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## Genre and the Performance of Publics

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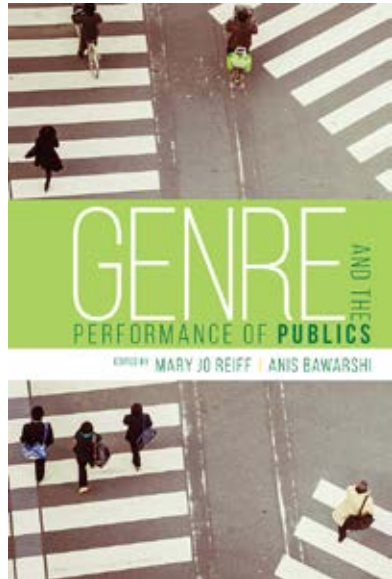
## Genre and the Performance of Publics

*Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi, Eds.*  
University Press of Colorado, 2016. 224 pp.

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**G***enre and the Performance of Publics* is dedicated to examining the relationship between genre networks and the performance of public life. In the introduction, “From Genre Turn to Public Turn: Navigating the Intersections of Public Sphere Theory, Genre Theory, and the Performance of Publics,” Reiff and Bawarshi seek to disambiguate terms such as “genre” and “uptake” that are frequently used in Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) and used throughout this collection. Genres, they assert, are “both social (typified, recognizable, and consequential ways of organizing texts, activities, and social reality) and cognitive (involved phenomenologically in how we recognize, encounter, and make sense of situations) phenomena” (3). Uptake is a more difficult term to pin down. Anne Freedman’s influence on *Genre and the Performance of Publics* cannot be overstated. Most contributors to this collection work from an understanding of uptake Freedman established in her influential essay “Uptake” published in *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change* in 2002. Uptake, in its simplest form, is “an intentional utterance . . . [that] helps produce an effect . . . under certain conditions” (11). Scholars in this collection continuously wrestle with epistemological and ontological questions related to the definition of uptake as well as its interdiscursive functions. Bawarshi offers a succinct definition of uptake in chapter two in his analysis of memory and uptake that is beneficial when considering the general use of the term ‘uptake’ in this collection. Although Bawarshi’s specific analysis of uptake is related to memory, readers can extrapolate from his analysis of memory and apply it to any force that may “shape our encounters with what we read, hear and see and how we take these up in our responses and actions” (48).

Reiff and Bawarshi state that the overarching aim of the collection “is threefold: (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 the teaching of public discourse” (5). The collection is largely successful in its aims and refreshing in



its approach. Of particular interest are the chapters on occluded genres and genres in which technology plays a vital role. This collection anticipates the difficulties inherent in analyzing and participating in genres that rely heavily on technology.

In chapter one, "Genre as Interdiscursive Performance in Public Space," Vijay K. Bhatia examines how interdiscursivity informs the study of genres. He introduces the concept of genre appropriation, a concept revisited later in the collection, and investigates how private discourse is appropriated for public consumption through social media, an issue that is especially relevant given how we increasingly live our lives online. Early in the chapter, Bhatia states that he is building on his previous genre studies research, an initially unproblematic approach adopted by many scholars; however, as implicit and explicit self-references accumulate, readers may be taken aback by the self-references that only distract from his otherwise salient analysis. Nevertheless, Bhatia establishes an interesting framework for better understanding the impact of technology on public life.

In chapter two Anis Bawarshi examines the relationship between memory, uptake, and agency. Using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a framework to analyze liminality related to genre and uptake, Bawarshi relies on Anne Freedman's assertion that uptakes have memories, stating, "We do not simply respond to the immediate demands of a rhetorical situation, an utterance, a text, a genre. Uptakes have memories in the sense that they are learned recognitions and inclinations that, over time and through affective attachments and formations of power, become habitual and take on a life of their own" (49-50). In this way, Bawarshi's approach to uptake is a kind of historiography of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict filtered through the lens of genre studies in which he examines the evolution of uptake within Israeli-Palestinian discourse. Bawarshi's interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is admittedly personal, as he describes himself as "a Palestinian-Lebanese American married to a Jewish woman, with two children who are both Jewish and Palestinian" (43). Bawarshi's personal investment in the Israel-Palestinian conflict is evident through his use of examples from his life; moreover, the framework he implements to illustrate the relationship between memory and uptake is effective and thought-provoking.

Amy J. Devitt investigates a unique dilemma in genre studies: genres that resist or prohibit thorough analysis. In chapter seven, "Uncovering Occluded Publics: Untangling Public, Personal, and Technical Spheres in Jury Deliberation," Devitt examines the trial of George Zimmerman through an analysis of its jury deliberations. She does an admirable job focusing on the occluded genre of jury deliberations. Devitt states that she "use[s] the genres of jury deliberations and jury instructions, supplemented by juror interviews, to examine how genre analysis can reveal hidden situations and open those situations to critique" (140). She accepts that juror interviews are problematic insofar as interviews are often unreliable; however, her inclusion of interviews is necessary because it is one of the limited entry points into understanding jury deliberations. Members of the George Zimmerman jury have publicly stated their belief that Zimmerman was guilty of killing Trayvon Martin while also expressing their inability to convict him given the constraints of their deliberation instructions. Devitt's analysis of the George Zimmerman jury instructions and deliberations

exposes how language impacts verdicts. She highlights the specialized language in criminal proceedings used by both attorneys and judges and observes that this language is often confusing to jurors who are neither educated nor trained in its use. Additionally, jurors often have limited resources available to them to clarify instructions steeped in legal jargon. Devitt argues for simplified language and more access to judges as a way to remedy the challenges jurors face in fulfilling their public duty.

Building on Bhatia's introduction of genre appropriation in chapter one, Monica M. Brown investigates the ramifications of genre appropriation in chapter ten, "Appropriating Genre, 'Taking Action' Against Obesity: The Rhetorical Work of Digital Genre Systems in Public Discourse." Brown's primary concern is "the problem of genre appropriation" and the ways in which "corporations have turned to genre appropriation as a strategy for manufacturing rhetorical ethos" (202). The framework for Brown's analysis is an unlikely partnership between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Home Box Office (HBO). After the American Medical Association (AMA) declared obesity a disease rather than a condition, the CDC developed and published information on their website to help combat obesity in America. HBO partnered with the CDC to produce *The Weight of the Nation*, a documentary series about the obesity epidemic in America. Both the CDC and HBO present public health resources related to issues of obesity, albeit with different goals. The CDC's interactive website is largely informational, while HBO's web presence with regard to *The Weight of the Nation* is largely promotional. HBO clearly trades on the rhetorical ethos of the CDC to lend credibility to its documentary. When viewers of the documentary engage with social media, what is perceived as an uptake, they are often sharing links or liking links related to the documentary about obesity, thus creating the illusion of activism; however, upon closer examination, their engagement is more corporate promotion than social activism. Brown classifies this engagement as "slacktivism." Brown identifies slacktivism as an inherent pitfall specifically related to digital genre appropriation. According to Brown, "slacktivism' [is] the trend of performing online actions on behalf of an issue or a cause that have little to no impact on its advancement. Slacktivists usually commit these token acts of support through social media—for example, by joining a Facebook group, liking a social media post, or signing an online petition" (202–203). Slacktivism rarely, however, translates into actual support for a cause, which is a cause for concern.

In chapter twelve Jennifer Nish offers a counterpoint to Monica M. Brown's assertion about slacktivism. Nish explores the ways in which "spreadable genres perform specific rhetorical functions: helping to form and coordinate publics centered around activist issues" through her analysis of the Pixel Project, which is aimed at eradicating violence against women (240). Nish analyzes the Pixel Project, an online non-profit, whose presence relies solely on online interaction. In the case of the Pixel Project, Nish determines that the spreadability of the genre is the uptake. The Pixel Project has a website, blog, dedicated Twitter account, and a YouTube channel. Information is disseminated via social media and is spread by activists who align themselves with the movement to end violence against women. Often, the information provided includes statistics and helpline information for women seeking to escape

violent environments. Nish indirectly addresses the concerns Brown has about slacktivism; specifically, Nish argues that promotion of an issue through social media is a form of legitimate activism. For the Pixel Project, the spreading of information functions digitally in much the same way a traditional activist might meet with a group to march for a cause or to hand out pamphlets or other informational materials; now, however, activism can happen with the click of a button. Nish highlights the evolution of the genre and corresponding evolution of the uptake which results in a progressive analysis of both.

*Genre and the Performance of Publics* is an admirable exploration of genre and uptake in the public sphere. It's a cohesive collection whose individual authors engage with relevant issues—politics, health, crime, and digital platforms—through refreshingly unpredictable frameworks, an approach that contributes to the book's overall effectiveness. Toward the end of the collection, the authors engage with questions about our increasingly digital world and the impact on uptake and agency. While *Genre and the Performance Publics* doesn't offer any definitive resolution to these issues, it does effectively expand discussion on them and encourages activists and academics to investigate the impact of technology on our utterances and how those utterances circulate in our communities.