

Review:

Genre and the Performance of Publics by Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (Eds.)

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In 1984, Carolyn Miller's "Genre as Social Action" was published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, laying the foundation for what we now call Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS). In this oft-cited piece, Miller outlines a theory of genre "centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" (151). Genres, Miller argues, are not collections of static textual conventions, but rather "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159).

Miller's foray into genre has launched a sustained and diverse field of inquiry; like genre itself, Miller's article seems most significant in what actions it has performed, how it has been taken up, and the ways it continually provokes innovative work. We might even locate this call for further inquiry in its title: *Genre as Social Action*. In a recent interview with Miller, Dylan Dryer notes this provocative construction: "It's not an *is*, so the implication there is that there is work to be done. It's a construct to consider" (Dryer, para 6).

It is within this call for more work that I find the roots of Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi's recent edited collection, *Genre and the Performance of Publics*. Indeed, the collection represents the sort of boundary testing conditioned by Miller's foundational provocation for a more practice-oriented notion of genre. In its expansive pursuits, this collection offers an important and provocative perspective on the work we do as scholars and researchers invested in public rhetoric and community writing,

Fundamentally, *Genre and the Performance of Publics* seeks to fill a void in RGS. Despite genre remaining a central concept in Rhetoric and Composition, genre scholarship has largely focused its attention on academic, workplace, and other institutional locations in which genres circulate in relatively routinized and stable ways (6). As readers of *Reflections* will recognize, this centripetal emphasis on institutional locations stands in stark contrast to other disciplinary work, where scholars have worked to locate our research and teaching within broader community spaces and public spheres.

Recognizing this divide between genre scholarship and our disciplinary "public turn" (Mathieu), this collection seeks to examine how a turn toward public genres might contribute to both extant work on public writing and engagement as well as genre theory more generally. In their introduction, Reiff and Bawarshi signal this type of theoretical reciprocity as they outline the three central aims for the collection: "(1) to fill a gap in rhetorical genre studies' attention to public genres, (2) to bring rhetorical genre studies into dialogue with public sphere scholarship in ways we hope will contribute to both areas of study, and (3) to enrich an understanding of public genres as dynamic performances that can contribute to research on and the teaching of public discourse" (5). This ethos of mutual benefit is important to sustain future work on public genre, and I can imagine—and indeed, hope to see—uptakes of this collection that include other voices of teachers, scholars, and community members engaged in the work of public writing, community engagement, and service learning.

The twelve chapters themselves are divided into four parts. I suspect that Part I, "The Interdiscursivity of Public Genres: Dynamics of

Uptakes, Agency, and the Performances of Public Life,” will be of significant interest to readers of *Reflections*, in that it offers rhetorical frameworks immediately useful for understanding the situated factors that influence writing’s role in the shaping of community and public life. In the opening contribution, for example, Vijay K. Bhatia’s definition of genres as “interdiscursive practices” offers a means to account for the ways that public writers work across and pull from a diverse range of rhetorical resources outside of the text “in order to respond to typical and not-so-typical situational configurations, thereby creating novel responses” (40). Anis Bawarshi’s contribution focuses on the rhetorical entrenchment of such public debates as the Israel-Palestine conflict, in which the uptakes or responses to new public genres become ossified, normalized, and routinized over time. This process of conditioned public response forestalls change and productive argumentation, and Bawarshi considers how genre researchers might intervene and work to develop strategies sensitive to the accumulated memories and histories at play when we encounter public genres. This emphasis on intervention requires the production of more robust disciplinary frameworks for understanding the complex ways that genres structure, and are structured by, publics. Dylan Dryer offers one such framework in his attempt to disambiguate uptake. Rather than offer a new, umbrella definition, Dryer constructs a taxonomy in which each term—uptake artifact; uptake capture; uptake residue; uptake enactment; and uptake affordance—designates a different component in the process of genre uptake. Dryer’s work, along with the other contributions in Part I, offers a useful granularity in better understanding and intervening in the complex roles that genres play in the production of public life.

Part II, “Historicizing Public Genres: Invention, Evolution, and Embodiment of Public Performances,” continues this framework building as it brings together work on historical-public genres such as dictionaries (Russell), petitions (Reiff), and interwar vocational guides (Applegarth). Each chapter in this section seeks to examine the situated historical, material, and spatial factors that shape and are shaped by genre’s public performances. To this end, Lindsay Rose Russell identifies “invention” as an important and understudied component of genre performance, that moment when “individuals, perceiving their work to be outside of accepted genres, project and attempt to stage the circumstances for new kinds of generically

mediated action" (91). Considering the beginnings of Cawdrey's English dictionary, Russell contends that attention to genre invention, those historically specific and contingent locations out of which genres emanate, allows us to examine the specific historical and social conflicts embedded within genres "before the systematizing memory of genre erases that sense of diversity and debate" (85). This chapter is compelling in its potential to be adapted to the study of contemporary public genres whose inventions are not outside of living memory. While Russell richly reconstructs the invention of the dictionary through historical methods, I can imagine work on genre beginnings as a more collaborative and potentially ethnographic process within the communities participating in the invention itself.

Part III, "Intermediary Public Genres: Mobilizing Knowledge Across Genre Boundaries," demonstrates the complexity and theoretical difficulties of genre interactions within and across publics, exploring the linkages (Devitt), dynamic and agential networks (Tachino), and potential disconnections (Smart) across discrete venues of public-genre work. Amy Devitt, specifically, considers the difficulty in examining "occluded genres" (Swales); those genres, like jury instructions, are not immediately available to broader publics or researchers, and are thus more resistant to reform. In the face of this public-genre inaccessibility, Devitt encourages researchers to seek out the surrounding "visible genre sets" that "can give us access to the situation, if not to the genre itself" (140). While still primarily text-based, Devitt's explicit emphasis on methodology is most welcome, as it is an area that is less visible in the collection as a whole.

Part IV, "Digital Public Genres: Mediating Public Engagement and Expanding Public Participation," focuses on the unique affordances, limitations, and performances of public genres in digital space. Each of the contributions in this section further develops a framework for the future study of public genres: from Monica Brown's discussion of "genre appropriation" in HBO's promotional website and campaign "The Weight of the Nation" to Jaclyn Rea and Michelle Riedlinger's work on how individuals redefined their public roles by producing risk videos in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. While teaching this section in an upper-level undergraduate course on genre, I found students especially interested in Jennifer Nish's discussion of spreadable

genres—genres that “support the formation and coordination of more diffuse publics by allowing for a wider distribution of uptakes than institutional genre systems and sets allow” (242)—as a means to better understand the complex ways that groups productively circulate public genres across divergent digital environments.

While the scope of this collection is impressive—and exceedingly difficult to capture in such a brief, directed review—a more sustained engagement with inventive, participatory, community-based research methods would have made this text more immediately useful to scholars across the broader public turn. Yet this is more a desire for future work as it is a criticism. Indeed, perhaps evident at this point, my admiration for this collection is largely based on its ability to provoke further innovative work on genres in public. As Reiff and Bawarshi explicitly note in the introduction, the connection points between public sphere scholarship and Rhetorical Genre Studies are diverse, mutually beneficial, and, potentially, collaborative (6-9). There is no doubt to my mind that this collection provides an important reminder of the capaciousness of genre study, how the study of genre might compel us into the emergent spaces and conversations of public work. An emphasis on genre shows us the important role that writing plays in the shaping and reshaping of public life, and those of us invested in the study of communities, publics, and writing should consider genre an important resource as we make sense of the complex work that writing does in the world. While there is always more work to be done, *Genre and the Performance of Publics* thoughtfully offers a window into the potential for a more spatially expansive approach to the study and theory of genre *and* publics.

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