Book Review

Form Is a Story

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These Are Love(d) Letters
by Ames Hawkins, designed by Jessica Jacobs
Wayne State University Press, September 2019
288 pp., $21.99, paper

No Archive Will Restore You
by Julietta Singh
Punctum Books, 2018
118 pp., $19.00, paper

Amateur: A True Story about What Makes a Man
by Thomas Page McBee
Scribner, 2019
224 pp., $24.00, cloth

Walking by the downtown performing arts center in Anchorage, Alaska, on an afternoon in June, I saw the promo poster for a documentary film on the northern lights, running every hour on the hour. I was on a long layover between work trips, with time to spare, so I paid the $15, went in, and spent the next forty minutes watching color, movement, shape. Form is a story, or part of a story. I grew up knowing that old Nancy Wilson song that rhymes *red and ruby palace* with *aurora borealis*, but had otherwise never heard of the northern lights before moving, as a young

woman, north from Chicago to Minneapolis. Once at a writing retreat at a camp in the far north, I witnessed a few green tendrils at the edge of a blue-black sky, but that's as close as I've ever come to standing under the lights, and eventually I moved back to Chicago without fully seeing the northern night colors.

It's safe to assume seeing the northern lights on film is not the same as standing under the northern lights—there was no atmospheric vibe other than that of a nearly empty theater on a brisk Anchorage afternoon, no bombardment of the actual—though I appreciate how the film led me to think of the kinds of light shows I have stood within—the light of the Las Vegas strip emblazing the desert, for instance, or the music and lights festival in downtown New Orleans in December where art animations are projected on the edifice of a government building, or a show I saw in Minneapolis in the late 1990s, where stage lighting was projected on the surface of a grain elevator while aerialist dancers hung above us and moved against the structure surface. None of these experiences contains narrative in the way we are trained to expect a story to unfold in a progressive series of linear events, but all relate a bombardment tale, their meaning created by the precision of the moments.

The aurora borealis, with its natural wonder advantage, may well be the more spectacular of these spectacles—though I don't really know as I've only seen the movie—but the reason the film version is unlikely to fully deliver is that the artifact is absent, the evidence too untouchable. The actual is too far from the skin.

All these shows of light and motion have me thinking about the role of shape, movement, and change in some of my favorite recently published research-and-archive-based nonfiction works, all books by queer authors, that combine actual or conceptual artifacts as well as memory and investigation. Nonfiction, with its consideration of the actual, has the capacity to be a repository of found, remembered, and searched-for objects. If we itemize what we carry in light of what me make, what kind of future will emerge?

The most fragmentary of these texts operate by accumulation rather than

a linear storytelling, and all of them have subjects more complex than what is immediately apparent. Their beauty comes from the shape and tone of their action as well as the embodiment of their detail, their impact only understandable as an experience of the whole. What does it take for a book to carry and change the reader's body, creating not just understanding but readerly experience? And how do artifact and experiential evidence shift what we know about, and might make of, our stories?

Or, to put it another way, form creates craving. Desire seeks form, and form attempts to fulfill desire, but touch is required to complete the exchange. If we can bring all the archives and artifacts to the page, what kind of lit-up sky will that be?

Ames Hawkins's first book, *These Are Love(d) Letters*, excavates a collection of love letters written by the author's father to the author's mother before their child was conceived, intimate and youthful tomes a young man sent to a young woman, wooing her into a romanticized marital partnership that would be upturned by the actual events of their lives. Hawkins's father was a gay man who contracted AIDS and eventually died from the disease's complications. The author's parents are long divorced when Hawkins's mother makes a gift of these letters to her writer child, letters she says she doesn't know why she kept. The author comes to know these artifacts as a personal origination key. The letters allowed the younger iteration of the author's father to speak through a complex and partly cloaked desire for companionship and recognition in areas other than sexual. The young man charms the young woman, another lost soul, into forming a partnership, the foundations of a life, that ultimately cannot contain the father, but which results in another life, that of the author's queer artist child.

> The letters I save are those in which I am most able to make and remake my own future connections with and to desire. Desire for another, often. Desire for writing: always. Desire that for me expresses and originates in a bodily understanding of queerness; my own sensational and affective understanding of being queer (144).

This legacy from queer father to queer child is in itself a powerful story, but the work of this book is not plotted along the course of these lives. The primary protagonists of this text are the letters themselves. Hawkins spends much of the book examining the letters, moving in close and pushing away again, both curious and afraid, but finally fully examining these artifacts as collections, as family tracings, as raw theory, and as an archive of all that made the child who came from these beginnings.

The force of these letters comes not from their reproduction. They are never fully reproduced in this work. Rather, we see fragments of the letters collaged into the design of the page, as the author contemplates the very nature of letter writing. The book examines: the famous love letters of poet Emily Dickinson and her sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson; those of writer Janet Flanner and her lover, the editor Natalie Danesi Miller; and also runs through the history of letters themselves from Cicero, Seneca, and Petrarch, through Victorianism, and even including email. But the focus keeps coming back to Hawkins's father's letters to his future wife, handwritten and addressed with an intimate and singular scrawl, partially reproduced on the gorgeously designed pages created by Jessica Jacobs. We see a few lines from this-or-that letter. We see the front and back of the envelopes and ephemera such as a Do Not Disturb doorknob hanger used as stationery. We see the Hawkinses' love affair with the letter as a mode of creation:

> In a letter, one is permitted to convert intellectual and emotional impulses into alphabetic text, position them all into what comes to be understood and felt as logical and orderly, regardless of how disparate and complicated the sentiments may be. I write letters because I desire to write across forms, between genres; in all ways that call attention to gaps, fissures, interstices, spaces between and among feelings and thoughts. The form of the letter exists in a space of everlasting hope: for an understanding of self and the response of another (73).

Hawkins's prismatic essaying includes quotations from theorists, memoir passages, and narration speculatively voiced by the author's mother. All this would be an impactful collage on its own, but the inclusion of the letter fragments gives the book a graphic narrative quality. When the author tells us

of finally succumbing to the letters' power and sitting down to read through the collection, we have enough of the actual documents on the page to appreciate their archival detail, opening us to a three-dimensional experience of the narrator's vulnerability and curious embrace of the past.

> I stare at the postmarks, think about the dates. I consider the possibility, feel a promise for what's inside. I am overcome by the thought that these documents provide a direct connection to the past, a time before. Before my parents married. Before they had me and my brother. Before we moved from one house to another. Before my mother left. Before my parents divorced. Before my father came out. Before I came out. Before he contracted HIV. Before we knew anything about HIV or AIDS (70).

The skin of those collected envelopes. The tracings of a father's hand. A past that is garbled with yet-to-be-revealed secrets but also the source points of revelation. The discovery of a father as a maker, as an artmaker that lays the foundation of the author's own making. The wallop of this book revolves around all our attachments to the objects of history.

Archives are the subject and the operative metaphor of another queer nonfiction book, Julietta Singh's *No Archive Will Restore You*. The archive in this book is a theoretical concept, referring to those traces of history that form any of our present beings, but the actual archive of this book turns out to be the author's own body.

The author describes her queer brown body as one that has been repeatedly broken, but also is in a constant state of becoming through unbecoming. Compiling a body archive is, she writes, "too bewildering an undertaking because like all other bodies mine has become so many things over time, has changed dramatically through forces both natural and social" (29). The prose in this book is an intimate, if not always specific, testimony intertwined with the artifacts of theory and scientific research. Singh writes the body as more than just a body, as a shapeshifting container of desire and change.

> While the skin is a visual sign of the body's exterior limit, the physicist Karen Barad emphasizes how in fact bodies extend into space well beyond the skin. Molecularly we spread to the "outside" world, mingling with it in ways that are not apparent to us. . . . For better and ""

> for worse, we are made up of an outside world which constitutes, nourishes, and poisons us in turn (30).

If there is a story in this book, it's that of the constant re-becoming of the post-traumatized body, as well of that of a body remade in passion. It's difficult to articulate why this book is so affecting and beautiful. The story threads are intentionally incomplete and the theorizing inconclusive. Yet all the bodily desires roll and slide through the text, creating an aurora of sensation. When the author writes of starting up her relationship with the trans artist she calls S, she becomes aware of not only his past bodies but also the bodies of others he's loved.

> The women S loved before me have known this body in various states of masculinity. It is a body that has morphed over time in ways that have shifted organically and been surgically and chemically transformed. And he has known each of us as becoming-bodies too. Can any of our bodies be said to be the same bodies now? There are multiple ways of answering this question. But none of them alter the distinct feeling that we are linked, we women, through a shared repository of his contact (92).

The shifting of bodies meets the shifting forms of writing the body. Like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, the artifacts of theory meld in this writing with suspended moments of the author's sensate embodiment, making the theoretical ideas flesh.

Thomas Page McBee's second book is also about the experience of bodies changing, but *Amateur: A True Story about What Makes a Man* is not so much a becoming-narrative as a tale of coming-to-know. In his first memoir, *Man Alive*, McBee told a much more fragmented story of how a brutal mugging was a catalyst for his decision to transition, but in this book McBee has already transitioned and passes as a cisgendered male, and so finds himself forced to contend with a legacy of male violence he has not, because of his female socialization, been trained to handle. After a man on the streets tries to provoke a fight when he wrongly accuses McBee of taking a picture of his car, the author

decides to step fully into the issue of men and violence by joining a men's boxing gym and training for a charity match in Madison Square Garden.

The form of this book is relatively linear, with a story arc built around his decision to address men and violence, his training, and finally the drama of the long-anticipated bout, and that thread of the story is built like any other learn-a-new-skill-in-public reportage work. We do see the narrator enter the gym as a newbie, worry about the exposure of his history (as he decided to go stealth when at the gym and in the ring, for the duration of this project), and eventually gather up enough confidence, and barely enough skill, to go through with his challenge. But all this is only the surface situation. The larger and more urgent subject, addressed through narrative digression and expository research, is the author's grappling with the expectations and blocked passageways of masculinity, and on this level the book swirls and repeats in some of the fragmentary artifact-based ways we see in more experimental nonfictions, the intention being to thwart the conventional redemption memoir trajectory in lieu of a recasting of long-held assumptions about gender and social behavior.

> Stories about trans people, when we hear them at all, often end with such shining symbolism, meant to indicate that the man or woman in question has succeeded, in the transition, in the grand task of finally being themselves. Though that's lovely, and even a little true, in the same way a pregnancy or a near-death experience can act on the body like gravity, reshaping our days and memories and even time around its impact—it isn't where my story ends. Not even close (4).

The memoir passages of this book restate a bit of the story of McBee's first memoir—particularly the confusion of transitioning into masculinity when all available role models were misogynist and abusive. But now that he's transitioned, and newly aware of what it means to be perceived as a cisgendered man, he has more stories to tell, the most difficult being his coming to terms with the acquisition of male privilege.

This privilege is too easy to accept. He finds himself taking advantage, cutting off women in the workplace, silencing even his own sister, checking

himself to wonder how much of men abusing masculine social privilege is simply a matter of testosterone. He turns to research to redirect his thinking, interviewing Stanford neuroscientist Richard Sapolsky, who tells him hormones are only part of the equation.

> Men who were actually given more testosterone became more generous, but men who merely thought they were operating with elevated T became less effective and more competitive. "If our world is riddled with male violence, the core problem isn't that testosterone can often increase levels of aggression," Sapolsky added. "The problem is the frequency with which we reward aggression" (94).

This realization leads McBee to search for ways to refuse these awards of aggression. He watches for the vulnerability of men in the gym, as he comes to believe that the ritualized violence of boxing allows men an opening to get past their socialized inability to access their feelings. McBee doesn't always find the tender side of the men in the ring, but he does develop a level of compassion he didn't have access to growing up with the abusive men of his family. "Increasingly, I felt . . . as if that boiling inside me could be cooled without losing its power, and in it I could see myself. I knew it had to do with the way sparring had transformed threat into play—an intimacy, like puppies wrestling" (131).

But one of his moments of success in the ring leads to more discomfort as he realizes he has injured his sparring partner. McBee goes on to write about the ways this arena of potential male intimacy is a work in progress. When sparring with his friend Steven, he lands a punch more effectively than he expected.

> I heard his awful yelp before I realized that he was on the ground. Danny jumped into the ring and knelt down beside him. He was holding his knee to his chest, lying flat on his back, making all sorts of sounds I'd rarely heard a man make. It wasn't crying, but it was the cousin of crying. It was the sound of a man who needed to cry and couldn't (131).

McBee's *Amateur* uses thinking outside of his experience, the artifacts of research, as well as the well-trodden ground of reporter chasing a story, to augment his immersion tale, but in the end it's the way his body learns to take

the blows that fuels the story. This deep immersion was intentional. Before choosing the focus of this book, McBee published magazine columns in *The Rumpus* and *Quartz* about his experience as a "new man" entering all manner of ritualized male spaces, but the boxing experience transcended merely journalistic research. McBee's actual bloodied body is one artifact of the writing of this book. Others are the small barriers he broke through, the obstacles in male friendships, the walls between himself and his siblings, all the while pushing himself, through active immersion, into sweeter auroras of masculinity he could not have previously imagined, no matter how hard he stared at the sky.

Form is a story about bodies, and bodies are stories about changing forms. Somewhere, far from where my body is situated now, auroras are changing shape and color, and whoever is watching is changed by what they see. Memory has long been the mainstay of what we consider literary nonfiction, but many contemporary writers are using hybrid nonfiction forms to help us understand so much more than what memory can contain. Memoir can help us recover the past, but what of the future? Through hybridity, artifact, fragment, and immersion experiment, nonfiction composes the as-yet-unknown shapes and queer formations our bodies might turn out to be.

Later on that June day I spent in Anchorage, I was sitting in the park, watching the ocean mudflats that surround the city's shoreline, marveling at what seemed to me a mid-afternoon sun brightening the eight o'clock evening sky. A small child, a toddler, ran past me, followed close behind by a parent calling out her name: *Aurora*. Yes, I thought. The world and your body will shift continuously, Aurora, and your artifacts will be beloved. So run in.