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Suppose We See Ourselves

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Suppose We See Ourselves

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this essay contains references to deceased persons.

Narrative form is often taken for granted, a set of storytelling rules that go unnoticed and unseen; similarly, colonialism benefits from an internal invisibility that resists observation. This autotheory essay considers the interplay between colonialism and invisibility, and explores how narrative form can act as a cultural intervention. The essay suggests that autoforms—such as autotheory, fictocriticism, autofiction, and autoethnography—expose invisible cultural rules and intrinsically alter the way content is understood. It is especially concerned with how colonialism uses authorship to limit internal observation and critique and suggests that by refiguring the 'I' and the 'we,' autoforms expose these invisible internal rules. It argues that autoforms actively reconfigure the boundaries around many of the early twenty-first century's major cultural conversations about representation and appropriation, lived experience and expertise, and public space and private space, as well as notions of identity, othering, consciousness, and embodiment. The paper approaches form not just as narrative structure, but also as a tool, a technique, a strategy, and an intervention that inherently impacts content and changes how the cultural landscape is seen and navigated. Through comparing the yellow soils of southern Australia and Gaza, the grammar of Derrida and Wittgenstein, and the path of water and rivers, the essay explores how the form we use to tell stories is often as important as the content.

Keywords: autoforms, autotheory, autofiction, colonialism, fictocriticism, life writing, narrative form

To Be Seen I

1. Suppose: we see ourselves. Though unusual in white, colonial culture, there have been instances.
2. To see oneself in whitefella culture is to navel-gaze; it's narcissistic, it's unsightly. Better, instead, to be an academic, to speak as an all-knowing God: this makes sense; this is acceptable.

Form and Imperialism

3. Amitav Ghosh (2016) says that the way we tell stories is as imperial as any other colonial technology. Look at 'the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth,' he says in *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh 2016: 7).
4. Perhaps the proliferation of 'I' and 'we' in literary forms is able to do something, not through content, but through form.
5. We are told it's narcissistic to even acknowledge the self, when the opposite is true; to ignore the self is to position the narrator as omnipotent, a favorite disguise of oppression.
6. Colonial culture is comfortable with forms of speech, writing, and knowing that reinforce colonial norms: 'Politics in the form of imperialism bears upon the production of literature, scholarship, social theory, and history writing,' Edward Said says in *Orientalism* (Said 1979/1994: 13).

To See I

7. Over dinner, a friend asked me what I was writing about, and I told her this and that—climate change, consciousness, colonialism. But when I said colonialism, she put down her fork and looked at me, confused: 'So your narrator isn't white?'
8. She said this as though colonialism was a topic for the colonized and never colonizers. As though the subject of othering is intrinsically a subject for 'The Othered' alone (Said 1994: 1).
9. We don't know we wear blinkers; we don't even know the shape of our own world.
10. As a white child growing up in white culture, I learned the boundaries of my whiteness according to the declarations of my Narungga Godmother, Aunty Raylene, who didn't hide her expertise on the unbearable strangeness of white culture. 'Shame,' she muttered when we were unthoughtfully outspoken. 'You whitefellas!' she declared when we'd forgotten to be properly thankful or reciprocate a kindness appropriately.

Mixing I

11. Aunty Raylene was famous for her bread-and-butter pudding.
12. This many eggs, that much milk, and this much sugar. Mix it like this. White bread, buttered, cut into rectangles, placed in this pattern in the baking dish. Scatter sultanas (blowflies) on top and bake.

The Long Paddock

13. Imagine: a long, straight road of yellow earth. On either side there are two or three meters of low scrub that sometimes, after the rains, turn a little green. Framing the road are low wire fences topped by two straight rows of barbed wire.
14. For hours, when I was a child, we would drive down the center of roads like this in a small car, following the faint parallel tracks left by cars that had gone before. Occasionally, when a car came in the other direction, both vehicles veered to the left and the drivers acknowledged each other according to their personal custom: an index finger was the most common; some chose the index and middle finger together (my dad's preference); while newbies or enthusiasts raised a whole hand. After the cloud of yellow dust that stretched behind the vehicle had passed, each car returned to the center tracks.
15. On the other side of the fence the vegetation was sparser and dryer. Sheep huddled under the odd small tree. Sometimes a sheep would get stuck in the fence, and then the car would stop, and someone would get out and pull the wires apart to free the sheep and it would run off, petrified and alone, looking for its flock.
16. 'Form,' Caroline Levine (2015) says in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, 'always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping*' (p. 3, original emphasis). John Frow, (2015) in *Genre*, adds that 'genres actively generate and shape the knowledge of the world' (p. 2).
17. In droughts, farmers bring their sheep to graze along the roadside. This is the long paddock, the shape of a flock of sheep in a southern Australian drought.

Writing and Form I

18. 'It's a poem,' a friend told me about an essay I wrote.
19. I didn't understand what she meant because there were no rhymes and no line breaks, it was four thousand words, and there was a beginning and an end.
20. But then I read Jan Zwicky's (2023) theory of lyric thought in *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Lyric thought, Zwicky says, is 'thought whose

structure is resonant, in which each aspect is tuned by the whole' (p. 117). I understood this to mean that meaning was conveyed not through declaring a thesis but through pointing, shaping, forming.

The Strip

21. The earth of the Gaza Strip is the same color as the roads of the long paddock—a soft, pastel yellow—and, when I went there for lunch in 1984, the buildings were the same color.
22. The color of the earth was familiar to my eight-year-old eyes, but the low buildings made of stone were not. It was a monochrome landscape of soft yellow.
23. My dad drove us in a hired car from Nablus in the West Bank to Gaza to visit one of my mother's nursing students. The license plate indicated the car was hired in Israel, which was helpful at the checkpoints.
24. My mother's colleague welcomed us to her home. She brushed aside colorful sheets that hung between the spaces inside. 'A family of sixteen live in this hallway and a family of ten live in that room,' she said. In each there was a neat pile of mattresses stacked by a wall. In the room where we ate, an older woman sat on the floor and laughed as she demonstrated how she had made fresh couscous by rubbing flour with a little water between her hands. The couscous was steamed in a pot on top of tomatoes and chickpeas and chicken and then inverted onto a large serving platter. There were few people around when we arrived, but a crowd appeared for the meal. We sat in a circle on the floor with the platter in the center and ate with our right hands. Like most meals of that time, my siblings and I chewed in stunned silence because, you see, we'd never eaten food with flavor before.
25. In the car on the way home, my parents discussed the generosity of sharing such a meal with us, while we children sat in the backseat and looked out the windows.

Writing and Form II (Borders of Form and Genre)

26. In the room that is all my own, I read Joshua Whitehead's (2023) book *IndigiQueerness: A Conversation About Storytelling*. He says that First Nations' consciousness 'is historically grounded, giving recognition and value to a form of society and collective identity that predates the nation-state' (Whitehead and Abdou 2023: 15). He says, 'I see everyone defying the expectations of border, whether it's border of province or territory or nation, but also the borders of genre or the borders of form' (Whitehead and Abdou 2023: 90).
27. Breaking the rules of form and genre might be popular in the early

twenty-first century, but its origins are not new.

To Be Seen II

28. Not long ago, I found an enormous, bright green grub in the garden. It seemed useless and defenseless, so I picked it up. Because I am a human of these times, I pulled my phone from the pocket of my jeans and directed the camera at its head. Perhaps, I thought, I would post a photo of it on Instagram. I might, I thought, ask if anyone knew what it was.
29. But every time I tried to focus on the bug's head, it squirmed and twisted its head away.
30. I placed it back into the garden and wondered what it meant to the bug to be seen. I wondered if it was shy, then I wondered if it was annoyed. In the end, the only thing I felt sure of was that the bug knew it was being watched and resisted it.

Writing and Form III (Form in Literature)

31. Form, perhaps, reconfigures ways of thinking—and form can, perhaps, reconfigure ways of being. 'It is the work of form to make order,' Levine says. 'And this means that forms are the stuff of politics.' The stakes, she says, 'are high' (Levine 2015: 3).

To Be Seen III

32. White culture hates to be seen.
33. When I told the story of how white men stole my Aunty Mandy, my mother's sister—a Peramangk woman, taken from her mother and placed with my grandmother's family, and who is part of Australia's Stolen Generation (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997)—a colleague, also a white woman, said, 'I wonder, does the narrator know yet that all cultures are flawed?'
34. I'm interested in the blinkers she wears, and I wanted to say, 'Actually, white colonial culture has its own philosophies and norms and forms.' But instead, I scribbled #notallcultures in my notebook.

Writing and Form IV (Mixing Forms and Genres)

35. Yesterday: a friend and I stood on a bridge in the forest and looked at the water below. We had been talking about how to know if something is the right thing to do. 'I don't know where I heard it,' she said. 'Maybe I read it, but water knows where to go. Each water drop knows where it needs to

go.

36. We stood and watched as the water passed below us. At one point she put her arm around me and I leant into her.
37. 'I will not mix genres,' Derrida (1980) wrote in 'The Law of Genre.' 'I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them' (p. *55*).
38. I like the way he speaks about the mobility of these terms. Upon first reading, I wondered if he really wanted to be quoted for all time as saying 'genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.' Of course, no matter how big or far reaching these words become, they will not overpower his broader legacy. Still, that was my first thought.
39. It seemed he didn't care whether these sentiments were attributed to him, though. He seemed to care only about their trajectory, their mobility, like a scientist who casts dye into rivers to see water flows and make hydrological maps.
40. Right there at the top of this article called 'The Law of Genre,' which is a pretty mighty name, he casts those words—'Genres are not to be mixed'—out into the world, marked like dye with his name all over them, to see the path they take, where they end up.
41. 'Suppose: I abandon them to their fate, I set free their random virtualities and turn them over to my audience—or, rather, to *your* audience, to your auditory grasp, to whatever mobility they retain and you bestow upon them to engender effects of all kinds without my having to stand behind them,' he says (Derrida 1980: *55*, original emphasis).

The Continents

42. Me: I will not mix continents. I won't talk of the water on this one and the water on that one; of the water appearing on this one and disappearing on that one and of all the little creatures that appear and disappear with the water appearing and disappearing. That is for science, for stories, for poems.

Writing and Form V (Grammar as Form)

43. I like the way Derrida starts his paragraph with a word and a colon.
44. So many commas,
45. so many semi-colons;
46. so many exclamation marks!
47. I like the way Ludwig Wittgenstein uses exclamation marks! And how Maggie Nelson copied him and how Wayne Koestenbaum copied Nelson—or, perhaps, how Nelson copied Koestenbaum!
48. I like the way Derrida says the words and then explains how he is using the words to see how his audience—no! how his audience's audience—uses them. What they become, where they flow.

49. Form is, he says, 'yet scarcely determined' (Derrida 1980: *55*).
50. I'm interested in Derrida's use of the word 'form' here because I am trying to understand the difference between form and genre in literature. There are 'several interpretative options,' Derrida says (1980: *55*). The options are, in fact, 'legion' (p. *55*).
51. Rivers, too, are 'yet scarcely determined.' Only when we account for things such as topography and surface (granite versus sand, for example) do the options narrow, and things like springs and wetlands appear.

To See II (Form and Seeing)

52. Having cast the dye, Derrida (1980) goes on to provide some topography and surface features: 'you may be tempted by... two modes of interpretation, or, if you prefer to give these words more of a chance, then you may be tempted by two different genres of hypothesis' (p. *55*).
53. This phrase—'genre of hypothesis'—is interesting to me because, as I have said, I'm interested in the difference between form and genre as it relates to literature, but also all narratives, and perhaps even all writings.
54. My hypothesis is that if colonialism is the overarching theme of our times, then new forms, new genres—mixing genres!—hijack and subvert its agenda, covertly telling the story of people and waters and foods and landscapes excluded from colonial narrative forms.

Mixing II (Bread-and-Butter Pudding)

55. Start with white bread. Generously spread margarine on one side, then slice into rectangles.
56. For the custard, use five eggs, this much milk, that much sugar, and whisk vigorously with a fork.
57. Outside Aunty Raylene's kitchen there is a garden with an old lemon tree growing beside a corrugated iron water tank. Beyond the garden and beyond the shoreline is the Spencer Gulf where the giant squid live.
58. Aunty Raylene arranges the bread artfully in a greased casserole dish, dots it with sultanas and margarine, then pours the custard mixture over the top. Before baking, she dusts it with cinnamon.
59. I have a friend who always suggests adding jam, but I always respond: 'No, we don't do that.'

Writing and Form VI (Limits)

60. Derrida goes on to say that the word genre evokes 'do' or 'do not,' a binary opposition that powerfully evokes limits and boundaries. Yet he also emphasizes connection. Genre in nature, he says, is inseparable from

genre in culture: 'the two genres of genre which, neither separable nor inseparable, form an odd couple of one without the other' (Derrida 1980: 55). As inseparable, he says, as 'I' and 'we' (p. 56–7).

61. Autotheory is described by Lauren Founier (2021) in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice* as 'a self-conscious way of engaging with theory' (p. 7), while in 'Queering the Essay,' David Lazar (2013: 15) argues that experimenting with genre is indelibly linked with gender as an embodiment practice. In *A History of My Brief Body*, Billy-Ray Belcourt (2020) mixes theory and memoir, embedding his personal history into his scholarship: 'I track that un-Canadian and otherworldly activity, that desire to love at all costs, by way of the theoretical site that is my personal history and the world as it presents itself to me with bloodied hands' (p. 9).

62. Bending and blurring forms invert the rules of colonial storytelling technologies, becoming an experimental site where the limits of scholarship, research, criticism, and narratology are reconfigured. Mixed genres, such as autotheory, fictocritcism, and autofiction, move and reconsider binaries and limits, elevating emerging ways of looking at twenty-first-century conversations.

63. There is no space for appropriation and deception here; no space for writers like Joseph Boyden to appropriate Indigeneity while telling mythological stories of European colonizers as though they were the stories of the colonized (Barrera 2016). When identity disclosure is embedded, the 'I' is not given places to hide.

64. Mixed forms excavate in-between spaces, creating new rules for conversations and structurally embedding new norms. When scholars disclose who they are and share the story of how they came to their subject (Muecke 2002: 108), their status as omniscient collapses and the elevation of institutional expertise over lived experience is intrinsically challenged, not just through content, but also, structurally, through form. These new genres elevate expertise acquired through lived experience, further embedding representation instead of appropriation or institutional expertise.

65. Even the notions of public and private change. In the autofiction novels of Karl Ove Knausgård and Shelia Heti, as well as the autotheory of Chris Kraus, the private becomes almost unbearably public, in an uncomfortable reshaping of the neoliberal town square.

66. I once spent a summer reading Belcourt, Kraus, Knausgård, and Heti. In autofiction and autotheory, the tension between the author and the narrator, between individual truth and collective truth, come to the front. These autoforms that elevate the 'I' are controversial. In colonial culture, the 'I' is understood as narcissistic; autoforms elevate the author over the content have a tendency to get lost in raggedy details that seem unliterary or inappropriate contributions to the neoliberal townhall, and often spiral from a stream of consciousness into critical theory. In *Bending Genre*, Margot Singer and Nicole Walker (2013) explain that one of the more challenging ideas for some is understanding that these discomforts and disruptions are often the point (p. 5).

68. My point, I guess, is that form is doing some heavy lifting in early twenty-first-century cultural conversations and the popularity of these new forms may be because of their ability to reframe the rules of critical cultural conversations.

Real Life as Form

69. In whitefella cultures, colonial cultures like Australia, the false is the real and the real is false. In the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum, a common concern was that blackfellas got 'too much,' even though in truth the wealth, natural resources, and, yes, even the children of Aboriginal people had been plundered, and even though the referendum did not include reparations for that transfer of wealth (Williams 2023, Withers 2023). Any discussion of what has been taken from Aboriginal Australians is automatically returned by white Australia with unprompted defensiveness and resentment, as though the transaction was the opposite to the truth; a myth constructed to falsify reality.
70. But white culture doesn't know it. We pretend to know, but we don't know. And we have strategies and tactics and literary forms to make us believe that up is down and down is up (King 2022).
71. Understanding white culture starts with understanding that it is something that can be observed, dissected, and seen; that it can be studied as any other system or collection of norms.
72. The unconscious belief that colonial culture isn't up for discussion is there in comments like 'Your narrator isn't white' when I say my story is about colonialism and 'all cultures are flawed' when discussing stealing Aboriginal infants.

Writing and Form VII (Autoforms)

73. Autoforms, such as autofiction, fictocriticism and autotheory, are relentless: look inside, look at the self.
74. This is a revolutionary intervention in a world where colonialism demands invisibility and resists being seen, analyzed, understood.
75. In these forms, the unexamined assumptions of dominant cultural constructs are not hidden, but put uncomfortably on display. This creates confusion and discomfort, and opens in-between spaces that allows an active redefining of the boundaries around issues like representation and appropriation, lived experience and expertise, public space and private space, as well as notions of identity, othering, consciousness, and embodiment.
76. Form and genre are not just structures, but tools and techniques, strategies and interventions, that change the way we see and understand.

In the End

77. Suppose: I was I.
78. Suppose: We were We.[1]

1. This piece is about the differences between form and content. The form of this essay has a number of influences: the numbered passages are influenced by Berlant and Stewart (2019), Ghosh (2016), Nelson (2009), and Wittgenstein (1922); the invitations to 'suppose' and 'imagine' are influenced by Derrida (1980) and Nelson (2009).

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Author's bio

Libby King writes short stories, autofiction, and autotheory essays that explore how form influences content. Her most recent autotheory essay in *Project Passage* uses blended literary forms to explore family separation, colonization, subjectivity, climate change, and the boundaries between science and mythology. Her work has appeared in literary journals including *Meanjin*, *Prairie Fire*, and *Grain*. She is completing a PhD at Flinders University under the guidance of Kylie Cardell and Stephen Muecke and sits on the Editorial Board of PRISM International. Originally from Adelaide, Australia, Libby lives on the west coast of Canada.

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