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The Genres of Genre: Form, Formats, and Cultural Formations

Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos, in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions.

— James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel”

Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity.

— Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre”

Genre is a Janus-faced theoretical genre. To examine the genres of genre in our time leads us to wonder about the foundation of critical theory from its recorded inception in classical antiquity and ponder the future of our academic and political practices. Not only does genre have the capacity to participate in the construction of communities through its reiteration of formulas and their corresponding values, but it also has the potential to transgress and transform the conventions of these communities. Contemporary examples of the establishment of conventions in genres and their use as counter-cultural “war machines,” to borrow Monique Wittig’s term (45), abound. As a powerful and flexible critical device, genre reveals the past and present relations and patterns of fiction and community-building processes. As Linda Williams suggests, “Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems they address; but genres thrive also in their ability to recast the nature of these problems” (“Film Bodies” 12). To offer what Jacques Derrida calls “a critical history of the concept of genre from Plato to the present” (59) is therefore crucial to evidence the interactions between genre and the issues with which it engages. While the essays in this volume consider the

historical depth of genre, they also address the political effects of genre as its predication on conventions enables communities to negotiate its exclusive and inclusive dimensions.

Given the importance of historical and conventional aspects of genre, it is to be expected that genre operates in specific contexts. This volume addresses genre in the contemporary United States. In their recent volume on the adventure narrative, Johan Höglund and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet point out that “One could define a ‘genre’ as belonging to a specific historical and cultural moment and agree that a ‘mode’ or ‘form’ can refer to a larger pattern that operates across a wider historical and cultural field” (1302).¹ John Frow, on the other hand, contends that genres transform their contexts:

Genre, we might say, is a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning [...] That is why genre matters: it is central to human meaning-making and to the social struggle over meanings. (10)

If genre can be understood as a way of symbolically organizing meaning, it also reveals the context in which it operates: in the contemporary United States, climate change, gender politics, neoliberalism, intersectional representations of race and class, and the circulation of affect are all generic matters. Genre organizes the conventions that delimit these matters and stages their performance.

Reflecting on genre consists in reflecting on the political significance of critical theory when the latter leaves the ivory tower of academia. In *The Republic* already, Plato insists upon this political aspect. His exclusion of the poets from the polis is *generic*: it is the genre of poetry they write that turns “the imitative tribe” into individuals that need to be “rejected” from his idealized political space. In a daring analogy with the body, Socrates argues that the genre of imitative poetry “wastes and reduces and annihilates” the souls of the citizens of the Republic. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle counters this Platonic argument of the degenerative character of mimesis and proposes a theory of genre that would prove formative for literary studies:

¹ This distinction between genre and form is also found in Caroline Levine’s recent *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, although – as James Dorson’s essay in this volume reveals – it is a distinction that is liable to push this definition of form into absurdity.

The graver spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men. The more trivial sort imitated the actions of meaner persons, at first composing satires, as the former did hymns to the gods and the praises of famous men [...] The appropriate meter was also here introduced; hence the measure is still called the iambic or lampooning measure, being that in which people lampooned one another. Thus the older poets were distinguished as writers of heroic or of lampooning verse. (IV, 1448b)

Aristotle creates a poetic nomenclature that we still use today, and he establishes genre as a critical category: the genre of criticism.

In the Renaissance the criticism generated by Aristotle would flourish and give to writers such as Dante Alighieri in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* or his *Convivio* the basis of their definition of Western modernity. In these treatises, Dante ponders the relations between language and the advent of a new political community, that community we would call “modern” or “Renaissance.” If for Aristotle genre is a question of literary convention as well as aesthetic and ethical appropriateness, with Dante it is a question of epochal change. Modern humanity in search of its “scented panther” (*panthera redolens*) (I, XVI, 1), that is, the very language of “modernity,” is characterized by the linguistic and poetic genres it adopts. With the ever-expanding horizon of Eurocentric metaphysics that would characterize the Renaissance, genre is no longer a question of taste, but rather an ethical and political performance. Genre is formative and constitutive: it brings together the new *civitas* that Dante is seeking to delineate. We see that in Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, whose white, virile, and Christian figure embodies that modernity at the center of the orb and the *castrum* of our modern world.

The eighteenth-century aesthetic turn endowed genres with kinds and degrees of beauty while further confirming their politically performative character. In a notorious passage from *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where Thomas Jefferson elaborates on how “the first difference” between human bodies “which strikes us is that of color” (264), he speculates about scientific possibilities that we now accept as specious and unequivocally racist to apply generic distinctions based on aesthetics to people. For Jefferson, beauty has generic standards, and the determining consciousness of those standards is a white and male one that wishes to dispose of black bodies and, albeit differently, of Native bodies. These bodies are to be “rejected,” for they do not belong in the ideal pastoral republic for which Virginia stands as an aesthetic model and a political experiment. Jefferson is an example of the profound consequences of generic categorization; he shows that when we deal with genre we are not merely disposing books on some imaginary shelf, but we are really dealing with the

semiotics that weaves the fabric of our cultures and societies. Aesthetic taxonomies determine not only what belongs to a given genre and should find a place in our libraries, museums, and syllabi: more importantly, it adjudicates on who is entitled to live in the space of the polis.

This is confirmed by Jefferson's commentary on Phillis Wheatley and his contempt for the genre of – what *we* would call – African American poetry, which he finds “below the *dignity of criticism*” (267; emphasis added). These shocking words of the future third president of the United States show the performative power of genre that reinforces and legitimizes individual speech acts. Jefferson's words echo the etymology of “genre”: the word comes from the French *genre*, meaning “kind” and “class,” and from Latin *genus*, meaning “birth,” “origin,” “race.” Derrida notes,

One need not mobilize etymology to [. . .] equate *genos* with birth, and birth in turn with the generous force of engenderment or generation – *physis*, in fact – as with race, familial membership, classificatory genealogy or class, age class (generation), or social class (61).

The Greek source of the word, *γένος* (*genos*), thus further confirms what we read in Jefferson, namely that genre also defines social and political class, and that the question of kind is also – if not primarily – a question of kin. Precisely because Jefferson's remarks are so problematically racist to us, they point to the historical condition of genre.

Genre does not stand as a preexisting category, but results rather from inclusive and exclusive strategies and from the tacit consensus of an audience. This last remark is harmless enough if we consider that most audiences can recognize a genre – the gothic or the western, for instance – without necessarily being able to trace its theoretical contours. On the other hand, this tacit historical consensus becomes alarming when we think of the generic exclusion exemplified by Plato, Jefferson, or some of the contemporary examples the present volume discusses. This also means that an active and discerning understanding of genre is essential to raise our awareness of the consequences of the tacit agreement on which many exclusions are based.

Genre theory, as Aristotelian categories suggest, aims at organizing and making sense of otherwise unwieldy material. Literature, film, painting and artistic productions are thus grouped in genres where these productions can be located. The inclusion of any new element into a genre modifies it; far from being a natural given, genre is a place of permanent negotiation and reconfiguration. This is, for instance, what Paul Alpers

writes when he responds – twenty-five years after the fact – to a reading of John Milton’s *Lycidas* by M. H. Abrams. Alpers comments on how “Virgil’s shepherds come together to entertain each other, in friendship and in friendly rivalry” and he insists on the sense of community created by readers who are like the Virgilian shepherds:

The word “convention” comes from [...] *convenire*, come together [...] [P]astoral conventions are not fixed procedures imposed by impersonal tradition, but are the usages of other poets – a *community of past singers* [...] *Poetic convention* in this sense – *the shared practice of those who come together to sing* – can enable individual expression, because the poet is seen as responsive to, even when challenging, his predecessors and fellows. (470; emphasis added)

Alpers emphasizes the ethical and communal quality of genre that not only provides a frame of reference for readers and helps them make sense of texts, but also helps them to realize the conditions of an interpretive community. The transformations of genre, or the development of a new genre, can thus be read as a response to changing social and political conditions, but also as an influence on these conditions.

An example of how genre can work to create consensus in the US national context is the development of crime fiction. As a genre, crime fiction polices its own territory while it is also about the policing of the legality and morality of the US community. Edgar Allan Poe is credited with generating American crime fiction with his three Auguste Dupin stories.² These stories and the genre they determine coincided with demographic, economic, and technological transformations in the United States. The genre crossed the ocean to be further developed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie before returning to the United States in the works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, who pioneered the hard-boiled detective novel. In its transformations, the genre privileged and promoted an image of the ideal citizen reminiscent of Plato’s, Dante’s, and Jefferson’s, in detective figures such as Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe.

However, as several authors have shown since the Civil Rights Movement, crime fiction can be an inclusive genre. Beginning in the 1950s, it became a platform for critiquing and subverting the stereotypical values promoted by the genre. This was done by activists and innova-

² This is suggested by specialists of crime fiction such as Stephen Knight, Catherine Ross-Nickerson, and John Scaggs; see *References* below. The three Auguste Dupin short stories include “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844).

tors such as African American Chester Himes and feminist Sara Paretsky.³ For example, Himes famously complicated the question of blame, of who *the* criminal is: “I had started out to write a detective story [...] but I couldn’t name *the* white man who was guilty because all white men are guilty” (qtd in Reddy 140; emphasis added). Himes’s point alerts us to the role of genre in stabilizing the ascription of blame to individual agents (a conservative position), rather than to the structural conditions which we now understand to be the cause of social injustice.⁴ Adapting the mechanism of a genre, making it inclusive rather than exclusive, can consequently come to stand as a form of political engagement and judicial redress.

Yet even at its most inclusive, instead of policing the world and ensuring everybody’s rightful place in the community, the stereotypes of genre have become exclusionary strategies. As James Baldwin writes in the first epigraph to this introduction, the “limbo” (19) between exclusion and inclusion in which genre dwells is also pointed out by scholars from communities who have been and still are neither within nor without the American community. As Chickasaw scholar, Jodi A. Byrd, states, “[t]hat genre [...] demands affiliation at the same time that it marks differentiation is one of the primary reasons that it enacts coloni- alist discourse at the site of imagination” (346). This bargaining affiliation and differentiation reflects the status of Native Americans in the United States because it echoes the legal status of their nations as “domestic dependent nations” (Deloria and Lytle 4). The generic negotiation between exclusion and inclusion is not only an artistic practice, but also a lived experience for Indigenous peoples.

While Byrd shows how Indigenous authors such as Blackfeet writer Stephen Graham Jones take the in-betweenness of genres as their creative site, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice coins the term “wonderworks” (152) to prevent the works of Indigenous authors from being constrained by the conventions of fantasy fiction:

³ Post-Civil Rights innovators of crime fiction being too numerous to list here, these are only two of the most famous innovators of the genre. These examples also omit intersectional takes on crime fiction, which, of course, also exist. It is also important to note that earlier crime fiction could also be inclusive (Dashiell Hammett, for example, embedded his communist sympathies into his writing); just as countercultural crime fiction could also display exclusive dimensions (Himes’s writing is as unconcerned with feminist criticism of crime fiction as Paretsky’s early novels are silent on the issue of race).

⁴ For more on how race relations in the United States are negotiated through genre and mode, see Linda Williams’s seminal study *Playing the Race Card*.

“Wonder,” on the other hand, is a word rooted in meaningful uncertainty, curiosity, humility; it places unsolvable mystery, not fixed insistence, at the heart of engagement [...] Wondrous things are *other* and *otherwise* [...] They remind us that other worlds exist; other realities abide alongside and within our own. Wonderworks, then, are those works of art – literary, filmic, etc. – that center this possibility within Indigenous values and toward Indigenous, decolonial purposes. (153)

Justice suggests that it is impossible to live otherwise and be part of other realities within Eurocentric, generic conventions, a claim that leads him to create the theoretical and artistic space of wonderworks. Including non-Eurocentric perspectives on the critical concept of genre might well consist in innovating the discussion of belonging to the American community and, thus, transform the question of kin.

This collection of essays explores contemporary understandings and examples of genres as well as the circulation of values or affect through genre. The essays are organized into three parts: “Form and Genre,” “Analyzing Genres,” and “Affordances of Genre.” James Dorson opens the first part with a reconsideration of a central distinction in genre theory – the distinction between form and genre – in a critique of one of the most celebrated works of new formalism, Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015). Dorson turns the constitutive dismissal of genre that structures Levine’s theory of form back against her thesis, revealing the critical absence in Levine’s book of a constructive engagement with “the process theory of genre” that recognizes its “softness” (as opposed to Levine’s “hardness” of form) and its consequences for the interaction and development of the determinative forms of social, political, and cultural life. Continuing the theme of what genre can (or cannot) do in terms of social and political work, Audrey Loetscher offers an unorthodox perspective which employs the rubric of genre theory, and particularly the genre of the manifesto, to interpret the methodologies of climate change litigation in the United States. Loetscher’s essay circumscribes the criteria that are needed for the development of an effective strategy to counter the climate crisis, but – in her analysis of the ongoing *Juliana v. United States* case in Eugene, Oregon – she identifies the persistence of tropes in key examples of the genre of the manifesto that ensure that such generically defined forms of resistance are doomed to ineffectiveness.

The second part of the volume, “Analyzing Genres,” features several essays which reflect further on genres (extant or nascent) that are relevant for the study of topical issues in the contemporary United States. In an essay that links Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853) to

David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011) and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018), Sixta Quassdorf proposes the emergence of the genre of the “office novel” as a manifestation of anxieties that are symptoms of bureaucratic and technocratic late capitalism. Rather than dismissing representations of office work in popular genre fiction as merely coincidental and insignificant, Quassdorf argues that literary representations of clerical work illustrate transformations of social life in the United States, and that adopting a generic approach allows for a more analytical appraisal of “the materiality of the individual in socioeconomic structures.” Bryan Banker's essay examines how the genre of science fiction is particularly well suited to the analysis of social relations under capitalism. Banker argues that the imbrication of class and race described in contemporary Marxist social theory is rendered starkly visible in *The Expanse* (2015-present), a television series produced by the Syfy network that portrays the peripheralization of industrial labor to the asteroid belt as well as the “racialization” of its laborers that is the consequence of physical transformations caused by industrial labor in a zero-gravity environment. Olga Thierbach-McLean provides a counterpart to Banker that also examines science fiction; specifically, the subgenre of cyberpunk and its “aesthetic standstill” that makes this subgenre potentially problematic in terms of race relations in the US. Thierbach-McLean describes Hollywood cyberpunk, from the 1980s to the present, as “dynamic and static at the same time,” reflecting shifts in geopolitics, but nonetheless maintaining a problematic socio-cultural continuity in terms of its depictions of “Asianness” to visualize dystopia. Consequently, Thierbach-McLean reflects on how the topological fixtures of genre can, when left unchecked, turn manifestations of sociocultural anxieties into shorthand for generic belonging, and from there potentially into aesthetic fixtures that renew the same sociocultural anxieties for the following generation.

The final part of this collection, “Affordances of Genre,” offers insights into affordances of genre. J. Jesse Ramírez examines genre as a means of “organizing belief [...] in a non- or extra-empirical reality” that has concrete sociopolitical valences insofar as race itself is structured on the same terms. Using the Netflix movie *Bright* (2018) as his focal point, Ramírez dismantles the cyclical logic by which “racecraft” emerges in social contexts, is then manifested (and exploited) as a recognizable social structure in major cultural texts (in this case, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), and thereafter is turned back onto society again as a means of interpreting the structure of its ailments. The overall consequence, Ramírez notes, is that this sociocultural reflexivity stabilizes the apparently “natural” distinction of racial difference, and hence the program of

racecraft continues in a single, unabated trajectory that reifies and fixes the “everyday epistemology of race” in a way that will remain unaffected by the traditional call for mutual “tolerance” to ease sociopolitical tensions. In the concluding essay, Courtney Jacobs and Ronald Schleifer take up slightly different issues of “self-evident” aspects of social life that are uniquely mediated by genre; specifically, the issue of whether genre might be capable of manifesting impersonal, collective, or trans-historical abstractions of “feeling.” Jacobs and Schleifer do not regard genre as a means of apprehending emotional experience according to extant, “self-evident” affective structures; instead, using the genre of the slave narrative as their example, Jacobs and Schleifer argue that the legibility of the suffering invariably foregrounded by such narratives is produced by their authors’ metaleptic concession to the generic conventions that make such suffering legible. In the nineteenth century, this generic instrumentalism was imperative, but in reality authentic empathy from American readers for the suffering of chattel slaves was and remains impossible due to the scale and illegibility of that suffering. Consequently, Jacobs and Schleifer engage with the most prominent of neo-slave narratives, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), to explore how this modern development on the genre of the slave narrative seeks to address the limits of the slave narrative’s purpose and “accommodate an illegible narrative void” in the collective memory of the US.

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