

Narrative Shifts

Form Matters

Session 5 Resource Packet

SEVENTH WAVE

Session 5: Form Matters

Overview:

How — but also when and why — did you end up in the form that you’re in? Is the form you began a piece in the same form that the piece should end in? What can other forms teach you about the one you currently practice in? And what of hybrid work, the ever-growing field of genre-bending writing? In this session, we look at the “rules” of form and genre in an effort to bend or break them to the will of our own work. We’ll explore different kinds of creativity that can help loosen our hold on specific forms.

Before Session:

In this session, we’re thinking about the everydayness of genre and form. While we each have backgrounds in specific traditions of writing on the page, we no doubt brush up against all kinds of forms in our day-to-day lives, be it on the news or via eavesdropping, in politics or family discussions, encounters with the world or in the wild. But what does this mean for us when we put pen to paper? Are there rules? What rules are there for the making, taking, and breaking? Which ones can we bend, and which will break?

Recommended Readings: One way to think about form is that it is a kind of *scaffolding*: the thing you use while you build the foundation, framing, and structure of the thing. At some point, though, you have to remove it to see the end result. What does this mean for craft or narratives? In a workshop with an early mentor, Suzannah Lessard, we were presented with a “nonfiction scaffolding chart,” which compares several key nonfiction forms to each other. (See Google folder for resource.) Explore this, and then feel free to roam through [this great resource](#) from *Writer’s Digest*, which lists 168 poetic forms (no joke). This resource is a great way to understand the many experimental shapes our work can take.

During Session:

Below are the activities we have planned for our fifth session:

- **A Messay of Forms.** For our first hour, we'll be talking about form, genre, and structure. Looking at Suzannah Lessard's scaffolding sheet, exploring Seventh Wave's "messay" framework, as well as other writers' words on form, from poetry to spec-fic, memoirs-in-essays to novels. We'll be referencing Kiese Laymon, Ursula K. LeGuin, Ariana Benson, and others.
- **Know your ABDCEs.** You may be familiar with the "hero's journey," which is a common template for a certain range of stories (that usually involves a hero doing what heroes do — going out to be changed). In this activity, we'll look at another nearby structure, ABDCE, and how it can be used to your own craft desires.
- **Spiral into Story.** It can sometimes be quite unlocking to consider the shape of a story. In this third activity, we'll be pulling from *Meander, Spiral, and Explode* by Jane Alison, talking about the subliminal power of the spiral and how it helps you break free from any narrative loops you may be stuck in.

After Session:

These are continuing resources created in collaboration with Emilie Menzel, a poet and librarian who builds creative libraries for individuals, nonprofits, and organizations (pictures are not in order, but just a sample of the authors listed).



1. How to Experiment and Reconsider Form

- [Calamities](#), **Renee Gladman (Book)**. Across her novels, prose architecture artworks, and here in *Calamities*, Gladman philosophizes and pushes the boundaries between the physical act of drawing and the physical act of writing. From the *Kenyon Review*: "Perhaps what makes *Calamities* so remarkable is how the formal and syntactical choices Gladman makes are direct enactments of their content. Maps, geography, folds, facets, grids: all of these populate the text blocks in a spectral form, the blocks themselves, depending on context, acting in turn as mimetic interpretations of their content — to follow the metaphor through, haunted by it."
- [Meander, Spiral, Explode](#), **Jane Alison (Book)**. "As Jane Alison writes in the introduction to her insightful and appealing book about the craft of writing: 'For centuries there's been one path through fiction we're most likely to travel — one we're actually told to follow — and that's the dramatic arc: a situation arises, grows tense, reaches a peak, subsides . . . But something that swells and tautens until climax, then collapses? Bit masculosexual, no? So many other patterns run through nature, tracing other deep motions in life. Why not draw on them, too?'"

2. Resources to Return To:

- [Dorothy a Publishing Project](#), **Publisher**. Dorothy "is an award-winning feminist press dedicated to works of fiction or near fiction or writing about fiction." They publish just two books every year of beautifully bizarre, hybrid fictions. Their catalog features several leaders of the hybrid fiction genre, including Renee Gladman, Sabrina Orah Mark, and Cristina Rivera Garza. Plus, all their books are in the shape of palm-sized squares.
- [Midst](#), **Literary Journal**. "What if you could watch your favorite poet write? Every poem published in *Midst* is an interactive timelapse. Hit play to rewind the poem back to its beginnings and see exactly how it was written — start to finish, blank page to final draft, and every edit in between."

3. Examples of Form Experimentation:

- [Wild Milk](#), **Sabrina Orah Mark (Book)**. "Sabrina Orah Mark's *Wild Milk* reinvents the fairy tale in a way I didn't know could still be done. Her craft feels generous, fluid, inventive: she bends myths and archetypes like balloon animals. And yet for all that sense of play, what she reveals is not lightness but wildness. There is something elemental in her stories, as complicated and tangled as the roots of any ancient tree." —Nadja Spiegelman, *The Paris Review*
- [Dictee](#), **Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (Book)**. "Dictee tells the story of several women: the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Joan of Arc, Demeter and Persephone, Cha's mother Hyung Soon Huo (a Korean born in Manchuria to first-generation Korean exiles), and Cha herself. This dynamic autobiography: Structures the story in nine parts around the Greek Muses; Deploys a variety of texts, documents, images, and forms of address and inquiry; Links the women's stories to explore the trauma of dislocation and the fragmentation of memory it causes."

4. Resources by The Seventh Wave:

- ["Reliable Supply,"](#) **April Yee**. What is the cost of living, of being alive, of having agency over our bodies and choices and futures? April Yee asks these questions in her poem, "Reliable Supply," which describes the emotionally and physically taxing process of egg freezing in a zuihitsu form, floating between prose and poetry to form a collage of meaning.
- ["HTML Color Swatches for Black \[Girl\],"](#) **Ariana Benson**. Ariana Benson's stunning poem, "HTML Color Swatches in Black [Girl]," pays homage to the countless Black women who have died at the hands of our broken societal institutions and systems, summoning their spirits in an invocation in the form of color swatches.
- ["Instructions for a Child of an Assembly Line,"](#) **Brian Dang**. Brian Dang's hybrid piece, "Instructions for a child of an assembly line," looks at their parents' complicated relationship to Empire as immigrants to the U.S. who work in the airplane manufacturing industry.

- **[“Matrilineage \[Recovered\],” Sarah Ghazal Ali.](#)** What does it mean to have agency in the formation of our family trees? And is it possible to claim our space in a lineage that has tried to erase us time and time again? Sarah Ghazal Ali’s poem, “Matrilineage [Recovered],” asks these questions in a unique contrapuntal-esque form that unfurls in a new ways with each reading.
- **[“Polaroid: Prison Visit,” and other poems, Nick Martino.](#)** Nick Martino’s polaroid poems respond to Solmaz Sharif’s observations on the historical violence of erasure and the erasure form. Across each series progression, his texts bloom rather than dissolve; this is erasure in reverse, the way a photograph develops, the way a relationship settles into form.
- **[“Bloodlines,” Sarah Kaplan Gould.](#)** Sarah Kaplan Gould’s poem, “Bloodlines,” utilizes an incredibly visual and tactile form with threads carrying over and literalizing the bloodlines they write about — their lineage of Jewish ancestry and the weight and responsibility that comes with understanding it fully.
- **[“Holding Patterns,” Kofi Opam.](#)** Kofi Opam digs deep with their fantastic hybrid essay, “Holding Patterns,” which lays out the many ways that we as a society continue to inflict harm upon Black bodies in ways both explicit and not.
- **[“The Scent of Oud,” Malaka Gharib.](#)** Malaka was our featured artist for Issue 12: Actionable Storytelling, and while she is a journalist, graphic novelist, and cartoonist, she decided to try her hand at the braided essay, which she discovered during her Bainbridge Residency with us in 2019.

If you have any questions about the resources provided, just let us know.

*Form matters,
until it doesn't.*

