and things" (Plate 2015: 97).

Listing, "a form of collecting" (Gass 1985: 120) and one of the ways Carson orders and arranges her things across *Nox's* pages, has always had a place in poetry going back to Homer's epic catalogue of ships in Book II of his *Iliad*, but similarly long lists also appear in the poetry of Chaucer, Milton, and Whitman, and fiction writers, including Joyce, Borges, Sorrentino, and Danielewski are also known for their unusual acts of listing. According to Robert Belknap, a list "is simultaneously the sum of its parts and the individual parts themselves," with each part or unit "possess[ing] an individual significance but also a specific meaning by virtue of its membership with other units in the compilation" (Belknap 2004: 15). Lists are essentially framing devices and structural schemas that foreground relationships among the individual parts that are listed and an entire list itself. But because of the way lists can disengage words from the narrative generating possibility of syntax, prototypical lists are typically nonnarrative (e.g., see McHale 1987, Alber 2016, Richardson 2016, Young 2017).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Here is Belknap's full definition of the list: "a list is simultaneously the sum of its parts and the individual parts themselves. By accretion, the separate units cohere to fulfill some function as a combined whole, and by discontinuity the individuality of each unit is maintained as a particular instance, a particular attribute, a particular object or person. Like the conjunction *and*, the list joins and separates at the same time. Each unit in a list possesses an individual significance but also a specific meaning by virtue of its membership with other units in the compilation" (Belknap 2004: 15). Belknap's definition is comprehensive, but it tends to overlook how literary lists often

While the lexical entries in *Nox* are obviously nonnarrative, the narrative bits presented in the prose poems, as well as the (auto)biographical information scattered across the fragments, transcripts, and photographs, inform the reader's understanding of what Carson is attempting to accomplish with these lexical entries. Prose poems 1.3 and 7.1 (discussed in the next section) even offer readers an interpretive schema for making sense of Carson's lexicographical discourse, which doubles as a method for interpreting Carson's efforts to understand her brother Michael as an object of translation. In other words, the individual units or parts of Carson's lists, broadly construed, interact with and comment upon one another, instantiating the phenomenon of what Werner Wolf calls "metareference," "a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a 'metalevel', within an artefact or performance," a form of metacommentary that extends from the "artefact to the entire system of the media" (Wolf 2009: 31). As a work of what Starre calls "metamedia," *Nox* "uses specific devices," list-making, collage, collocation, metaphor, metonymy, and xeroxing, "to reflexively engage with the specific medium to which it is affixed" (Starre 2015: 8).⁶⁰ In this context, Linkis argues *Nox* not only

disengage words from syntax which affects the possibility for narrative and world building (McHale 1987: 153). Syntax is the fundamental linguistic pattern needed for representing and sequencing causally related events, and thus, as Jan Alber notes, "control[s] the projection of worlds" (Alber 2016: 345). Brian Richardson echoes this point when he claims the "nonnarrative" function of literary lists "nearly always force[s] a break in the transmission of the narrative proper" foregrounding the "essential otherness" of lists (Richardson 2016: 328). Liam Young also echoes this point when he claims that lists typically lack a "narrative function" precisely because they do not deploy the "conventions" of "prose and syntax" (Young 2017: 27).

⁶⁰ In general, most contemporary book-archives are works of metamedia because they typically incorporate the materiality of the book medium into their expressive possibilities, including the projection of worlds.

presents Carson's attempts to remember her brother, but "'remembers' at a media level" as well, "exposing its own story, from original codex scrapbook to the published leporello in the box" (Linkis 2019: 152).

While we can construe *Nox*'s collage and list-making devices, as well as the visual effects produced by the Currie and Carson's particular use of xerox machine, as instantiating various forms of self-referentiality, because every artifact possesses a discernable relation to every other artifact, no matter how distant or ambiguous that relation may be, we can also observe how *Nox* as a whole resembles the structure of what are called *relational databases*. According to Hayles, the two central characteristics of any relational database are the "construction of relations" among a database's "different attributes" and a self-referential logic known as "self-description" (Hayles 2012: 177). Similarly to how Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) lists historical data along the inner margins of the book corresponding to the book's two intersecting and numerically constrained bidirectional narratives to produce a kind of self-reflexive machine, *Nox* imposes a whole host of constraints on itself—lexical, intertextual, enumerative, artifactual, material—aspiring to be a "formally closed logical system" (Hayles 2012: 177). *Nox*'s logical system is highly associative and is no doubt epistemically depleted due to its limitation of "raw materials," but its self-reflexivity, the way that it is both Carson's elegy and the construction of that elegy laid bare, transcends the conventional usage of the book as merely a commodity into something authentic and personal, even if Carson believes she fills it with more "darkness" than "light" (*Nox* 1.0).

3. Lateral Poetics and Archival Tropes

In Carson's opening prose poem, which begins with, "I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds," and ends with, "So I began to think about history" (*Nox* 1.0, see Figure 3), she not only implies that "elegy" and "history" are kin, two kinds of knowing that rely on the tools of narrative, she signals to readers the kind of *lateral thinking* and creative procedures she will follow for the rest of the book. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "lateral thinking" is "a way of thinking which seeks the solution to intractable problems through unconventional or seemingly illogical methods" (*OED*). The first recorded usage of the term is by Dr. Edward de Bono in a 1966 *London Life* article, where de Bono divides thinking into two basic methods, vertical thinking and lateral thinking. Vertical thinking uses "the processes of logic, the traditional-historical method," whereas lateral thinking "involves disrupting an apparent sequence and arriving at the solution from another angle" (*OED*). Carson's two primary activities, translating Catullus's poem 101 and grieving/understanding her brother, both laid bare by *Nox*'s archival poetics, are framed as "intractable problems" requiring "unconventional" methods to solve. The structure of *Nox*, Carson's arrangement of objects, clearly "disrupts" any possibility of conventional causal-logical "sequencing" as well. Even though *Nox* is invested in history and elegy as ways of knowing things and people outside or that existed prior to the self, things that "you yourself have survived" (*Nox* 1.1), Carson's methods are primarily lateral, indirect, metaphorical, figurative, or relational, relying on the horizontal structure of the book, especially the structure of bilingual books, where the verso pages are in one

language, the recto pages in another, requiring readers to oscillate back and forth, page to page, language to language, performing the act of translation.⁶¹

Carson's understanding of and approach to the study and writing of history is largely informed by her lifelong interest in Ancient Greek and Latin literature. As a trained classicist and translator of Ancient Greek and Latin poetry and drama, when Carson says her initial attempt "to fill [her] elegy with light" led her "to think about history," she is referring to what she has learned about history from the writings of Herodotus, but also Hekataois, Plutarch, Pindar, the Bible, and of course Catullus. Indeed, if there is an intertext in *Nox* that is comparable in importance to Catullus's poem 101, it is Herodotus's *Histories*.

In Book IV of *Histories*, which Carson references twice in *Nox*, Herodotus offers a brief history of the Scythian people, in part reconstructed from his own travels through the region. The Scythians, who are thought to be the ancestors of Genghis Kahn, were superior warriors, but illiterate nomads, thus obtaining certain information from them proved difficult for Herodotus. At one point, while traveling through Exampaeus, a region in Scythia, Herodotus encounters a group of Scythians who, when he asks them if they know the size of their population, respond by pointing to an enormous bronze bowl made entirely of molten arrowheads. According to Herodotus, the Scythian king Ariantes

⁶¹ In her interview with Wachtel, Carson says the structure of *Nox* "probably" derives "from the structure of the bilingual translation," where the "left-hand-page [is in] Greek or Latin," the "right-hand-page [in] English" (Wachtel 2014). As someone who began reading such books early in life, Carson says, "you get used to thinking in the little channel in between the two languages where the perfect language exists" (Wachtel 2014).

wanted to know how many Scythians there were, so he issued a proclamation that every Scythian was to bring a single arrowhead, and that anyone who failed to do so would be put to death. A huge quantity of arrowheads were brought, and the king decided to use them to construct a monument for posterity. So he used them to make this bronze vessel, and he chose this place Exampaeus to be its site. That is what I heard about the size of the Scythian population. (Herodotus 2008: 262-263)⁶²

Requiring every Scythian to submit an arrowhead upon pain of death may have been an effective way of controlling and commemorating the Scythian people, but it is surely not an effective way of documenting population size. What is fascinating about this anecdote, however, is the Scythian's response and the incompatibility between their understanding of number and Herodotus's. First of all, the Scythians do not respond with speech but in bodily gesture, pointing to an enormous inanimate object. When asked a concrete question, although the Scythian's point to a concrete object, the bowl becomes an abstraction, unable to account for the quantitative nature of Herodotus's query. Importantly, the Scythian's gesture bestows the bowl with metonymical qualities—each arrow effectively stands in for a person, the bowl stands in for the entire population—but the quantity of the whole remains inaccessible, for there is no numerical record inscribed on the bowl itself. King Ariantas's bowl was

⁶² To provide readers a clearer sense of the bowl's enormity, Herodotus writes that it's "six times as big as the bowl" built by Pausanias, "easily holds six hundred amphoras of liquid," and is "six fingers thick" (262). One amphora, the unit of measurement for liquids in Ancient Rome, equals approximately 26 metric liters, making the commemorate bowl at Exampaeus capable of holding roughly 15,000 liters, enough to fill a 550 square-foot room. Obviously, none of these measurements help approximate the size of the Scythian population, but the bowl was likely never constructed as a means for measuring the population to begin with, at least not in any technical sense.

not a ledger, but it was certainly constructed to serve mnemonic purposes. As Herodotus puts it, the bowl was built as a “monument for posterity,” likely to symbolize the Scythian’s military might. As an act of commemoration, the bowl was likely designed for future Scythians to admire as part of their cultural inheritance and legacy. What Herodotus’s anecdote ultimately highlights is how the Scythian’s response simultaneously answers and fails to answer Herodotus’s question, depending on which side of the exchange one is on.⁶³

For Carson, the story of the Scythian bowl epitomizes how “history,” the “process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming,” often “produces no clear or helpful account” of things, and can be “at once concrete and indecipherable” (Nox 1.3). The enormous bowl stands before Herodotus but the actual number of the Scythian population the bowl is meant to memorialize is inaccessible. By various turns of phrase, as Carson is prone to doing, what she first refers to as the “something that facts lack,” in this case the Scythian population which the bowl instantiates, the parts of history that “cannot be avoided” or “got round,” is then figured in terms of what Carson calls “bits of muteness” (Nox 1.3). These “bits of muteness” are what historians inevitably “collect,” they are the epistemological gaps of history that only become present when their absence is detected, and which forever tantalize the historian with their “overtakelessness” (Nox 1.3). But for Carson, it is not

⁶³ There is, however, another way of interpreting this anecdote, which is Herodotus’s failed attempt at determining the Scythian population was a matter of *translation*, not a matter of record keeping. We know that Herodotus most likely only spoke Greek and the presence of translators along his travels as recorded in *The Histories* is quite limited. In other words, when asked the size of their population the Scythians may have been responding to an entirely different question than the one Herodotus had intended. This interpretation frames this anecdote less in terms of commemoration and record keeping than in terms of miscommunication resulting from poor translation.

only the silence of these gaps that makes them perceptible, as one might expect given their “muteness,” it is also their “fundamental opacity,” an opacity Carson compares to a “human being” who “likes to show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding” (*Nox* 1.3). What begins as a vocal deficiency (“muteness”), is refigured in terms of a visual deception (“opacity”). As Carson puts it, “I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me. He refuses to be ‘cooked’ (a modern historian might say) in my transactional order” (*Nox* 1.3).⁶⁴ Although the Scythian bowl cannot convey the numerical data it embodies, Herodotus’s anecdote nonetheless frames how readers of his book will remember the Scythian people. A similar relationship exists, we are invited to believe, between *Nox* the object and Michael the individual. Carson’s elegy cannot encapsulate all that Michael was, and it likely provides more questions than answers, but it still embodies memorable traces of him, meant to be passed on and contemplated by future generations.

Carson’s second reference to the Scythian bowl appears at the very end of prose poem 7.1, one of the longest and most elucidating commentaries in all of *Nox* outlining the lateral thought process by which Carson came up with her lexical procedure for translating poem 101 and how it informs or even parallels Carson’s bookish procedures for inquiring into the life of her brother Michael. Carson begins this prose poem with a discussion of Catullus’s poem 101, the only time she ever

⁶⁴ Carson’s hiding-in-plain-sight notion of “truth” in this particular context likens her object of study to a kind a reluctant exhibitionist, with the historian acting as a kind of voyeur.

explicitly mentions it in all of *Nox*,⁶⁵ and then by various turns of phrase comes to compare the process of knowing another person to that of translating a poem.

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 his brother except his death. Catullus appears to have traveled from Verona to Asia Minor to stand at his 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....I never arrived at a translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But 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. (7.1)

Reading prose poem 7.1 in light of what we already know about Carson's travels to Denmark, further implies a parallelism is being drawn between Catullus and Carson, how *Nox* is meant to operate as a kind of multimodal rewrite or hypermediated update of poem 101, evoking Plate and Rose's sense of "rewriting" as a form of "cultural remembrance" or "memory-work" (Plate and Rose 2013: 613). Michael fled Canada in 1978, never to be seen again by any of his biological family before he died in 2000. Carson misses the funeral as well as Michael's widow's spreading of his ashes into

⁶⁵ *Nox* is not the first instance where Carson attempts to translate poem 101, but it appears to be the first place where she explicitly expresses her admiration for it. In *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), there is a series of Catullus inspired poems, perhaps translations, featured under the heading "CATULLUS: CARMINA" (38-45).

the Baltic (*Nox* 5.6). Several weeks after Michael's death, upon receiving word from Michael's widow that he had died, Carson flies to Copenhagen (*Nox* 2.2, 3.2). Neither Catullus nor Carson, in other words, were present when their brothers died, and they both had to travel great distances to the site of their brother's death. But whereas Catullus may have "recited" his "elegy" at his brother's "grave," because there is no "stone" for Michael (*Nox* 5.6), *Nox* effectively functions as his gravestone and epitaph. Carson's accordion book, after all, is entombed in a coffin-shaped box.

The lateral progression of Carson's discourse is on full display in prose poem 7.1. Carson begins with what she knows about Catullus's brother, drawing comparisons between her and the Latin poet, soon transitioning to discussing her own attempts at translating the poem over many years, noting its difficulties and her own dissatisfaction. But although Carson never "arrived at the translation [she] would have liked to of poem 101," she still gains a number of insights along the way. As Carson's most recent attempt at translating the poem, *Nox* lays bare these insights, producing and representing them simultaneously through the process of its construction. What Carson says she learned about translation from attempting to translate poem 101 in the context of her brother's recent death, is presented in the form of an extended, mixed multimodal metaphor with Michael eventually becoming the central target. First, Carson figures "translation," the process of translating an ancient Latin poem into a modern English poem, in terms of "a room," concretizing an abstract and dynamic process into a physically demarcated space. That this room is "not exactly an unknown room," suggests familiarity with the room, and by extension familiarity with the process of translating poem 101. Carson then likens the activity of

translating to groping “for the light switch” inside this room, an activity that apparently “never ends”. In Carson’s conceptual metaphor, “translating a poem,” the subject, is the *target* domain, and “groping for a light switch in a room,” the image constructed for understanding the subject, is the source domain. Now, as if this metaphor for literary translation isn’t odd enough, Carson abruptly replaces the target domain from “translating a poem” with “translating a person,” holding onto the source domain of “groping for a light switch in a room.” When Carson writes “I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end,” not only does she replace the image of “groping for a light switch/word” with “groping for a light switch/Michael,” both activities are framed as endless. That the image of the source domain for both metaphors is a *dark* room (the light switch is presumably off), not only further cements “nox” (read: night, darkness, absence, death, the unknown) as the book’s central trope, hence the title, Carson is basically telling readers that she is working *in the dark*.

When readers turn to the following page from prose poem 7.1, they find the second lexical entry for “*frater*,” Latin for brother, pasted on top of a partially visible photograph (Figure 11). The only thing discernable in the photograph is a shadow, most likely the top portion of a human figure, presumably Michael’s, the taker of the photograph. Placed on top of the lexical entry is a small white rectangular box, presumably cut from the same source photograph as the one that lies beneath given its similar shade of grey. Considering what this collage immediately follows, the small photographic clipping is not randomly placed here, it is likely meant to represent a light switch. Furthermore, given the content and composition of the overlapping



Figure 11. Lexical entry and collage for *frater* (Nox 7.1).

textual objects, readers are invited to view Carson's brother Michael as a kind of shadow figure, lurking in the dark, existing beyond language. And just as there is no English translation provided for this entry, no light switch, as it were (there is, of course, an entry provided for the first entry for *frater*), perpetually fading in the background, lingering in the traces of shadows, Michael seems to escape the light of Carson's groping and prowling. As Carson puts it, "Prowling the meaning of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch" (Nox 7.1). And yet, Carson continues to prowl, filling up her scrapbook with lexical entries, ruminations, and the material fragments of Michael's life, for as Meghan O'Rourke reminds us in her review of *Nox*, "a mourner is always searching for traces of the lost one" (O'Rourke 2010). The cathartic affect that comes from repeatedly filling up the pages of her grief-work provides Carson, one assumes, a sense of "psychic renewal" (Fleming 2016: 65).

In the final sections of prose poem 7.1, distributed across multiple pages of the book and surrounded by poetic fragments and innumerable paper and photographic clippings, Carson provides her second reference to the Scythian bowl. This reference is accompanied by commentary, however terse and oblique, on *Nox*'s verso pages, implying that Carson's lexical procedure is in part derived as a response to Herodotus's anecdote.

What if you made a collection of lexical entries, as someone who is asked to come up with a number for the population of the Skythians might point to the bowl at Exampaia. [next recto] In one sense it is a room I can never leave, perhaps dreadful for that. At the same time, a place composed entirely of entries. (*Nox* 7.1)

First, Carson compares her process for translating Catullus's poem 101, particularly the exhaustive bilingual translations she produces for each word of the poem, with the response the Scythians provide Herodotus when he asks them their population, that of pointing to an enormous bowl. This is a rather cryptic association Carson is drawing, but that seems to be the point, for just as the population size of the Scythians is irretrievable through the bowl, so too is the "deep festivity" of Catullus's "diction" once it has been translated (*Nox* 7.1). In both cases, something has become forever lost or indiscernible once it has been physically altered from its original form, whether that be a collection of molten arrows shaped into a bowl or a poem's authenticity once it's been translated into a different language. Once this peculiar metaphor takes shape, readers are taken back to "a room," the primary word-image of the mixed metaphor discussed earlier, which Carson now says she "can never leave."

That this “room,” now “composed entirely of entries,” is described in an adjacent poetic fragment as “astonishing,” negating its initial description as “dreadful,” suggests a kind of Joycean epiphany has occurred, harking back to Carson’s initial reflections on Herodotus in prose poem 1.3. “Herodotus is an historian who trains you as you read,” who coaxes readers into being “amazed at the strange things people do,” especially the “asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming” process of “history,” because it often “produces no clear or helpful account,” such as when the Scythians “point to a bowl” when asked the number of their “population” (*Nox* 1.3).

Carson, like Herodotus, trains her readers how to read *Nox*. The kinds of figural maneuvering Carson requires of us to effectively navigate the lateral discourse of her multimodal and often opaque book-archive, teaches us that a collection of raw materials can generate into a purposeful network of textual artifacts, that textual objects can function as windows into other worlds, indexing the life and times of others. Essentially, Carson plants a series of metaphors, which warp and weft through and across the pages of the book, which are then formalized into Carson’s hands-on archival procedures. In this context, Gibbons claims Carson mobilizes a network of “conventional conceptual metaphors” (Gibbons 2013: 186). Commenting upon prose poem 1.0 (Figure 3 above), Gibbons argues that Carson’s “negation” of the poem’s initial “wish fulfillment” (“I wanted to fill my elegy with light”) first implied by the conjunction “but,” is followed by “semantic negation (death, nothing, dead)” and “syntactic negation (the repetition of ‘cannot’),” establishing “death” as an opposite of “light” and thus constructs two conceptual metaphors, “LIGHT IS LIFE” and “DEATH

IS DARKNESS” (Gibbons 2013: 183). Carson goes on to extend these metaphors, Gibbons observes, to produce two more, “LIFE IS PRESENCE” and “DEATH IS ABSENCE” (Gibbons 2013: 184-85). Gibbons adds that the “structure and reading experience” of *Nox* is suggestive of another conceptual metaphor, “GRIEF IS A JOURNEY,” and when we consider Carson’s “combination of semiotic modes” in concert with the book’s “unwieldy shape and size” the conceptual metaphor of “EMOTIONS ARE OBJECTS” shows up, “with grief” being perhaps “one of the most difficult to handle” (Gibbons 2013: 186).

Tracking these conceptual metaphors as they develop and interact throughout *Nox* relates Carson’s experimental book-archive to elegiac tradition, shedding light on key tropes Carson employs along her bookish “journey,” but they are not overtly affiliated with Carson’s archival procedures, nor do they incorporate any of the analogies or tropes Carson develops in prose poems 1.3 and 7.1. Arguably the most useful and far reaching explanatory concept or poetic trope to come out of these two prose poems, perhaps even the entire book, is Carson’s conception of “muteness” *à la* Herodotus. Readers will recall from our discussion of prose poem 1.3 that Carson, quipping on Herodotus, refers to the epistemological gaps of history as “bits of muteness,” which historians must inevitably “collect” and ceaselessly “prowl”. But it is not only the auditory silence of these gaps that makes them perceptible, it is also their visual “opacity,” and thus readers are invited to imagine that “room” where Carson prowls for light/words/Michael is not only dark, it is silent, mute. As Carson puts it, “I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me.”

An obscure and ephemeral figure with a “plain, odd history” (1.0), Carson’s brother Michael is often characterized indirectly as mute because of his decades of silence:

(2.2) He wrote only one letter, to my mother, that winter the girl [Hanna] died.

(4.2) She never got an address for him. Indeed during the last seven years of her life he wrote her not a single word.

(5.1) What he needed from me I have no idea.... And when he telephoned me—out of the blue—about a year after our mother died he had nothing to say.

(8.1) Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years) I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them.

Although the word “mute” or “muteness” is not explicitly stated in these examples, Michael’s lack of communication is a kind of muteness, the absence of speech. When we read the telephone “conversations” Carson transcribes from memory next to the “one letter” Michael wrote his mother, it becomes obvious that *death* is the occasion for these writings, which obviously bares its own unique connotations of muteness. In *Nox*, Michael is shown to only break his silence when someone dies. His speech acts, so to speak, can be seen as attempts to fill the absence created by the death of loved ones. The artifacts that convey his words, his letter to his mother and Carson’s transcripts, are not only material traces of Michael’s life, they come be figured as muteness’s opposite. Thus, we should add “discourse” and “muteness” to Gibbons’

inventory of conceptual binaries, associating the former with life, light, and presence, and the latter with darkness, death, and absence.

Toward the end of *Nox*, where the discourse and textual objects become increasingly cut-up, crossed out, and tea soaked, including Carson's translation of poem 101, Carson compares Michael to the Biblical figure of Lazarus, and implicitly, herself, to one of Lazarus's sisters. "More than one person has pointed out to me," writes Carson, "a likeness between my brother and Lazarus" (*Nox* 8.3). Carson does not state who suggested this or what the point of comparison was, but what prose poem 8.4 focusses on is Lazarus's "muteness".

You can think of Lazarus as an example of resurrection or as a person who had to die twice. An historian will take the latter view. I know how Lazarus saw it. He is mute at the famous supper where Mary Magdalene spills spikenard on Christ's feet (John 12). Mute in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16) where, sitting in paradise, he hears a rich man in the flames of hell calling out to him for a drop of water. Mute also through his resurrection. Even in the painting by Giotto, notice the person with raised hands with no mouth (perhaps his sister) placed behind Lazarus to load this space with muteness.

Although it is disputable that the beggar named Lazarus from Luke 16 is the same Lazarus of Bethany who is resurrected in John 11, it is true that the characters named Lazarus in both narratives are "mute". When we read the Parable of the Dishonest Manager that Jesus tells the Pharisees about a rich, powerful man who goes to hell because of his greed, whereas his loyal beggar-servant named Lazarus who goes to

heaven, alongside what is known about Carson's brother Michael, we are invited to consider Michael as a principled man who went to heaven to enjoy the comforts that once belonged to other men. However, what seems to interest Carson most in drawing this comparison are their deaths. As an "historian," readers are led to believe Carson wants us to think Michael was not resurrected but instead died "twice". Parr suggests we read Michael's first (metaphorical) "death" as occurring when he changed his name and fled to Europe to "became someone else, reborn, perhaps into a place where someone could see him" (Parr 2014: 356). Carson seems to confirm this interpretation when she offers the only explicit commentary in all of *Nox* on one of its photographs: "I have a photograph of him....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" (*Nox* 8.2). As for the comparison Carson invites between herself and Lazarus's sister, the woman standing behind Lazarus in Giotto's "Raising of Lazarus," whose "raised hands" and "no mouth" Carson suggests "load this space with muteness," mirrors Carson's own muteness, her lack of communication with Michael, limiting what she can definitively write or say about him.

Whenever Carson "prowls" her "WHO WERE YOU" questions (*Nox* 2.1), she inevitably turns to lesser known figures from ancient texts. We might even say, in light of the analogy between Lazarus and Michael, that Carson construes the act of remembrance, at least in this context, as a kind of resurrection. This seems especially true when we consider Carson's first prose poem about "history" being that moment "when you are asking about something that you realize yourself have survived it, and

so must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself” (*Nox* 1.1). Just as with the analogy between Catullus’s brother and Michael that lingers across the entire book, the analogy between Lazarus and Michael reveals nothing definitive about Michael, but it does reveal *how* Carson contemplates and commemorates him: indirectly, metaphorically, laterally, in relation to other people or characters who are also only knowable through their textual traces and who also happen to be “mute”. Carson’s lateral discourse is mobilized by patterns of intertextual citation, discursivity, etymology, collage, collocation, and figurative substitution. And that which is “mute” is also that which has not been or cannot be textually instantiated. Working from a text-based epistemology, it is unsurprising that Carson concludes, “There is no possibility I can think my way into my brother’s muteness” (*Nox* 8.5). Carson’s methods of knowing Michael (and translating poem 101) are limited to what Lisa Gitelman calls “paper knowledge,” knowledge that is ontologically grounded in the “know-show function” of textual documentation (Gitelman 2014).

In *Nox*, because textual objects tend to *stand in* for people who are absent, including those “words” plastered all over the walls of Carson’s metaphorical translation “room,” Carson employs a series of OBJECTS FOR PEOPLE *metonyms*. Even when Michael is the focus of Carson’s examination, he is typically analyzed indirectly as an intertextual object, mediated by photographs, transcripts, and ancient texts. In this context Plate observes how Michael’s handwritten letter (*Nox* 2.2) “is an authentic document” that “bear[s] the imprint not only of his physical body but also of his emotional state and personality traits, because, according to graphology, much about people’s character, disposition, and attitudes can be derived from the

characteristics, traits, and strokes of their writing” (Plate 2015: 100). As with *House of Leaves*, textual objects in *Nox*, and textual objects more generally, function as material extensions to those who create them or as windows into the characters represented by them. As such, OBJECTS FOR PEOPLE metonyms as well as other kinds of textual oriented metonyms and metaphors often fill the pages of contemporary book-archives. Textual objects provide readers mental access to larger psycho-social complexes, indexing the historical-material conditions of an object’s physical production, as well as its transmission, reception, and handling over time. Given *Nox*’s elegiac context, we might say that Michael haunts Carson’s book like a spectre, his presence never fully detectable, existing as a kind of Derridean “trace” (Derrida 1988), neither present nor absent.⁶⁶ Carson prowls these traces, just as she prowls poem 101, in search of genuine understanding and a translation that is true or authentic to Carson’s particular experience as a sister, translator, and poet.

4. Flickering Moments of Authenticity

On the back of *Nox*’s oyster box, there is a two-sentence quote by Carson. There are no blurbs by friends or critics, no catalogue description by New Directions. Just this: “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” (*Nox*). I have discussed at length how *Nox* commemorates Michael, how Carson “prowls” him indirectly, figuratively, and

⁶⁶ Catullus’s poem 101 also “haunts” *Nox*’s pages, to use a metaphor Matei Calinescu uses in his study on intertextuality. A text that “haunts” you or a text is one that “cannot and will not be forgotten,” that holds “a strong if not mysterious claim over memory, attention, and imagination,” that urges you to “reread [it], to make [it] present in [your] mind again and again” (Calinescu 1993: xi).

intertextually, how she engages with conventional elegiac themes and objectifies both her brother and the experience of grief through her hands-on archival procedures. I have also discussed how *Nox* is a reproduction of Carson's original scrapbook, acknowledging the various steps she and her partner Currie took in transforming the book into a manufacturable commodity. As Carson puts it, *Nox* is "a replica, as close as we could get it." *Nox* is a professional reproduction of a copy of a manipulated one-off scrapbook, with plenty of physical manipulation and xeroxing likely occurring between when Carson initially compiled the book and when New Directions manufactured it for commercial retail. From a Benjaminian perspective, with each "technological" manipulation or "reproduction" performed on the original scrapbook in preparation for its commodification, "the here and now of the original," which for Benjamin "underlies the concept of its authenticity," is simply lost (Benjamin 2008: 21). For Benjamin, authenticity only resides in the originary object; once technological reproduction comes on the scene "the aura" of art—its "quintessence"—is "jeopardized" (Benjamin 2008: 22). That *Nox* is engrossed substantially more in the realm of "ritual" than "politics," further divests Carson's book-archive from Benjamin's "criterion of authenticity" (Benjamin 2008: 25). However, if "the point of reference for attributions of authenticity is located in the aesthetic object itself," as Wolfgang Funk claims, then "reception/attribution" should be "construed as structurally inherent to the aesthetic act of communication," placing the "reader" as the "quintessential constituent of the authenticity of the work in question and not merely its detached adjudicator" (Funk 2015: 65). As such, "authenticity" is not merely a "factual attribute" assigned to objects by an authority,

but an “aesthetic phenomenon” co-constructed during the literary communication that occurs between authors and readers (Funk 2015: 65).

Reading *Nox*, much like reading Bly’s *We Descend*, is an arduous exercise in narrative reconstruction. On the verso pages of the book, Carson deconstructs Catullus’s poem 101 into its smallest lexical units, cataloguing each word’s possible English senses, decontextualizing them from their particular usage in the original poem. Readers are invited to draw connections and parallels between these catalogues and Carson’s larger philosophical project of mourning Michael and translating poem 101, which are deliberately ambiguous, never foregrounded. On the recto pages, Carson shares memorable moments of Michael as well as the material fragments of his life, supplemented by historical musings, drawings, paintings, poetic fragments, telephone transcripts, and the only letter Michael sent to his mother—most of which, like the lexical entries, remains “mute” to readers. The piecemeal challenge Carson bestows to her readers, however, constitutes what Funk calls “authentic narrative” (Funk 2012: 42). For Funk, notable works of contemporary literature attempt to “renegotiate the relationship between experience and its representation in an attempt to truthfully re-enact experience through representation” (Funk 2015: 1). Funk argues that “the effect of authenticity enacted in and through” what he calls “metareferential literature,” is “the result of processes of reconstruction” (Funk 2015: 2). Funk describes this process as a phenomenon that “emerges from an explicit foregrounding not only of the constituents of literary communication,” but their “plotting,” “as the author... forfeits her implicit authority to structure the representation of the story for an explicit stimulation of the readers to (re)create the story and the plot themselves”

(Funk 2012: 42). Although *Nox* presents a very gappy narrative and is arguably more concerned with the aesthetic and cathartic potential of scrapbooking than with storytelling proper, Funk's notion of readerly reconstruction characterizes not only what Carson's multimodal elegy demands of readers, but much of what contemporary book-archives demand us with their heterogenous collections of textual objects. Because the "materials used to make *Nox*," writes Rapatzikou, "only partly authenticate their connection with the author's brother," Carson "encourage[es] readers to attend to how [her] stories are made rather than the source from which they originate" (Rapatzikou 2017: 58). In this context, we should note how Gibbons' observation that the reader's "search for narrative connection or resonant phrases maps onto Carson's own quest for emotional appeasement" (Gibbons 2013: 186), extends to Carson's own processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, which must be mimicked by readers in order for this mapping to take place. It should go without saying, however, that any attempt at such mapping will always produce fuzzy, "muted" results.

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that those instances in *Nox* when Carson's lateral discourse becomes epigrammatic, when the lexical entries sidestep into something resembling lyric, is when Carson is at her most axiomatic, truthful, even authentic. For it is during these moments, which I would argue readers are asked to repeat and remember (just as Carson does with Michael's words), where Carson delivers memorable statements about the world and the limitations of human subjectivity and representation, offering blame and praise, urging readers what to value and believe. "History can be at once concrete and indecipherable," "Prowling

the meaning of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light,” “I came to think of translation as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch,” “Always comforting to assume there is a secret behind what torments you,” “*silentia muta noctis* deep speechlessness of night,” “*similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night,” “*quod fugiens semel hora vexit*: what the transient hour brought once and only once,” “*inmensumne noctis aequor confecimus?* have we made it across the vast plain of night?” Transitory phrases such as these do not merely establish *Nox*’s elegiac mood or provide commentary on Carson’s bookish procedures. They orient the reader toward a set of values and beliefs, exemplifying, I would argue, what Funk calls “flickering moments of authenticity,” moments “where the boundaries of absence and presence, object and subject, feeling and knowledge, the physical and the metaphysical, are obscured” (Funk 2012: 52).

On the final page of *Nox*, Carson provides a translation of poem 101, which I want to suggest is not only one final flicker of authenticity but one that encapsulates all the others (Figure 12). The paper inscribed with the translation has been physically altered to the point of rendering it almost entirely illegible. In this context, Linkis argues Carson “turns the project of translating the past into a demonstration of material distortion or indecipherability.... pointing to a meaning or a content which has been lost in the process” (Linkis 2019: 156). As a bookish experiment, Carson does not merely preserve “memories in a box,” she “perform[s] memory by turning the book into a thing that has... been touched by time and people, and which consequently bears witness to processes of intervention and interaction, mutilation

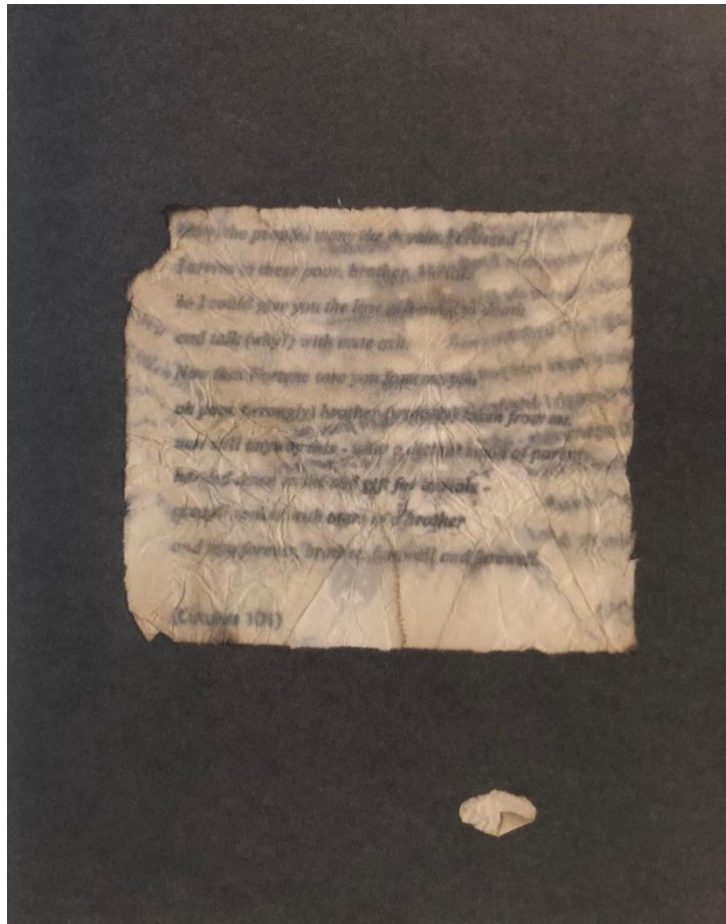


Figure 12. Carson's materially disintegrated translation of poem 101

even" (Linkis 2019: 168). Carson's book functions as a metaphor for the process of human memory (PEOPLE ARE BOOKS, BOOKS ARE BODIES, etc.). Linkis is persuasive here, but she tends to underappreciate how the final page of *Nox* unites Carson's literary, structural, and aesthetic procedures in one final image.

Giving the impression of flickering in and out of existence, an effect produced by typing out the poem multiple times as well as soaking the paper in tea, like Michael, Carson's translation is opaque and "muted," fading into an encroaching dark

background, its presence flickering into absence. It is important to note that this is the only page in all of *Nox* that does not have a white-colored background, making it the darkest page in the book, filled with the least amount of “light” (or the most amount of “*nox*,” depending on one’s perspective). The background color is not so much black as it is dark grey, the color of granite gravestones as well as that of “mute ash” (“*alloquerer ipsum*”), the apostrophic phrase with which Catullus addresses his brother in poem 101. In other words, every major element and device featured in Carson’s grief-book reappears in some abstract way on this last page, capturing one last flicker of light before everything disappears into the abyss of *nox*. The page functions as a visual instantiation of Carson’s metaphorical translation room, which both Carson and the reader depart as this page in Carson’s life is turned and the accordion book is returned to its archival container.

Chapter 5

Beautiful Short Cuts: On Warren Lehrer's *A Life in Books*

A Life in Books is about the relationship between one's life and one's work, how a life writes itself without a plan or map, and how we can form a narrative after the fact, put the pieces of the puzzle together, and hopefully (in Mobley's case) move forward more consciously.

—Warren Lehrer (2015)

1. How to Build a Compendium

A Life in Books: The Rise and Fall of Bleu Mobley, The Long Awaited Memoir and Retrospective Monograph Featuring All 101 of Bleu Mobley's Books (2013), Warren Lehrer's first novel, what he calls "an illuminated novel," is the fictional memoir and retrospective monograph of an American author and bookmaker named Bleu Mobley. Narrated from the confines of a prison cell where Bleu has been pinned up for nearly a year on "contempt-of-court charges" (*ALIB* 361),⁶⁷ *A Life in Books* is Bleu's 102nd and last book, transcribed from audiotapes, compiled and edited by a writer named Warren Lehrer—the real Lehrer's fictional doppelganger.⁶⁸ According

⁶⁷ All citations for *A Life in Books* will be abbreviated as *ALIB*.

⁶⁸ A generally accepted definition of autofiction, "novels that feature a character who shares his/her name with the author" (Worthington 2018: 1), certainly applies to *A Life in Books*, but as with *We Descend*, the fictional Lehrer's connection to the book is as its compiler and editor; he plays no significant role in the storyworld of Bleu's memoir outside of helping him get it published, which Lehrer documents in his only writing in the book (Note From the Editor). While the fictional Lehrer is presumably responsible for collecting and reproducing all of the objects excerpted in the book, as well as transcribing the audio tapes and formatting the book, as a character in the novel he's more or

to Lehrer's introductory note, after listening to Bleu's "recollection and reflection, beginning with his memories of learning how to use the letterpress printer in... junior high school, all the way to his becoming a high profile detainee," he proposed to Bleu an idea for "a book that would be one part Bleu Mobley memoir (based largely on the tapes), and one part retrospective (documenting all of his published books including selected excerpts)" (*ALIB* 4). Bleu agrees to Lehrer's proposal, as well as to being interviewed by him to "fill in a few gaps" (*ALIB* 5). As editor, Lehrer takes "the liberty of weaving together content from the prison tapes with content from [his and Bleu's] taped conversations" in order "to capture the real-time experience that [he] had listening to the prison tapes—of one man, during one night, retracing his life and career and the chain of events that led him to the center of a national literary and political scandal" (*ALIB* 5).

One of Lehrer's goals, then, is to construct a mostly linear narrative progression that would appear as seamless and contiguous as possible, a narrative that would integrate all of its various parts—memoir, excerpts, book reviews, blurbs, and photographs—into a chronological sequence of causally related events. Although readers must oscillate back and forth between Bleu's memoir and these various intertexts, with the excerpts in particular drawing from or parodying a wide range of genres, Lehrer's novel is not disjunctive and disorienting as *We Descend*, *House of Leaves* and *Nox* are. This is because Lehrer employs a set of recurring metonymical

less absent. And while one might pose questions concerning his specific arrangement of the book, one does not need theories of autofiction to proceed with such questions. There are obvious similarities between the flesh-and-blood Warren Lehrer and Bleu Mobley, but inquiries into that matter are more biographical in nature and beyond the scope of this chapter.

devices to connect all of its parts together, what in my title I refer to as aesthetically charged “short cuts,” designed to seamlessly connect everything into a larger conceptual whole. That readers can clearly observe these shortcuts—verbally and visually—is also intentional and plays into some of the larger issues of authenticity discussed later on.

A Life in Books may be Lehrer’s first novel, but Lehrer has been designing artist books and writing concrete literature since the early 1980s, what Lehrer himself refers to as “visual literature.” Lehrer’s earlier work clearly feeds into *A Life in Books* in significant ways. Since the publication of his first two books *Versations* (1980) and *I Mean You Know* (1983), typographic explorations into the poetics of speech and character, Lehrer has coauthored three experimental books with poet and journalist Dennis Bernstein, *French Fries* (1984), *GRRRRHHHH* (1987), and *Five Oceans in a Tea Spoon* (2019), written a quartet of visual biographies collectively referred to as *The Portrait Series* (1995), as well as coauthored with Judith Sloan *Crossing the BLVD* (2003), a multimedia documentary history of 79 people from all over the world who at the time were all living in Queens, New York. Lehrer has also co-written and produced an opera for CD with Harvey Goldman, *The Search for It and Other Pronouns* (1992). Many of Lehrer’s projects have multimedia and/or transmedia components—objects, animations, and stories that readers can engage with online or in actual studio spaces—and most of Lehrer’s work prior to *A Life in Books* documented the lives of real people. *A Life in Books* is Lehrer’s first venture into long form narrative fiction, but Lehrer’s literary toolkit is very much informed by his career as a designer, performer, and documentarian in the oral history tradition.

Some of Bleu's stories from *A Life in Books* have been adapted into short films, but more importantly Lehrer took the 101 book covers he designed for *A Life in Books*, as well as the textual artifacts he produced that became the foundation for the novel (book excerpts, letters, notebooks, flyers, envelopes, newspaper articles, and audiotapes that are "reproduced" in the book), and exhibited them across the U.S. as a retrospective survey of Bleu's extraordinary publishing career. As Lehrer's website states, the travelling exhibition "celebrates the creative output of an American master who, in so many ways, and for so long, helped us better understand our own lives, relationships, institutions, and a half-century of American/global events".⁶⁹ More than simply a fictional memoir, Lehrer's novel is an aesthetic book object that can be read (and looked at) in a number of ways: it's a kind of literary history of contemporary literature, a history of the book industry as well as of American pop culture in the neoliberal period; it's a bildungsroman, a fictional memoir that verges into the realm of autofiction; a satire, a romance, a campus novel; a NYC novel (in part a 9/11 novel as well), and a short-story collection; it is a love song to the book-as-object, a legal defense, a collection of graphic art—all compiled into a single novel. Such textual heterogeneity is a hallmark of the compendium or book-encyclopedic sensibility of many contemporary book-archives—how authors combine and interact a plethora of genres, modes, and mediums in the service of creating an authentic documentary or "bookish" aesthetic (Pressman 2009, 2018).

⁶⁹ Visit warrenlehrer.com for more information on Lehrer's travelling exhibit.

Examining any one or combination of these bookish topics would be productive, for very little scholarship and criticism has been produced on *A Life in Books*, and although I do touch upon many of these topics at some point, I want to begin by examining the underlying structures that make it possible for us to even claim that *A Life in Books* is capable of being all of these things simultaneously. In order for Lehrer to produce a novel concerned with all of these bookish themes and treating them the way he does in the form of a retrospective monograph (i.e., an archive of a single artist), requires an elaborate network of *metonymies* whose logic of contiguity and efficiency provide the necessary mechanisms for doing so. Whereas the footnote is the connecting device in *House of Leaves*, the hyperlink in *We Descend*, Catullus's poem 101 in *Nox*, in *A Life in Books* the device that connects all of its parts is metonymy.

Metonymies exist at every level in Lehrer's novel, from the words and images on the page to the cognitive processes required of readers in imagining the book's many possible textual worlds. When Jessica Helfand tells us that Lehrer's novel "is a vivid kaleidoscopic odyssey that frames one man's life through not one, but one hundred books—and book-jackets" (Helfand 2013), she is referring to the metonymical functions of the novel's visual elements and framing devices. When Steven Heller writes that "Lehrer's 101 cover designs... like the best film title sequences, which establish moods or introduce plotlines... are vehicles by which Lehrer illuminates Mobley's tale of success and failure" (Heller 2013), he is suggesting that Bleu's books, including the excerpts, provide reader's mental access to Bleu's entire creative universe. The best way to accomplish these tasks, Lehrer's

novel would seem to suggest, is through the repetitive deployment and interaction of metonymical devices. One might say that Lehrer has constructed a series of metonymical relationships across the pages of his book as a bibliographic solution to the narrative problems he sets up for himself.

The consistency with which metonymies recur in *A Life in Books* marks them as the novel's "dominant technique" in the Russian Formalist sense of the term. Whether verbal, visual, conceptual, or multimodal, metonymies function as the "focusing component" of the novel, in so far as they "rule, determine, and transform the remaining components," guaranteeing "the integrity of the structure" (Jakobson 1978: 82). Metonymies are constitutive of the many possible meanings produced in Lehrer's novel; they are the glue that binds all of the novel's parts into a coherent whole. Furthermore, whereas novels organized by metonymic principles usually foreground their sequential contiguities *linguistically* with particular details standing in for absent material-spatiotemporal continua and psychosocial complexes (Jakobson 1987; Lodge 1977; McHale 1992), in *A Life in Books* it is the reproduction and interaction of individual textual objects placed in a *multimodal* semiotic system that tends to fulfill these metonymical functions. Readers are invited to imagine possible worlds while reading Bleu's narrative, but they are also invited to imagine possible books based on what can be extrapolated from the novel's numerous intertexts. These activities, I argue, are metonymical in nature. Readers are provided partial information pertaining to fictive objects and are invited to build worlds around those objects, including the actual book-objects themselves, from that partial information. In laying bare the novel's organizing principles, as well as how its numerous

artifactual components are logically, causally, and physically connected, *A Life in Books* foregrounds and to a certain degree exploits the cognitive activities of textual worldbuilding.

2. Why (Multimodal) Metonymy Now?

In analyzing the conditions that underlie the meaning making apparatus of multimodal semiotic objects and structures, one of the central issues, if not *the* central issue, for scholars and researchers has been the analysis of multimodal metaphor. This is unsurprising given that the study of conceptual metaphor theory has been central for cognitive linguists since the early 1980s when the field first began to emerge. As Charles Forceville puts it, “metaphor is central to cognition, since human beings are claimed systematically to understand abstract concepts in terms of concrete phenomena” (Forceville 2009a: 56). From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is defined as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 5). Furthermore, metaphor is considered to be the blending of “two conceptual domains,” where “one [domain] is understood in terms of the other,” where “the logic of the source-domain structure is mapped onto the logic of the target-domain structure” (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 103). Understood as a figure of speech or trope, as is the case within the rhetorical and poetics traditions, metaphor is defined as the association of “two unlike things; the representation of one thing by another” (Murfin and Ray 1998: 210). According to M. S. Silk, in “metaphor, the deviant item or sequence is distinct from the non-deviant sequence in its vicinity terminologically, and the relation between the two terminologies, in whole

or part, is one of analogy, comparison or similarity” (Silk 2003: 124). In other words, metaphors *compare* unlike words, phrases, notions, or objects that do not exist within the same semantic domain; things that are not physically, logically, causally, or terminologically related to one another are made to be similar through such comparisons.

It was only a matter of time before scholars would adjust their focus from the study of verbal metaphors to visual and multimodal metaphors in an age where so many commercial objects are primarily visual, if not multimodal. Forceville provides the following definition of multimodal metaphor: “multimodal metaphors are metaphors whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes” (Forceville 2009b: 24). However, some scholars see this definition as “overly restrictive,” for multimodal metaphors often occur “from the interaction between modes” (Gibbons 2013: 181-182) with the source and/or target domains operating in more than one mode at once. This criticism seems correct. Furthermore, when it comes to analyzing such metaphors in works of multimodal literature, the “reader-user’s performative engagement with the text often plays a crucial role in the emergence of multimodal metaphors” (Gibbons 2013: 182). In other words, multimodal metaphors are not static objects, they “are inherently creative” and “require an adaptation on the part of the reader during the act of reading” (Gibbons 2013: 182).

Jeanette Littlemore suggests that “the most practical way of contrasting metaphor with metonymy is to say that metaphor involves *mapping across domains*” whereas “in metonymy the mapping is thought to take place *within a single domain*”

(Littlemore 2015: 14).⁷⁰ As “a cognitive process,” according to Zoltan Kovecses, metonymy takes “one conceptual element or entity (thing, event, property), the vehicle,” and “provides mental access to another conceptual entity (thing, event, property), the target, within the same frame, domain or idealized cognitive model” (Kovecses 2006: 99). As a figure of speech, metonymy is generally understood as “a trope in which one word is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relationship” (Evans and Martin 1986: 144). As Sebastian Maztner observes, both target and source in metonymy are “encapsulated or at least contained in the semantics of the other one by virtue of their collocatability in ordinary language” (Maztner 2016: 50-51). Another way of putting it is that metonymy operates according to different types of “contiguity” (as opposed to principles of “similarity” like metaphor): referential, linguistic, and conceptual (Peirsman and Geeraerts 2006: 273).

Perhaps the most common metonym is when a PART stands in FOR THE WHOLE (“Nick got a new set of wheels”), but others include THE PRODUCER FOR THE PRODUCT (“She was reading Shakespeare”), THE CONTAINER FOR THE CONTAINED (“the kettle is boiling”), THE CAUSE FOR THE EFFECT (“She is my pride and joy”), THE ACTION FOR THE AGENT (“Crime must be punished”), and A PLACE FOR THOSE IN THAT PLACE (“the White House is panicking”). These are verbal metonymies, but

⁷⁰ Roman Jakobson is the first linguist to point out the essential differences between metaphor and metonymy: “The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate terms for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively” (Jakobson 1987: 109-10).

they have correlates in human cognition and non-verbal expression as well. For instance, when asked to imagine or recall one's hometown, one will likely imagine a familiar street or home, not an entire town. When asked to draw a picture of America, one might draw an American flag or the Statue of Liberty—these drawings would be visual metonymies of America. Metonymies highlight salient or even symbolic aspects of objects and ideas because it is impossible to imagine, for instance, one's entire hometown or draw all of America, thus providing quick mental access to larger objects, spaces and ideas. Being able to access abstract ideas from partial information allows reasoning about things that do not have concrete references such as *America* or *freedom*. Because metonymies can vary across language and cultures, they have a unique function in building and expressing identity. In the context of literature, metonymies allow authors and readers to quickly align perspectives, allowing for efficient communication. As Littlemore puts it, metonymies act “as a kind of shorthand, allowing people to use their shared knowledge of the world to communicate with fewer words [or images] than they would otherwise need” (Littlemore 2015: 5).

The difference between monomodal and multimodal metonymy is that the latter comes about from the interaction of two or more communicative modes (e.g., verbal and pictorial). However, as William Feng points out, “the mappings between the source and target” in multimodal visual metonymies “are not as conventionalized and strong as the lexicalized ones in language, due to the nature of visual semiosis (i.e. visual images lack a clear vocabulary system...),” therefore “metonymy identification in visual images operates at the level of discourse semantics and is

context dependent....The ‘addressee’ [or reader] makes an inference from the visual cues drawing upon his or her cultural knowledge as well as the immediate context of communication” (Feng 2017: 444). Thus, as with multimodal metaphors in works of multimodal literature, the reader’s “performative engagement with the text often plays a crucial role in the emergence of multimodal [metonymies]” (Gibbons 2013: 182).⁷¹

Given that scholars have come to realize that metonymy, and not just metaphor, plays a significant role not only in human thought and language, but across all channels of human communication and artistic expression, there has been increasing interest in visual and multimodal metonymy. Much of this research has taken commercial advertisements as its object of study (Downing and Mujic 2011; Feng 2017), and to a much lesser extent movies (Forceville 2009b), comics (Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014), and children’s literature (Guijarro 2013). The study of visual and multimodal metonymy in experimental works of literature remains even more limited and has typically focused on topics that are adjacent to metonymy specifically, such as *modality* and *indexicality* (Norgaard 2010, 2017, 2019; Gibbons 2012a: 138-140). Modality is a part of the grammar of language that provides speakers choices for characterizing their relation to reality in a marked way. A

⁷¹ Forceville offers the following characteristics of metonymy to encompass all possible communicate modes and not just verbal ones, including their interaction in multimodal compositions: (1) “a metonym consists of a source concept/structure, which via a cue in a communicative mode (language, visuals, music, sound, gesture...) allows the metonym’s addressee to infer the target concept/structure”; (2) “source and target are, in the given context, part of the same conceptual domain”; and (3) “the choice of metonymic source makes salient one or more aspects of the target that otherwise would not, or not as clearly, have been noticeable and thereby makes accessible the target *under a specific perspective*” (Forceville 2009a: 58).

common marker pertains to a speaker's commitment to a given utterance in terms of probability, obligation, or inclination and is typically marked by modal verbs (e.g., hedges and boosters). Modality in the context of visual images and multimodal objects functions on a continuum, with images with high modality appearing to viewers more or less as they would "if we had been there," and images with low modality being "formally stylized...by decrease or exaggeration of...detail, background, depth, light, shadow, tone, and colour" (Norgaard 2017: 474).

Indexicality is a notion derived from Peircean semiotics and is more directly related to conceptions of metonymy, for "metonymic relations are seen as derived from the semiotic principle of indexicality, including relations such as cause and effect, part and whole, container and contained" (Feng 2017: 442). The basic idea of "the index" is that it is a "sign whose meaning springs from some kind of physical or causal relation between the signifier and the signified" (Norgaard 2017: 477).

Indexical meanings constructed from textual objects, especially photographs, in multimodal book-archives obviously carry varying degrees of modality, but they also function as material-textual evidence anchoring them to the real world. As Wolfgang Hallet observes, "photographs, documents and physical objects are regarded as indices of the real, empirical world....they contribute considerably to the construction of the textual world, setting the story in a certain geographically and topographically identifiable space...at a given historical time" (Hallet 2009: 145). It is precisely this indexical function of textual artifacts that Papailas argues is "the hallmark of the archive," for as she puts it, the "retention of the link between a particular document and the original context of its production and use" is what in part

authenticates the document as a historical artifact (Papailias 2005: 16). The indexical quality of textual artifacts, in other words, shares a similarity in its context-referent function to the principles of contiguity and salience that are present in metonymy, but the study of metonymy in multimodal book-archives ultimately asks a different set of questions than those of modality and indexicality. The question of how real an image or document appears in its reproduced form in such books, or whether such objects faithfully index the physical world they depict, may be of importance, especially when issues of authentication are at stake as in the case of *We Descend* and *House of Leaves*. But the function of metonymy, strictly speaking, has less to do with the ontological commitments and “reality affects” (Hansen 2004) associated with modality and indexicality than with how verbal-textual and nonverbal-textual objects, especially when working in combination with one another, can offer readers conceptual shortcuts for imagining absent material-spatiotemporal continua, such as book-objects and narratives, as well as absent psychosocial complexes, such as those of characters in a work of fiction. In the context of experimental book-archives and multimodal literature more generally, metonymies often function in the service of a logic of representational efficiency, communicating mixtures of verbal and non-verbal content with as little communicative effort as possible. As such, metonymy is not only a creative tool employed by interlocutors providing mental access to larger ideas, objects, and spaces, it is a “labor saving device” that shares a degree of functional equivalency with “the gimmick” (Ngai 2017: 466)

Part of what Lehrer is attempting to accomplish in *A Life in Books* is make present to readers an author’s entire career, how Bleu’s personal and professional life

not only shaped the kinds of books he wrote, but how the kinds of books he wrote and the changing shape of the book industry shaped his character and personality. These two strands of events often appear inseparable, recursively feeding into one another in ways that at times become difficult to distinguish cause from effect. This is not to suggest Lehrer presents a 1:1 correspondence between life and art, rather that Lehrer dramatizes their interrelation over time, how *parts* of people an author meets in real life, or *aspects* of events an author witnesses, get folding into his or her fictional creations, illuminating the toing and froing of life and creativity. As such, Lehrer's novel is about the creative process in general, and the creative process of an author in particular, exploring the relationship between the two, emphasizing the work and craft of writing and bookmaking over time. *A Life in Books* suggests we can not only analyze an artist's work in order to discover what his or her life might have been like, but that to a certain extent an artist's work also writes the artist's life. The only feasible way of portraying the life of a prolific author like Blue Mobley in a single book, encapsulating both his life and his work, requires a representational logic of abbreviation that can efficiently convey meaningful and generative information while hopefully not drastically undermining the scale and complexity of the imaginary whole. I argue that the only way to do this kind of representational work in a single book is by constructing a complex network of verbal and non-verbal metonymies.

3. Bleu Mobley's Life in Books: A Metonymy

Immediately following the Editor's Note (cited above) in *A Life in Books*, Lehrer provides a diagram explaining the book's format, its various parts and how

they are arranged on the book's pages (Figure 13). From the diagram we learn that the book consists of mostly memoir, (Bleu's autobiographical narrative spoken into a tape-recorder and transcribed by the editor), but also features book covers (photographs of each of Bleu's book covers), chapters (the book is divided into nine chapters signifying a stage in Bleu's career), articles and letters (facsimiles of articles, letters, and reviews about Bleu's books), catalogue descriptions (abstracts of Bleu's books as they originally appeared in catalogues and advertisements as well as what genre the books were originally classified under in book stores and libraries), publisher and publication dates for each book's first edition, and book excerpts (reproduced excerpts taken directly from 33 of Bleu's 101 published books), which range anywhere from one to eight pages in length.

From the diagram we can observe how virtually every transcription and reproduced object in *A Life in Books* functions as a PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymy. The reproduced photographs of Bleu's books each *stand in for* the physical book object as a whole; they are partial representations that index and provide mental access to each book as an object. The book cover images stand in for some aspect of each book's content, inviting metonymical and/or metaphorical interpretations. Furthermore, each of Bleu's books is reflective of a technological stage in the development of printing and book history, from the scrolls of the ancient world (*ALIB* 113, 272) to the moveable type of letterpress *à la* "Gutenberg" (*ALIB* 18), from experimental *dos-à-dos* books (*ALIB* 30, 39, 61, 66) to repurposed artist's books (*ALIB* 109), from futuristic works of bibliocircuitry (*ALIB* 296) to virtual reality book-installations (*ALIB* 328). As for the snippets reproduced from newspapers and

A NOTE ON THE BOOK FORMAT The approach to putting this book together is inspired by Bleu Mobley's "book composing" techniques, including his idiosyncratic approach to typography, use of pictorial devices, and reproduction of facsimiles.

Memoir

Composed entirely of his own words, Bleu's memoir is a composite of his prison tapes and the one-on-one interviews with Warren Lehrer.

Chapters

A Life In Books is divided into nine chapters.

Book Covers

The books reproduced here are of Bleu's own copies, which he used for public readings, interviews, and scrawling revision ideas. (Whether out of superstition, loyalty, or laziness, Bleu never replaced any of his original author's copies with fresher ones. He also holds onto old clothes, shoes, cars, and friends.)

Sample Page Spread



Catalogue Copy/Genres

The copy used here, in most cases, comes from original catalogues or prospectuses advertising first editions.

Publishers & Pub Dates

The name and location of publisher, and the year of the first edition.

Articles/Letters

When Bleu refers to articles, reviews, or letters, every effort was made to find and reproduce the original.

Book Excerpts

This edition of *A Life In Books* includes text excerpts from more than one-third of Bleu's books. Excerpts can run anywhere from one to eight pages in length. In some instances they are reproduced directly from the original. Most often the text has been reformatted for this book. Some excerpts that were not included in this volume are available at www.alifeinbooks.net (along with other archival materials related to Bleu Mobley and his life in books).

Figure 13. Diagram of text types and formatting in *A Life in Books*.

magazines, these are meant to function as metonymies of entire reviews as well as of the attitude of readers towards Bleu's books. Abstracts provided for each book are metonymies for each book as a whole, and although the 33 excerpts from Bleu's books are not taken from actual books, readers are asked to interpret them as metonymies for each of Bleu's books as well as for pivotal moments in Bleu's life. And given that many of the events narrated in Bleu's memoir index actual historical events, both Bleu's life and his books stand in for or index historical events in the real world too. Even the title of Lehrer's novel is metonymical: Bleu doesn't merely spend his life making books, his books *stand in* for his life (*his life in books*).

Bleu's memoir begins and ends in the confines of a prison cell, but the novel progresses more or less chronologically, charting Bleu's life as a bookmaker and the books he has (co)authored along the way. Beginning at the height of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s when Bleu first learned how to use a letterpress printer as a teenager, and ending during the final year of George W. Bush's second term in 2008 when Bleu is imprisoned for not disclosing his source for a scandal-filled book on the Bush administration, Bleu's memoir highlights memorable world events, often drawn directly from real events such as the assassination of Dr. King and the US invasion of Iraq. Bleu's professional career as a writer is divided into nine chronological phases which correspond to the novel's nine chapters. Chapter 1, "The Invisibles" (18-37), outlines Bleu's beginnings as an amateur writer, journalist, and bookmaker while still in high school. In Chapter 2, "The Sandbox" (38-139), Bleu's most experimental period, he acquires a full-time teaching position, completes his PhD, gets tenure, becomes disillusioned about the academy, and publishes his first bestseller which is

then adapted into a successful Hollywood movie. In Chapter 3, “Yes I Can’t” (140-181), Bleu continues to publish experimental books, but he also turns to writing nonfiction, biography, and self-help books, publishing the latter under the pseudonym of Dr. Sky Jacobs. In Chapters 4 and 5, “Any Means Necessary” (182-215) and “The Factory” (216-251), Bleu moves into children’s literature, animal stories, comics, and flash fiction, and churns out more than 20 Dr. Sky Jacobs’ titles, many of which are bestsellers. Importantly, during this period, Bleu hires several writing assistants and opens up a “factory” reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s NYC studio. In Chapter 6, “With Us or Against Us” (252-281), Bleu becomes disenchanted about “the death of the book,” inspiring him to publish a poetry collection on rolls of toilet paper. In Chapter 7, “Semiotic Octopus” (282-318), Bleu turns to multimedia for his Sky books, designs a coloring book that features infamous photographs of war, circulates a political pamphlet, invents the pseudonym Blane Masters for a series of popular books on economics, and designs two satirical book-objects, one that has a tiny TV installed inside for those who want to look like they are reading, and a Bible that is annotated with tiny “scientific” artifacts. In Chapter 8, “Codex Redux” (319-355), Bleu turns away from writing books in the traditional sense, instead designing bookish toys for children, book-themed apparel, book lamps, and bookish spectacles until he gets the idea of writing *Under the Rug*, the book that lands him in prison. In Chapter 9, “Dawn” (356-377), Bleu publishes a collection of poems written by his fellow prison inmates, his last book, though *A Life in Books* is technically coauthored by Bleu and “Warren Lehrer”.

Lehrer's novel, because it continuously oscillates between Bleu's memoir and excerpts from his life's work, is highly episodic, but the way in which the book is edited, Bleu's memoir always sets up the excerpt that is soon to follow. As such, the reader's encounter with Bleu's books is deliberately framed by the context in which his books were inspired and written. The excerpts are thus always presented as extensions of Bleu's world, contiguous or analogous in some way to his autobiography; they function as metonymies for Bleu's life as well as for the works they are excerpted from, for the excerpt's *raison d'être* as a class of text is its ability to saliently capture *en summa* the larger text from which it is taken. Whether we examine metonymies in the form of verbal expressions, bodily gestures, non-verbal cognitive processes, or multimodal objects, they function as cognitive shortcuts for accessing larger domains of spatial-temporal continua, psycho-social complexes, and textual-material worldness. What follows is a series of close readings of early sections from *A Life in Books* intended to serve as a summation for how Lehrer's entire novel is organized by various kinds of metonymies.

Blue's career as an author and bookmaker may end with him no longer writing books *per se*, but his passion for books nonetheless begins with letterpress printing *à la* Gutenberg, "with lead and wood type" (*ALIB* 18). Long before Bleu became a bestselling author, his journey as writer begins at his school newspaper *The Oracle*, where he published stories under his own column called "The Invisibles"—a bi-weekly column dedicated to telling the stories of local NYC nobodies, the "unsung" (*ALIB* 19) who go unnoticed in everyday life, the *invisibles* among us. The column called "Sarah the Doll Lady" is the only article reproduced in its entirety

(*ALIB* 20-21) and concerns an elderly woman named Sarah who makes and sells dolls on the bench in front of her housing complex. The article concludes with a quote from Sarah:

I'm working on a new doll, but it's going slow. I'm so mixed up with my husband passing and the funeral. I'm the oldest in my family. They're all dying before me. I'm naming the new doll Hairy Harry. That was my husband's name—Harry. Every one of his organs went to pot. Just like his father he had bad organs but a full head of hair to the very end. Whenever someone dies, I try to make a doll in their memory. Even if most people don't buy any, they see the dolls sitting on the bench with me like we're family. It puts a smile on their day and that makes me smile. (*ALIB* 21)

There are multiple metonymies at play here. The dolls which Sarah now makes are modeled on actual people she personally knew before they died, and presumably each doll displays a characteristic feature of these people, as in the case of the Harry doll that is hairy like Harry was. These characteristics are also presumably salient and memorable and come to stand in for the persons they belong to when they are foregrounded in the dolls themselves. In the case of the Harry doll, this trait of “hairiness” is both visual and tactile and would thus be, if it were not merely a fictive object, a multimodal metonymy for Harry. Seeing and touching the doll provides Sarah access to her memories of Harry. Although this doll is obviously not a real empirical object in our world, we can nonetheless observe how the character of Sarah has created a multimodal object in her world whose salient features are metonymies of Harry, thus creating a doll based on a TRAIT FOR PERSON metonymy. Furthermore,

that Sarah believes on-lookers see her and her dolls as a “family” reveals how Sarah essentially conceives of these dolls as stand-ins for the people they represent and thus they function as OBJECTS FOR PEOPLE metonymies as well. Although these metonymies are purely conceptual and exist at the level of the novel’s projected world (as opposed to being verbal or visual metonymies), they nonetheless highlight the creative potential of metonymical thinking for the production of memorable objects.

While the above quotation from “Sarah the Doll Lady” is taken from an entirely reproduced newspaper article, the non-verbal aspects of the excerpt (e.g., the heaviness and size of the type, the color and shape of the reproduced paper) do not play a role in the construction of these metonymies. One could argue that since this is the only excerpt in the novel among the countless “Invisible” columns Bleu must have written, that both the story and the reproduced textual object could stand in for all of the Invisible stories Bleu wrote. “Sarah the Doll Lady,” in this context, would capture *en summa* the gist of the column in its entirety—its structure, style and purpose—making both its content (the story) and its physical manifestation (its supposed textual materiality) function as PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymies. However, such metonymies are still conceptual, they do not function at the purely verbal level. So, although one can conceptualize this particular textual artifact in metonymical terms, its indexical modality is what is essentially foregrounded.

Immediately following the printing of Bleu’s very first book *The Grandest Art Show in the World*, inspired from one of Bleu’s Invisible stories, Bleu and his print shop teacher, Mr. Gutiero, discuss the differences between fiction and nonfiction. Mr.

Gutiero asks Bleu if his book is “fiction or non-fiction,” to which Bleu responds by asking “why it mattered” (*ALIB* 27). After a confusing discussion over why if nonfiction is *true* it is defined as a *negative*, as well as the perceived cultural value of each genre, Bleu remains conflicted with Mr. Gutiero’s assumption that “*non-true* stories... have more longevity than *true* stories” (*ALIB* 27). Up until this point Bleu had never written fiction, nor had he ever thought about the nature of fiction, so when Mr. Gutiero postulates that fiction has more longevity than nonfiction, he asks himself “*what kind of world allows truth to play second fiddle to fiction*” (*ALIB* 27)? After consulting the dictionary, Bleu confides with his artist mother who suggests that in “being free to invent characters out of their imagination, fiction writers can probably get more of the truth than news reporters. Like in art, don’t you prefer pictures that aren’t so perfectly realist” (*ALIB* 27)? It doesn’t take long before the creative possibilities of fiction take hold in Bleu’s imagination and find their way into his creative output, and when they do, metonymical devices of all sorts tend to structure the dynamics between his life and his work and thus Lehrer’s novel more generally.

While in high school, Bleu authors and prints 32 *dos-à-dos* books, constituting his *Famous Fathers* series (Figure 14). Here, Bleu’s *own* metonymical thinking, rather than those he reports on, is put on display. Not knowing who his biological father is Bleu leverages some passing remarks made by his Aunt Chloe, that his father was a “famous man” who “may have also been married and traveled a lot” (*ALIB* 29), as a kind of springboard into the archives of New York’s public records where he hopes to discover the identity of his father. Knowing that he was conceived in “New



Figure 14. Two-page spread featuring some of Bleu's *Famous Father* books.

York in the winter of 1952,” Bleu conducts research to see which famous men, who were also married and/or travelled a lot, visited NYC that winter (*ALIB* 29). In order to narrow his findings Bleu focusses on “heroic figures—great artists, athletes, scientists, journalists, revolutionaries, statesmen, and outlaws” (*ALIB* 29-30).

Although Bleu's strategy inevitably fails to supply the answer he is looking for, what results from this project is his *Famous Father* book series—a collection of character studies on famous men who might *also* be his father. On one side of each book's *dos-à-dos* binding Bleu describes “what each of [his] ‘famous fathers’ did to transform the world” and on the other he “portray[s] the kind of relationship that particular famous father might have had with [him] had he followed his lust with responsibility,” thus each book is part history, part “fantasy” (*ALIB* 29). Famous

figures that make up the series include Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Charlie Chaplin, Woody Guthrie, and many others. As with Sarah's dolls, these figures all come to stand in for Bleu's absent father and thus clearly serve metonymical purposes. But they are not *really* meant to be viewed as potential father candidates. As substitutes or stand-ins, they facilitate Bleu's attempt to cope with emptiness and longing, filling the void, however provisionally, left by an absent father. These books are embodiments of Bleu's frustration, commemorating these figures for their contributions to human culture and knowledge.

It is at this point where Bleu's writing-as-wish-fulfillment tendencies are first introduced. We might call these books "symbolic acts," in Fredric Jameson's sense of the term (Jameson 1981), for they are fantasies that attempt to symbolically resolve certain political, social, and/or historical issues that cannot be resolved in the real world. Bleu realizes that as "a journalist, it was [his] job to cover what *is*," but as "an ex-journalist, [he] felt free to imagine *what if*" (*ALIB* 38). In the *Famous Father* series, Bleu fantastically transports figures from his world (and in this case our world as well) into the imaginative realm of fiction where they come to function as parental surrogates, filling in significant gaps created by an absent father. As both physical and narrative object, they are created with the purpose of serving psychological needs at the level of character, but they also serve metonymical purposes at the level of story, discourse, and book-building. Readers are not provided excerpts from the series, only photographic images of the book-objects themselves, so these particular metonymies mostly exist at the conceptual level.

As the novel progresses verbal and conceptual metonymies begin to appear more frequently in Bleu's prose. Before writing his first novel, Bleu works at as foreign correspondent reporting from the West Bank, South America, and the Caribbean. He is eventually fired by his editor because his reports were supposedly too *poetic*. In defending the significance of a paragraph to an article he wrote on Haiti to his editor, Bleu writes:

I think it's relevant and interesting that Pierre was taught his lineage by his parents going all the way back to Africa, to the 1970s slave rebellion, up to his being born, and everything else I wrote in that paragraph. In this *one man*, you've got an entire history of Haiti. Most Americans couldn't tell you their family history two generations back. I can't even tell you who my father is.

(*ALIB* 36)

In this passage Bleu announces his fondness for metonymical thinking. For him, the life of "one man" is symbolic of, and indeed stands in for, "an entire history" of a country. The logic of efficiency that seems inherent to metonymy as a conceptual process, its ability to accomplish so much with so little, is what attracts Bleu to this kind of thinking. Metonymy's explanatory power, coupled with its expediency, makes it a compelling cognitive tool for quickly apprehending and communicating complexity and depth.

Dissatisfied with the constraints of journalism on his creative sensibilities, Bleu leaves journalism to become a university writing instructor, and with the help of a friend who runs a small garage-based printing press Blue is able to typeset and design the book that will become his first published novel, *The Switch* (Figure 15).

As a journalist, it was my job to cover what is. As an ex-journalist, I felt free to imagine what if. With a good deal of time on my hands between paying gigs, I ended up speculating about any number of things—including the blood-boiling enmity of polar opposites that I kept finding in nearly every sphere of life, not only in the war zones I'd recently come home from, but in politics, in workplaces, and in families. What if all these "enemies" somehow got their wires crossed, even for only one day? What if flashes of light lit up pockets of acrimony and misunderstanding around the world? Could embittered hearts be opened, or would it make no difference at all?

I didn't write my peculiar first novel with any purpose in mind, least of all to have an effect on the way people behaved toward each other. I didn't even know for sure if what I'd written was actually a novel; *The Switch* was merely an experiment played out in the sandbox of my imagination. If I hadn't bumped into Ron Hodamarsky at an upstate printer's flea market, *The Switch* might still be an unread manuscript resting peaceably in a file folder somewhere.

A former High School of Printing classmate of mine, Ronald owned a garage-based small press in Middletown, New York. Although the list of his Jewel Weed Editions focused exclusively on books of poetry written by Ronald's wife, Pat Hodamarsky, Ronald really dug the premise of *The Switch* when I described it to him in the flea market parking lot. Without even reading a word of it, he offered to publish the book if I would pay for all the printing and binding expenses—including the cost of having his small secondhand offset press fixed. I agreed if I could do my own typesetting and design the cover. (Having a hand in the design of my books and book covers became a habit I couldn't shake.)

Published in an edition of 300 copies, my first novel received reviews in two obscure literary journals—favorably in one and very unfavorably in the other. The reviewer who panned it (perhaps my first faceless enemy) particularly disliked the book's structure:

It is dizzying enough slogging through a novel where every character is simultaneously someone else, but then halfway through *The Switch*, the reading orientation flips 180 degrees, forcing the reader to physically turn the book upside down. Once vertigo sets in you realize this device is nothing but a cheap trick to get you to notice the book's palindromic cover design that forms a face from both orientations. Cute, but it doesn't make up for the preposterous premise and the altogether convoluted read. *Switch it off!*



The Switch A NOVEL

One morning, a woman wakes to find that she's living the life of her archenemy. She experiences everything he sees, does, and thinks throughout the day. Her nemesis has been switched with her as well. On this particular day, switches like these are happening everywhere. Author Bleu Mobley, in his ingenious debut novel, chronicles a day in the lives of five sets of switched enemies: three pairs who come face-to-face every day, and two pairs who have never met but despise the very thought of each other.

1979, Jewel Weed Editions, Middletown, NY

excerpt

THE SWITCH

Shortly after waking up, you realize that you are in the body of your number one nemesis. You look in the mirror. You see your enemy, you think the thoughts of your enemy, but somehow your own consciousness is still there too, as a quiet witness. You won't like embodying this person throughout the day, but there is nothing you can do to stop it. Your nemesis has become you for the day as well, witnessing everything you deal with on a daily basis. Should your nemesis encounter you during the day, you'll have a chance to see exactly how they see you, and vice versa. On this day, switches like these have occurred all over the world.

A Zionist from Tel Aviv finds himself at a café in a Palestinian section of the West Bank, smoking shisha, speaking in Arabic to some friends he's never laid eyes on, cursing the stinking Jews for imprisoning him for eight months without charge and killing his father. In Tel Aviv, a Palestinian man discovers he is standing guard in an Israeli army

Figure 15. Two-page spread featuring Bleu's first novel, *The Switch*.

Inspired by a series of “what if” thought experiments Bleu devises in response to his foreign correspondence experiences—“*What if* all these ‘enemies’ somehow got their wires crossed, even for only a day? *What if* flashes of light lit up pockets of acrimony and misunderstanding around the world? Could embittered hearts be opened, or would it make no difference at all?” (ALIB 38)—*The Switch* is a novelization of the popular body-switching movie genre, exemplified by films such as *Turnabout* (1940), *Freaky Friday* (1976), and *Trading Places* (1983), though its literary forbearer is arguably Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928). According to the catalogue description, *The Switch* “chronicles a day in the lives of five sets of switched enemies: three pairs who come face-to-face every day, and two pairs who have never met but despise the

very thought of each other” (ALIB 39). We also learn from the excerpted book review that “halfway through...the reading orientation flips 180 degrees, forcing the reader to physically turn the book upside down,” which the reviewer calls as “a cheap trick to get you to notice the book’s palindromic cover design that forms a face from both orientations.” “Cute,” the reviewer remarks, “but it doesn’t make up for the preposterous premise and the altogether convoluted read” (ALIB 38).

Reminiscent of the *tête-bêche* narrative structure and book design employed in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *Only Revolutions* (2006) and Lance Olsen’s *Theories of Forgetting* (2013), if it were not for this strategically placed book review, readers would not know about *The Switch*’s *tête-bêche* structure, for it is not mentioned anywhere else, nor is it put on display in the approximately two-and-half-page excerpt provided. The book review and catalogue description thus provide crucial details about *The Switch* that readers would otherwise never know. As paratextual inserts they serve narrative purposes, but they also function as PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymies, for the review and description are partial representations that help readers imagine a more complete fictive object. The review offers readers a glimpse into how critics perceive Bleu’s work, and when we read the catalogue description alongside Bleu’s “what if” questions, it becomes fairly obvious that the novel is a dramatization of how characters of radically different backgrounds and beliefs when *switched* can come to empathize with ‘the other’. As a literary conceit, the fictional dramatization of body switching is not “preposterous” as our reviewer suggests, for it comes to mirror both the immersive and instructive nature of fiction.

The Switch's book cover design is also equipped with metonymical qualities. Strictly speaking, the cover is not a "palindromic" image representing two identical faces, but the combination of incomplete and multicolored circles with a Z-shaped line zigzagging down the middle of the page can easily be interpreted as an image of two eyes and two noses that we in turn identify as representing two human faces. Reading the cover as a palindromic image of two faces requires, however, that we first perceive these abstract shapes as representations of human body parts; *that* particular interpretive move is metonymical. We conceive of these half circles as stand-ins for human eyes, the zigzagging line for two noses. But even then, the image remains highly abstract and incomplete. All we see are eyes and noses, and yet readers will likely have no difficulty calling this an image of two faces. *That* is the power of metonymy. From partial and abstract information as well as familiarity with the context in which the image should be properly understood, readers are able to imagine a larger and more concrete entity.

When we read *The Switch*'s book cover in light of what we know about the novel's narrative and the book's *tête-bêche* structure, we become attune to how the image interacts with other aspects of the book to produce multimodal metonymies as well. The two "faces" on the book's cover are meant to be viewed as visual metonymies of the characters in the novel who switch bodies with other characters. Likewise, the reader's physical manipulation of the book with their hands performs what we might call the bibliographicization of the novel's technique and theme of switching. In other words, the primary conceit of *The Switch* is figured into the book's material design which in turn supports the novel's bi-directional narrative

structure. The interaction between all of the book's elements produces a multimodal network of intertextual signifiers whose correspondences are made possible by various kinds of metonymies.

The excerpt provided from *The Switch* is divided into three sections, each serving distinctly different metonymical purposes. The first section, similar in purpose to the catalogue description, introduces the conceit of the switch, which in turn generates the novel's main conflicts. This introductory paragraph acts as a summation of the novel's narrative world and intended meaning, resembling what Littlemore call a PART OF THE SCENARIO for THE WHOLE SCENARIO metonymy (Littlemore 2015: 93), though PART OF THE NARRATIVE for THE WHOLE NARRATIVE is arguably more descriptive in the context of narrative fiction.

Shortly after waking up, you realize you are in the body of your number one nemesis. You look in the mirror. You see your enemy, you think the thoughts of your enemy, but somehow your own consciousness is still there too, as a quiet witness. You won't like embodying this person throughout the day, but there is nothing you can do to stop it. Your nemesis has become you for the day as well, witnessing everything you deal with on a daily basis. Should your nemesis encounter you during the day you'll have a chance to see exactly how they see you, and vice versa. On this day, switches like these have occurred all over the world. (*ALIB* 39)

Reading this excerpt, we recognize that Bleu's experience as a journalist and the "what if" questions he poses in response to them are the foundations for *The Switch*'s conceit; Bleu's first novel is contiguous with his memoir. Indeed, the memoir

produces a contextual frame for how to read Bleu's life into *The Switch*, inviting us to read the excerpt through a more indexical or autobiographical lens. Furthermore, the first paragraph from this excerpt is functionally equivalent to many of the other textual bits that physically surround it on the book's pages, from Bleu's narration to all of the intertexts mentioned above. Just as Bleu's memoir in conjunction with these intertexts provides context and information that allows readers to more fully construct the physical parameters and literary elements of the fictive book-object in question, the purpose of the opening paragraph is to highlight the primary difference between Bleu's novel's fictional world and the world Bleu occupies. Thus, the opening paragraph outlines the scope and scale of the conceit for the novel's fictional world and how it affects the novel's characters. We don't know from what page this excerpt is supposedly taken, maybe it's supposed to be the first paragraph to *The Switch*, maybe not, but its purpose is nonetheless similar to most any novel's narrative beginning, introducing what James Phelan calls local and global instabilities, the "unstable relations between characters" that drive the "progression" of the narrative toward its possible resolutions and completeness (Phelan 2007: 15-16).

The second section to the excerpt offers a short list of example switches. Here, we discover that by "nemesis," the novel means to switch characters who have drastically different viewpoints on what are often highly polarizing issues.

A Zionist from Tel Aviv finds himself at a café in a Palestinian section of the West Bank...speaking in Arabic to some friends he's never laid eyes on....a Palestinian man discovers he is standing guard in an Israeli army uniform outside a dance club that was fire-bombed a month earlier. (*ALIB* 40)

Additional switches include a gay man with a homophobic man, a pro-life activist with pro-choice feminist, a black man with a white man, old friends turned archenemies. The kinds of issues that divides *The Switch*'s characters are the very same ones that divide America's two major political parties and thus much of the U.S.'s politically engaged population. *The Switch* may be formally experimental, but it is also deeply concerned with actual social, political, and historical issues, thus it serves as a kind of diorama of contemporary American public life. Because switches like those listed above occur all over the world for a single day, if there is an argument implicitly running through much of *The Switch* it is likely that issues which deeply divide us could potentially be overcome if we would only take the time to listen to where others are coming from; if we would open our hearts, minds, and ears to our "enemies" we could potentially see beyond the "acrimony" and misconceptions we have for them. Some readers will no doubt find that proposing to deal with such large scale issues at the level of individual responsibility is juvenile, but as a thought experiment dramatized in a work of literary fiction, *The Switch*'s argument is aligned with the pedagogical values the liberal arts have traditionally ascribed to reading literature, that it invites us to perceive the world from a perspective radically different than our own, eliciting critical self-reflection and the appreciation of difference, all of which is a good thing, whether or not it can actually help solve real socio-political problems.

The third and significantly longer section to the excerpt narrates the opening scenes to the switch that occurs between Helena and George, "two high-powered L.A. lawyers" who work together at "Bennett and Bennett" (*ALIB* 40). Here, we read about

the initial effects the switch has on these two particular characters who, it should go without saying, are not particularly fond of each another, and readers are invited to assume that the positive effects that result from this particular switch stand in for the effects of the switch for the novel as a whole. To provide context for this switch the narrator explains the origin of their animosity for one another.

Nine years earlier, George had thought he was next in line to become a partner at Bennett and Bennett when Helena leapfrogged him, becoming the firm's first woman partner. His objection to her becoming a partner, he wrote in a letter to the Bennetts (never sent), had nothing to do with Helena being a woman or "because she may turn out to be more talk than action. It simply is a matter of seniority." Three months earlier, Helena cast the sole vote against making George a partner, "not because of his textbook passive-aggressive behavior or because he's a chauvinistic pig, but because of his poor organizational skills." (*ALIB* 41)

No matter the legitimacy of George and Helena's respective claims about the other or how they feel the law firm should be managed, it becomes clear that their differences do not end there. Soon after Helena and George enter work on the day of the switch, not knowing exactly what is going on, they find themselves reluctantly confronting each other, as the other, at the morning partners' meeting. It's worth quoting the passage at length that outlines their differences as well as the conflict and resolution that ensues at the meeting.

Helena and George find themselves at opposite ends of every agenda item. Helena views cases in political terms. Who's in the seat of power? Who's

being taken advantage of? What are the demographics? George thinks every case needs to be seen on its own merit, “not through some politically correct lens or checklist.” Helena likes to process every little thing; George wants to cut to the chase. Helena seeks to dispel conflict through dialogue; George designs ways of ripping his opponents to shreds. Helena thinks to herself as having a purpose; George considers himself a professional with a job to do. Helena sees human consciousness as evolving, very very slowly, and she is a catalyst working to jog it forward; George thinks the best days were long ago, and the most he could possibly hope for is to channel some of the high standards back then. Usually Helena dominates these meetings... while George... barely ever says a word. But on this day, for some reason, Helena is relatively quiet, and George is the one blabbing away like someone slipped truth serum into his coffee. The barbs and daggers of the two sparring partners—normally kept behind the scenes and behind the lines—ricochet in full view all over the conference room. Yet, by the end of the meeting, the two actually break through a seemingly intractable impasse and reach an agreement on a preliminary approach to the Anderson case. A consensus is reached to continue the discussion after lunch. (*ALIB* 41)

Helena and George are caricatures, not psychologically complex fictional characters that develop over time as they face a series of challenges. As James Phelan would put it, they function “thematically” rather than “mimetically,” in the service of some “cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical” idea, rather than representing “possible people” who we respond to emotionally and ethically (Phelan 2007: 5-6).

The conflict that ensues between Helena and George is brief and unspecific, but that is precisely what makes this anecdote so susceptible to a metonymical reading. Its descriptions exist at a level of generality and familiarity that allows for Helena and George to function as stand-ins for practically any topical debate between a politically left-leaning and a politically right-leaning individual. For example, consider these two caricatures in the context of literary theory. One could argue that Helena reflects the attitudes of a more Marxist or feminist critic, interested in power and structural inequality, whereas George reflects more the attitudes of New Criticism or neo-pragmatism, interested in the autonomous object and bourgeois practicality. But we could just as easily consider the contrasts described between Helena and George in contexts where they are arguing over, say, the quality of an intern's legal portfolio or a high school student's college application given the nonspecificity of the passage. In Bleu's novel, Helena and George are lawyers, but they could just as well be literary critics, university administrators, bankers, politicians, police officers, and so on.

The excerpt from *The Switch* concludes with Helena and George bumping into one another at elevator. Helena asks George how his dad is doing, who we learn recently had a cancer-related surgery. Reflecting immediately on her question to George, Helena realizes she "didn't even know George's dad *had* cancer." During this very same moment, George realizes "for the first time that Helena's eyes droop down at the corners. They are sad eyes." George, feeling "oddly appreciate of the question but also baffled," then replies, "He's actually doing a lot better. Thank you" (ALIB 41). Once the elevator reaches its destination and its doors open they part ways. That is the end of the excerpt. Will Helena and George, or any other set of

switches, drastically change for the better as a result of their switch? Will they come to recognize “the other” through their vicarious embodiment of them? Does Bleu offer his readers a happy ending? Does his “what if” experiment take a dirty realist turn or does it continue down the path of wish-fulfillment where it originates? Does Bleu’s novel symbolically resolve the problems of the real world like Hollywood body-switching movies typically do, or does it fail where those movies succeed? There’s obviously no way to answer any of these questions in the absence of a real book called *The Switch*,⁷² but what we can say is that Bleu’s first novel builds upon a series of metonymical devices that are first introduced in his memoir, and that all of the other intertexts that surround the excerpt—book cover, book review, and publisher’s blurb—interact with one another to produce a larger metonymical complex that stands in for this early phase in Bleu’s career as a writer. No matter which excerpt and accompanying intertexts one chooses to examine in greater detail, as we did with *The Switch* for example, one will find similar metonymical devices

⁷² However, when we consider the kinds of characters who are forced to switch with “the other,” in order for any kind of human fellowship to likely come about between them would require each character to overcome their own respective exclusionary politics. When we read, “The awkward eye contact already made, there’s no use pretending they didn’t see each other,” it seems as though Helena and George actually see one another, perhaps for the first time, but not in a “we are the same” kind of humanist universalizing way, for as soon as the elevator door opens they “take off in opposite directions” (*ALIB* 41). Helena and George recognize their differences, not their likenesses, as well as part of themselves they hadn’t noticed before as a result of the switch. As such, at the last moment *The Switch* would seem to step out of its more universalizing anecdote and gesture toward the ethical ideas of phenomenological thinkers like Levinas and Derrida who argue that ethics is less a normative practice that rational individuals learn to recognize and act out than how we choose to respond to the exorbitant demand of the “naked face” and “speech” of the other (see Moraru 2014: 29-31, 94-108). Such an ethics, Christian Moraru writes in *Cosmodernism*, “must be based on that which makes us different, in-comparable and yet, by virtue of the radical distinctions between us, com-parable, etymologically, ‘apposable’ or juxtaposable inside an ethically rather than exclusively or predominantly ethnically constituted human fellowship” (Moraru 2014: 29).

undergirding the production and interaction of textual units, especially between Bleu's memoir and the excerpted material.

In sum, the various kinds of intertexts integrated into Bleu's memoir serve multiple functions within the novel's multimodal discourse. What I have focused primarily on is their metonymical functions, how they provide readers mental access to Bleu's entire creative universe. Each intertext has a metonymical function in so far as it is a partial representation of a narrative world and/or fictive textual object, offering readers a short cut to larger conceptual domains, whether they be psychosocial complexes, spatiotemporal continua, textual-material properties, or literary-historical traditions. These intertexts obviously serve structural purposes as well, possessing causal-logical relations needed to support the integrity of the novel as well as the progression of the narrative from beginning to end. Because each intertext has been removed from its original context and placed into another and in a way that deliberately foregrounds a causal link between its original production and use and its current role within a more complex multimodal semiotic system, each intertext additionally carries an indexical function as well. That is, each intertext, most notably the book excerpts, indexes the writing and printing technologies originally used to create them (both fictive and actual), as well as their changing material conditions over time. Furthermore, every reproduced textual artifact carries its own modality, the degree to which each artifact is a faithful reproduction of its original, and if they, as in the case of photographs, represent the world as it really is (high modality) or in some stylized form (low modality) (Norgaard 2019: 87). Finally, there is the symbolic function to the excerpts, and by extension to all of

Bleu's books, which are motivated by Bleu's aspiration to resolve real problems through the symbolic possibilities of literature and bookmaking. This symbolic function is observed by Bleu's psychotherapist during Bleu's last session before being sentenced to prison, who more than anyone else seems to have a firm grasp on Bleu's *oeuvre*. "I mean your composing has always been a way for you to fill the holes in your life. That's what words and books have been for you.... Writing isn't just a career for you, it's how you make sense of the world—how you make it whole" (*ALIB* 363-364). Bleu's therapist's analysis is on the money (and note his use of metonymical language, i.e., parts and wholes), for Lehrer's novel dramatizes how art and literature is often created to satisfy the desires and needs of their makers.⁷³

In the next section I draw connections between metonymy, modality, and various indexical markers presented in *A Life in Books* to argue how Lehrer fetishizes the book medium while simultaneously relying on computer technology to produce and publish his novel. Lehrer is certainly aware of this contradiction, but I want to suggest that the antinomies between print and the digital expressed in *A Life in Books*, are not simply another indication of how the codex novel as a literary form and cultural object continues to "reinvent" itself by utilizing digital technologies and engaging with the digital in critical and novelistic ways (Hayles 2002a; Pressman

⁷³ And I would argue, once again, that what makes this dramatization perceptible to readers are the metonymical devices Lehrer lays bare throughout his novel, both verbal and non-verbal. During each chapter and phase of Bleu's career he faces a series of challenges, sometimes these challenges are personal, sometimes they are more social or political, but Bleu rarely discusses how he confronts these challenges. Instead, readers are presented with excerpts from his books that dramatize whatever previous experience or issue he has mentioned in his narration. As such, Bleu's books largely stand in for his own life; he transposes his life into his books. Bleu's books attempt to solve the problems of the real world, even if these solutions are essentially symbolic in the end.

2009, 2018). Instead, I want to argue that the print/digital dynamic in *A Life in Books*, which often overlaps with the authentic/hoax dynamic, at least in Lehrer's novel, exposes a deeply ambivalent attitude about media's claims to veracity in the so-called "post-truth" era, where nonfiction plays "*second fiddle to fiction*" (ALIB 27). This ambivalence is intensified by Lehrer's travelling *A Life in Books* gallery exhibition, which though is not currently on display, has been installed in various galleries across the US. While Lehrer's bookish exhibition transcends the book-specific site of literary fictional worlds, opening up the space of the book in ways that resemble Carson's *Nox*, what is most striking about the exhibit is how Lehrer continues to disavow himself from his work—these objects belong to Bleu Mobley, not Warren Lehrer. Similar to how Bly asks his readers to *believe* in the authenticity of the archive, Lehrer wants to make *believers* out of us, but the consequences turn out to be very different because Lehrer's world is passed off as our own, whereas Bly's is entirely futuristic and speculative.

4. The "Reality Affects" of Lehrer's Fictive Objects

In Lehrer's introductory Note there is a small (2x1 inch) newspaper clipping embedded in the body of the first paragraph that some readers will likely overlook or find difficult to read because of its decreasing font size, but that in part communicates to readers why Bleu is sentenced to prison (Figure 16). Although the clipping cuts off mid-sentence, from the article's colorful and catchy title and its excerpt-like (metonymical) qualities, readers are able to infer the gist of the article and thus some of the context surrounding Bleu's imprisonment. Bleu, we are told, has been



Figure 16. Newspaper clipping about Bleu’s criminal case (*ALIB* 4).

sentenced for “refusing to reveal the name” of the “White House cleaning person” who supposedly confided to him details about “presidential discretions” (*ALIB* 4), details which, knowing Bleu is now at “the center of a national literary and political scandal” (*ALIB* 5), readers are led to assume Bleu subsequently published as one of his 101 books. In other words, Bleu presumably wrote a scandalous dossier on the Bush Administration (a fact we learn at the end of the novel) based on information collected from a whistleblower. Soon after the book’s release, Bleu was called before a “grand jury” and questioned by a “federal prosecutor” who demanded “the name of [his] source” (*ALIB* 13). Refusing to comply, “the judge” sanctions Bleu to a “federal detention center” claiming his “*silence* showed contempt of court” (*ALIB* 13).

It is important to note that the details surrounding this “national literary and political scandal” are deliberately withheld from readers for more than 350 pages, and even when Bleu begins to broach them, he is hesitant in how he exposes the “truth” about this infamous book. *Under the Rug* is categorized as “Non-Fiction” and marketed as “a true story of unseemly behavior, indiscretion, and hypocrisy as told by Ms. X to bestselling author Bleu Mobley” (*ALIB* 337). The four-page excerpt for *Under the Rug* does not, however, reveal any of the scandalous details concerning the President’s supposedly unseemly behavior. Instead, the excerpt highlights the moral character and certitude of an immigrant woman named Ms. X (Bleu continues to champion the “invisibles” of the world until the very end), who after decades of working her way up the cleaning industry ladder becomes a maid at the White House. According to Bleu, who presents himself as the journalist and narrator of the book, “Hearing the things [Ms. X] heard that she wasn’t supposed to hear, seeing the things she saw, knowing the things she came to know, triggered a three-way tug of war between her religious beliefs which commanded her to do what is right, her deeply ingrained habit of keeping secrets, and her status as a new American” (*ALIB* 340). After two years of observing these “presidential indiscretions,” Ms. X informs her supervisor, “out of a sense of duty,” what she thinks she knows, but is immediately fired and blacklisted from any future employment with the Federal government (*ALIB* 341). According to Bleu’s memoir, after seeking out a newspaper reporter to share her story, who happens to be a friend of none other than Bleu Mobley, Ms. X and Bleu agree to meet, and the rest, as we might say, is history, or at least that is the version of the story readers are initially told (*ALIB* 334-35).

Several pages following the excerpt readers are presented with Bleu's admission for why he *really* kept "mum" about his source—he is the source. The *truth* is there is no Ms. X. *Under the Rug* is just another one of Bleu's novels masquerading as a work of non-fiction that Bleu justifies on the grounds that it "was done with integrity" and serves the "greater good" (ALIB 362-63). Bleu *did* meet with "a person who had a low level job in the White House... claiming to be a witness to indiscretions," but they "backed out after only one interview" (ALIB 362). It wasn't even really an interview, Bleu admits, just "a conversation over coffee," and the whole thing seemed "very sketchy" (ALIB 362). "Instead of abandoning the project, or going out to find other sources who could confirm or deny the allegations," Bleu "wrote a book anyway, filling in the gaps of the person's story" (ALIB 362). *Under the Rug* is kind of noble lie, a lie that becomes a public good regardless of its inaccuracy because it serves the greater good of society.⁷⁴ Bleu "believed that [he] was morally justified fictionalizing a story that could take down the most powerful man in the world," President George W. Bush, "a man who lied to bring his country to war, lied about torture, lied about spying on his own people, lied about the science of global warming and the fate of the planet, lied about so many things that imperiled millions of lives" (ALIB 363). Bleu concludes that he "must have convinced [himself] that because [his] lying was done with integrity—as a selfless act that put [his] entire reputation and livelihood at risk for the greater good—it was okay" (ALIB 363).

⁷⁴ The "Noble Lie" is a notion first discussed in Book 3 of Plato's *Republic*. Plato believed it was sometimes necessary for leaders or "guardians" to spread "needful falsehoods," lies or myths that if everyone believed would unify all classes of the citizenry under a common good as well as against potential enemies that could undermine the republic (Plato 2004: 108-115).

The tragicomic irony, of course, is that even though *Under the Rug* is a novel, a work of fiction written to fulfill another one of Bleu's wishes, the White House still calls for a grand jury, they respond *as if* what Bleu has published is factual instead of being fictional. In other words, they attribute the book with "legally authenticity" (Mak 2102: 6) in order to justify their *affective* response and Bleu's imprisonment. Bleu passes off this book as an *authentic* account of history and that is exactly how it is interpreted by the *authorities* it is meant to undermine. Instead of bringing down the White House for *real* war crimes, Bleu is incarcerated for *fabricating* events surrounding those war crimes. Bleu does not reveal the fact that he is "the source" of the book's content, because doing so would mean he is a fraud; his credibility and reputation as an author would be tarnished. Bleu's hoax is misread as authentic (which is arguably what he wanted), but in the end the joke is on him, for he's the one who's convicted of a crime, not those who started a war on the pretense of a lie and who actually committed serious war crimes. That Bleu's deliberate blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction in this very politically charged context has as severe consequences as it does, suggests this once playful metafictional trope has lost much of its ironic undertone. In our so-called "post-truth" era, an era in which subjective beliefs and gut-feelings are granted equal footing or even priority over empirical observations (Browse 2017; Worthington 2017), blurring these boundaries, in certain contexts, simply isn't funny anymore. As a satirical hoax, *Under the Rug* obviously lacks any stable indexicality, yet it manages to elicit such a profound response that it motivates a federal prosecutor to uncover the identity of its author's

source.⁷⁵ In a sense, the White House's response to *Under the Rug* parallels the kinds of responses Lehrer elicits from his readers throughout *A Life in Books*. Which is to say, it doesn't really matter if everything we are reading/viewing is an elaborate work of fiction, because the consequences are the same.

"See," Truant writes in *House of Leaves*, "the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of the book is fiction. Zampano knew from the get go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same" (*HoL* xx). In an earlier chapter I argued for the significance of the deictic marker "here" in this often cited passage, suggesting that "here" refers to the world of fiction, its rules and inherited forms, as well as to the medium of the codex book, in contradistinction to Hansen's emphasis on "consequences," which he argues refer to "the *necessarily* real impact [the book] has on the embodied life of its reader," what he calls "reality *affects*" (Hansen 2004: 621-22). In the absence of a stable referential object, Hansen suggests we shift our attention from questions pertaining to the veracity of objects to the affective responses of subjects to those objects: "lacking the force of indexicality, these mediations can only acquire the force of conviction by eliciting embodied reactions in their fictional and actual readers" (Hansen 2004: 599). The reader, in other words, marks an object as authentic because of the affect it produces, not because of its supposed diplomatic, legal, or historical authenticity.

⁷⁵ Reminiscent of earlier metafictional texts like Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and Steve Katz's *The Exaggerations of Peter Prince* (1969), the Bush Administration, the primary target of Bleu's hoax, in reading *Under the Rug* as an authentic documentary record, is essentially looking for a fictional omnipotent narrator. For in calling a grand jury to investigate an author of a work we know is fictional, the White House admits to existing on the same ontological plane as the characters Bleu invents in his novel.

Similar to my argument about authenticity in *We Descend*, Hansen suggests that authenticity is a matter of deeply felt personal experience and belief.

In addition to how the White House, by virtue of its power and authority, is able to make *Under the Rug* “legally authentic,” Hansen’s notion of “reality affects” offers a way of interpreting the White House’s response to Bleu’s book, but more importantly, it offers a way of framing how Lehrer’s employment of digital technologies in the service of imitating printed matter is a kind of “authentic hoax” in and of itself. We know that none of Bleu’s books actually exist in our world, but that does not keep us from constructing them in our minds based on the photographs and partial information that is provided, a cognitive process that I have argued is metonymical in nature. When we consider the kinds of literary conventions Bleu employs, as well as the kinds of books he designs, we can see how his oeuvre parallels the historical and technological development of printing into the digital period. I want to suggest, however, that these representations elicit an ambivalent response toward Blue’s books, one that aestheticizes the book as a material-cultural object but that is complicated by our knowing that not only do they not *really* exist, digital technologies actually underwrite the production of the whole project.

Before *A Life in Books* became a multimodal codex published by Goff in 2013, it was no more than collection of digital files. Once Lehrer’s digital file was printed and assembled into a codex book on a small assembly line, no matter Lehrer’s sincere attempts to evoke a pre-digital past in many of his images, there are traces of the digital moment in which Lehrer designed the book’s pages. When we look at the excerpts from many of Bleu’s pre-digital books, we can observe a contemporaneity

inflected more by the historical moment when Lehrer wrote them than the actual moment in history when they were supposedly written by Bleu, regardless of Lehrer's many historical references throughout. For instance, in the excerpt from *The Switch*, George is emphatically opposed to examining legal cases through a "politically correct lens or checklist" (*ALIB* 41), but "political correctness" in the sense that George means it did not enter the lexicon of US public discourse until the early 1990s.⁷⁶ When we look more closely at the "photograph" of the book cover to the "First Edition" of *The Switch* (see Figure 3 above), we can observe chipped corners, dings, and dampstains on the book, which Lehrer purposefully designed into the image to give the book an aged look, similar to what Carson does in *Nox*. The computer-generated image possesses high modality, but it's simply a trick, for it merely indexes whatever digital technologies Lehrer used to make it (i.e., Adobe Photoshop), not a "garage-based small press" from 1979 and the 35 years of wear and tear that followed (*ALIB* 38). As with other notable book-archives, the objects reproduced in Lehrer's novel are designed to look older than they really are in order to give them an authentic artifactual look.

The 101 book covers in *A Life in Books*, as well as all of the novel's supplementary materials which were displayed in Lehrer's *A Life in Books* exhibition, are intended to be *looked at* and admired as visual objects, as bookish spectacles, as authentic reproductions of Bleu's books. On reflection, however, there is something very "gimmicky" about *A Life in Books*. According to Sianne Ngai, a "gimmick" is an

⁷⁶ According to Google's Ngram Viewer, "political correctness" in the US began acquiring popular usage in the early 1990s and by 2000 was a commonplace of public political discourse.

object or contraption that elicits from us a sense of its being both “a wonder *and* a trick,” it is an object “we marvel at *and* distrust, admire *and* disdain, whose affective intensity... increases” as a result of the “ambivalence” we feel toward it (Ngai 2017: 469). In the case of *A Life in Books*, such “ambivalence” and “affective intensity” derive from appreciating the originality and technical accomplishment of Lehrer’s novel on the one hand, and all of its digital trickery and pastiche elements on the other. In other words, there is a feeling of being duped, of having fallen for the magician’s trick, but since we know how the magician’s trick works we are also able to appreciate the magician’s mastery of his trade. *A Life in Books* is itself a kind of magic trick, one that requires us to believe in its authenticity while simultaneously acknowledging its artificiality. When accounting for the vision and technical skills needed to create such a literary compendium, I would argue that whatever ambivalence one might feel toward the novel’s gimmicky-ness ought to give way as one realizes each object’s intricate role within the novel’s dynamically assembled metonymical structure. One must acknowledge, in other words, the novel’s authentic literary gimmick: Lehrer devised an ingenious method for filling up a single book with 101 other books in a way that is compelling and beautiful in all sorts of ways. Lehrer’s short cuts, therefore, are not simply cheap tricks, for although the book, to borrow Ngai’s words, at times seems to simultaneously “work too hard and work too little” in its exhaustive use of digital resources to highlight how the various material and social conditions that make those resources possible have forever changed the history of books and the culture of reading, there is a positive aesthetic payoff to

Lehrer's novel that cannot be reduced to the effect of a gimmick (Ngai 2017: 472, 470).

The backward-looking nature of Lehrer's novel, that it is a retrospective monograph of a successful experimental author turned literary hoaxer and gimmick-maker,⁷⁷ makes it susceptible to an aesthetics of nostalgia that disavows the present by projecting an idealized sense of the past that never was. One could argue that Lehrer's novel "attempt[s] to appropriate a missing past," or that it displays a nostalgic celebration "of the imaginary style of the real past" (Jameson 1991: 19, 85). There is no doubt that *A Life in Books* fetishizes the book, "the fetish object par excellence of contemporary digital culture" (Pressman 2018: 106), but Lehrer's novel is less concerned with mourning the loss of some irretrievable (book) history or literary past than it is with aestheticizing the bookmaking process as a personal, creative, and therapeutic endeavor that can transcend time and space, even the physical space of the codex book.⁷⁸ Indeed, Lehrer's decision to remediate his novel

⁷⁷ Before Bleu writes *Under the Rug*, he designs bookish children toys, lamps, and apparel (*ALIB* 325-33), interactive CD ROMs and coloring books (*ALIB* 285-89), toilet paper poetry (*ALIB* 272-74), and even a book with bibliocircuitry that has a miniature TV embedded inside "for people who hate reading but have an image to maintain" (*ALIB* 295-97). Some of these objects are clearly satirical gimmicks, but they are also innovative attempts to reach an audience in a society where the value placed on books is seemingly diminishing. *A Life in Books* may at times appear gimmicky but is so in the service of a larger, more complex multimodal narrative. It's less a gimmick than a satire about how during the neoliberal period the book industry, like everything else, has been co-opted by gimmicks, undermining what we might think of as the sacred value of the book and the transformative power of authentic books.

⁷⁸ A skeptical reader might point out that Bleu consistently retreats into his books as a way of staving off the difficulties of the real world and therefore is clearly afflicted with a rather nostalgic pathos. This may be true, but we are not encouraged to evaluate this nostalgia positively. The object of our *aesthetic* judgment is Lehrer's book as a whole, not Bleu's personal weaknesses or his gimmicks which readers are supposed to laugh at. Furthermore, when Bleu is incarcerated he realizes he has been a prisoner to his books: "I will not live to write anymore, or write to live; no more perpetual note taking, experience hoarding, idea stockpiling, or shrinking and expanding the world to fit between the covers of a book" (*ALIB* 376). In overcoming his unhealthy obsession with books, Bleu

into the space of the gallery is not simply a sign of further commitment to aestheticizing the book-object, for in the space of the gallery the images Lehrer designed on his computer for his book are decontextualized from their original narrative context and presented as individual works of graphic art (Figure 17).

Looking at book cover images to fictive objects on a gallery wall, or a faux newspaper article written about fictional characters inside a glass container, elicits an uncanny response that is at once strikingly similar and yet very different to when readers confront these same digitally produced images in a codex novel, framed by a particular context in Bleu's mostly chronological narrative. When Lehrer would curate these exhibits, he would appear as the "Warren Lehrer" who compiled and edited *A Life in Books*, Bleu Mobley's friend and colleague. In Lehrer's novel, because Bleu is essentially imprisoned for lying and feels like a fraud because of that, Lehrer's novel, in the end, is committed to upholding the line between fact and fiction, documentary and hoax, even if that line is sometimes very thin. This seems especially true in light of the political context in which *Under the Rug* is situated, as a novel written in response to the Bush Administration's actual lies to justify their invasion of Iraq (*ALIB* 363). And yet, during Lehrer's gallery exhibits, in continuing to attribute Bleu Mobley as the author of these artifacts, Lehrer performatively disavows himself from his work. However, in extending this bookish and documentary aesthetic into the space of the gallery, where it is remediated into an exhibit accompanied by a live performance, points to how the consequences for

becomes aware of how his writing-as-wish-fulfillment has often created more problems than it potentially solved.



Figure 17. Photo of *A Life in Books* gallery exhibit. Photo credit: Warren Lehrer.

blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction for aesthetic purposes are very different than blurring the boundaries between documentary and hoax for political purposes. When Lehrer performs “Lehrer,” the metonymical chain is still visible, with the real Lehrer clearly standing in for the fictional Lehrer, while the audience momentarily suspends disbelief for purely aesthetic enjoyment. A danger obviously lies in not knowing when fiction is masquerading as fact, when hoax is pretending to be authentic. But Lehrer’s adoption of metonymy as a narrative and aesthetic principle always foregrounds the difference, both in his novel and when he performs it. Lehrer’s archival aesthetic, in other words, toes the line between fact and fiction, documentary and hoax, but deliberately upholds their boundaries for ethical and political reasons, thus representing a post-postmodern attitude toward art and life.

Chapter 6

Coda: From Book-Archive to Artifactual Narratives

The multimodal book as archive. The contemporaneity of book-archives. The archival poetics of multimodal literature. The textual heterogeneity and compendium nature of multimodal literature. These are the concepts “Books as Archives” argues are crucial for understanding how contemporary authors experiment with multimodality in the creation of their books. As I state in my preface, this project began with *House of Leaves*, a vague concept of the literary compendium, and the idea of developing a descriptive poetics of archival fiction. I soon after realized that such a project was not only too big but did not provide me with the conceptual framework I needed for studying the corpus of contemporary multimodal literature I was compiling. Rather than inventorying the salient, recurrent archival techniques, topoi and themes featured among this growing body of literature, I decided to study different types of book-archives, paying particular attention to how authors employ specific mediums and devices for different audiences and effects. Rather than redefining multimodality or providing a new theory of multimodal literature, I examine what authors *do* with multimodality, arguing that figures such as Bill Bly, Mark Z. Danielewski, Anne Carson and Warren Lehrer construct different types of books-archives, but nonetheless all employ the book-object as a physical site for collecting and representing texts and other artifacts for expressive purposes. Each author constructs a deliberately affective or expressive archive, responding not only

to different literary traditions but to different discourse communities and issues present in the contemporary world, especially those revolving around the preservation and authentication of documents. I argue that by examining contemporary multimodal literature through the lens of the archival poetics that I construct provides scholars with a set of rhetorical tools and a much-needed critical vocabulary for examining the poetics, metamediality, and bookish aesthetics represented in and by these unique cultural objects.

Now having successfully passed my dissertation defense and spent some time reflecting on the feedback my committee members and colleagues provided, I think it would be productive to shift one's focus away from "book-archives," whose object-oriented focus tends to lack momentum, as well as from "archival poetics," which is perhaps too broad and expansive in its scope, and lean harder into developing a theory of "artifactual narratives," how and why authors of multimodal novels since the modernist period tell (and show) their stories through the collection and representation of texts and other artifacts. Focusing more on how readers are asked to construct narratives through the mediation of numerous textual artifacts instead of continuing to develop a poetics or typology of "book-archives" also provides a more focused path for revising this dissertation into a publishable book manuscript, I think.

Authors of book-archives typically combine genres such as fiction, poetry and (auto)biography in their works, as well as employ a wide range of discourse types, organizational techniques and semiotic modes. Figures like Danielewski and Carson are exceptional in their ability to defy or resist our generic categorization of their books, establishing truly heterotopic spaces within the physical dimensions of their

books. I continue to believe that book-archives are a distinct type of book and mode of contemporary writing, representing an archival poetics that is contemporaneous with globalization, network societies and digital technology. But no matter what genres or styles or techniques are mobilized, or what modes and discourse types are employed the most, readers of book-archives are still asked to *reconstruct* a “narrative” out of various and often disparate texts and other artifacts. As textual assemblages, book-archives—or, what I would prefer to focus on instead, “artifactual narratives”—are able to maximize or minimize their degree of narrativity based on how many artifacts are reproduced, how many fictional characters or real people are responsible for producing them, how contemporaneous they are, how causally connected or thematically related they are with one another, as well as according to the amount of verbal discourse there is in comparison to nonverbal discourse and the ratio between narrative and nonnarrative discourse that is expressed across the spectrum of maximal versus minimal narrativity. If we focus our attention more on how artifactual narratives pose important challenges to current theories of narrativity as well as to established approaches to reading and interpretation, I believe we can better situate these works within current paradigms of narrative theory and to what extent current theories of narrative are able to account for their experimentations. Such a shift in focus would also allow us to better understand where artifactual narratives should be placed within different literary genealogies, as well as what makes their documentary or archival aesthetic different from what is represented in the history of cinema and within the contemporary arts. I suspect a theory of artifactual narrative as a genre of the novel would also greatly benefit from theories of

montage, especially in the context of cinema and graphic storytelling, as well as from theories of immersion derived from videogame studies, augmented reality, and interactive storytelling.

In addition to focusing more on the rhetorical and cognitive poetics of artifactual narratives and their increasing prevalence since the early twentieth century, there needs to be more emphasis placed on women and minority writers of artifactual narratives. I was already familiar with Cha's *Dictée* (1982), Howe's *The Midnight* (2002), Sandra Newman's *The Only Good Thing Anyone Has Ever Done* (2002), Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014), and work by Anne Carson (*Nox*, 2010; *Nay Rather* 2013; *Float*, 2016), but during the latter stages of writing this dissertation I also discovered Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries* (1994), Lyn Sharon Schwartz's *The Fatigue Artist* (1995), Ronit Matalon's *The One Facing Us* (1999), Thalia Field's *Ululu* (2007) and *Experimental Animals* (2016), Leanne Shapton's *Important Artifacts* (2009) and *Guestbook* (2019), Barbara Browning's *The Gift* (2017), and several other notable artifactual narratives produced by women, many of which are more politically involved than those produced by their male counterparts (e.g., Danielewski, Bly, and Olsen). That some of the most experimental and politically sophisticated artifactual narratives of the past 40 years have been made by women needs to be acknowledged as a significant development in the history of experimental literature, which has traditionally been dominated by men. In addition to examining these works with greater scrutiny, scholars should consider how issues of gender, sexuality, and race inform these particular artifactual narratives

and to what extent men and women are constructing artifactual narratives for similar or different audiences.

Given that much of what readers are asked to do with artifactual narratives is to imagine how, why, and to what extent particular artifacts correspond to one another and to regularly fill in those gaps that exist between artifacts with narrative possibilities, scholars should also consider the kinds of phenomena and experiences that are deliberately withheld from readers in contrast to those that are explicitly represented or expressed in the texts provided, and to what extent there are differences in emphasis based on gender, sexuality, race, power, or economic status. In other words, examining what is stated (and shown) in light of what is deliberately unstated (and not shown) could potentially offer novel insights into how narrativity is constructed in works of artifactual narratives and to what extent degrees and types of narrativity vary depending on which discourse communities and traditions they belong to and the target readers authors seek to address.

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