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The Ecology of Genre

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In the last thirty or so years, teachers and scholars of writing have made great strides in exploring the cognitive dimensions of textual production, to the extent that the "writing as process" (see Crowley) movement is now recognized as central to the intellectual and pedagogical enterprise of composition studies. Only more recently, however, have teachers and scholars of writing fully begun to consider the social dimensions that contribute to how and why cognition and texts are produced. This "social turn" (Trimbur) recognizes that there is more at work on the text than just the writer's autonomous cognition; there are also various social forces that constitute the scene of production within which the writer's cognition as well as his or her texts are situated and shaped. Within composition studies, this scene of writing is most commonly identified as a discourse community—the social and rhetorical environment within which goals, assumptions, and values are shared by participants who employ common discourse strategies for communicating and practicing these goals, assumptions, and values. Those teachers and scholars who espouse such a social constructionist position shift the balance of power from the writer's cognition to the writer's context, hence creating a dichotomy between those who argue for the primacy and cognitive authority of the writer and those who argue for the primacy and discursive authority of the writer's social environment.[1]

Of course, this dichotomy is pedagogically and theoretically limited. Neither the writer nor his or her social environment exists independently of one another. Neither is artificial nor static enough so as to remain self-sufficient. Rather, communicants and their social environments are constantly in the process of reproducing one another, in much the same way that biologic ecosystems sustain, and are sustained by, their organisms. Composition studies for the most part lack the ecological vocabulary to conceptualize and describe such a dynamic relation between communicants and their environments. While we recognize that the self and the social inform one another in some way, we still perceive them as funda-

mentally separate: the self is one thing; the social is another. The self is inside; the social is outside. The self is subjective; the social is constructed. What we lack is a theoretical perspective for perceiving the self and the social as recursively at work on one another, as engaged in an ecologically symbiotic relationship. Ecocomposition can supply such a perspective by helping us recognize that a writer and his or her rhetorical environment are always in the process of reproducing one another, so that "environment" is not some vague backdrop against which writers enact their rhetorical actions; instead, the environment becomes in critical ways part of the very rhetorical action that writers enact. We create our environments—our rhetorical situations—as we write within them; that is, we create our contexts as we create our texts. And genre is at the heart of this ecological/rhetorical process.

In the "Ecology of Writing," Marilyn Cooper describes what she calls "an ecological model of writing" (7) in which a writer is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems. These social systems are not merely contextual backdrops; they are "dynamic interlocking systems that structure the social activity of writing" (7). Thus, writing is not a social act simply because it takes place in some social context; it is social because it is at work in shaping the very context within which it functions. A writer's response to, and interaction within, a social context affects that social context. It is not that a writer merely functions within a context, but that a writer participates in the construction of that context. Writing is both constituted by, and constitutive of, ever-changing social contexts (12). This is why writing is ecological.

In much the same way, genres are ecological. As what I am calling "rhetorical ecosystems," genres help communicants recognize, act within, and reproduce recurring environments (see Bazerman, Devitt, and Miller). Following Carolyn Miller ("Genre as Social Action"), for instance, Charles Bazerman defines genres as social actions. He writes:

> Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (19)

To claim that genres are environments within which familiar social actions are rhetorically enacted and reproduced is to reject traditional notions of

genres as artificial forms or arbitrary classification systems for organizing and defining kinds of texts. Indeed, over the last fifteen years, genre scholars in speech communication, applied linguistics, and composition and rhetoric have reconceptualized genre so that it includes not only ways of organizing and defining kinds of texts, but also ways of organizing and defining kinds of social actions, social actions that genres rhetorically make possible. As such, genres are now understood as containing both a functional and an epistemological dimension; they are both the familiar rhetorical tools communicants use to respond to recurring situations as well as the ways in which communicants come to know and define recurring situations. Genres, in short, are the sites in which communicants rhetorically reproduce the very environments to which they in turn respond—the habits and the habitats for acting in language. This is why I argue that genres are rhetorical ecosystems that allow communicants to enact and reproduce various environments, social practices, relations, and identities. In the rest of this chapter, I make the case for such an ecological view of genres.

GENRES AS RHETORICAL ECOSYSTEMS: HOW

Human beings are rhetorical beings. We are not only different from other animals because of our capacity to use language as symbolic action or because we can use language to express ourselves in rhetorical ways; more significantly, we use language to construct rhetorical environments in which we exist, interact with one another, and enact social actions. We are constantly in the process of reproducing our contexts as we communicate within them, speaking and writing about our realities and ourselves to the extent that discourse and reality cannot be separated. Within these rhetorical constructs, we assume different rhetorical identities and perform different social activities as we negotiate our way from one environment to the next, often balancing multiple identities and activities at the same time. While on a recent visit to Florida, I was struck by the extent of this fact. Seemingly everywhere, the geography of Florida is rhetorically demarcated by such slogans as The *Real* Florida or billboards that promise real estate that allows one to Experience the *Wild* in Your Backyard. These slogans and billboards ironically stand interspersed between billboards advertising the staged realities of Disney's EPCOT Center and Universal Studios. Marking Florida's highways, these signs appear to be engaged in a grand rhetorical argument with one another: the "real" Florida versus the "tourist" Florida. But this binary does not really hold.

The "real" Florida is as much a simulacrum as is the "tourist" Florida.' Both are rhetorical demarcations, ways of defining and conceptualizing our notions of place. Certainly, Epcot is more overtly rhetorical in its construction, but really the difference between what we call "wild" and "staged" environments is as much rhetorical as it is geographic. We recognize a place as wild mainly because we discursively designate it as such, and we act in such a place according to accepted social norms. These norms are rhetorically rehearsed for us in such places as National Parks' visitors centers that not only narrate the nature of the wilderness we are about to enter—and how, subsequently, we should behave in this environment—but also place us conceptually within this narrative/environment. In short, even in places ostensibly outside of rhetoric, places we call "wilderness" or "nature," we cannot escape the power of rhetoric in shaping how we socially define, recognize, and experience our environments and ourselves in relation to them. Discourse and reality are deeply, ecologically, interconnected, so much so that we create the rhetorical conditions within which we perform and come to understand our environments, our social activities, and our identities. This is why we are rhetorical beings.

The ancient Greek Sophists recognized the contingent and rhetorical nature of human reality. Like the New Rhetoricians who followed them in our own century, the Sophists recognized that rhetoric is epistemological, involved not just in how we order particular arguments, but more significantly in how we order and experience reality, which itself becomes a cultural argument or mythos writ large. The Sophists described this rhetorical construction of reality as *nomos,* what Susan Jarratt defines as "rhetorical construct" or "habitation" (42). Within this rhetorical habitation, human customs of social and political behavior are historically and provisionally constructed and reproduced through cultural narratives, which, according to Kenneth Burke, shape the rhetorical contexts in which we identify and relate to one another. These cultural narratives maintain the rhetorical conditions that enable and shape our social relations and actions. Our interactions with others and with our environments, therefore, are always already mediated not only by physical contexts but also by rhetorical contexts which, as I mentioned earlier, are ideologically and discursively embodied and reproduced by genres. Genres—what Catherine Schryer defines as "stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action" (108)—thus become the typified rhetorical sites or *habitations* in which our social actions are made possible and meaningful as well as in which we are rhetorically socialized to perform these actions.

Within material constraints, then, our social relations and actions are rhetorically mediated by genres, which maintain and reproduce the sociorhetorical conditions within which we perform our social relations and actions. In this way, genres are more than simply conduits or backdrops for our actions; they are not only familiar communicative tools we use to convey or categorize information. Rather, genres are more like rhetorical ecosystems in which communicants reproduce the very conditions that in turn call for certain typified responses, that is, genres help reproduce sociorhetorical environments by providing communicants with the rhetorical conventions for enacting them. This is why they are ecological. Through genres, our typified rhetorical actions reproduce the very recurring environments that subsequently make these rhetorical actions necessary and meaningful. For this reason, generic conventions are not innocent or arbitrary, but are at work in rhetorically shaping and reproducing our social environments, our practices, and our identities as social actors—how, that is, we become socialized by genres to assume and perform certain situated roles and actions.

We notice the extent to which genres function as rhetorical ecosystems (rhetorical habits as well as social habitats) in the example of the physician's office. A physician's office is not a rhetorically unmediated environment, a purely physical site in which doctor and patient interact. We might be tempted to think that it is because the doctor-patient relationship is such a sensual, tactile one, but this would be to underestimate the power of genre in shaping and enabling this very physical relationship. Prior to any interaction between doctor and patient, the patient has to complete what is generally known as the "Patient Medical History Form" (PMHF). Patients recognize this genre, which they encounter on their initial visit to a physician, as one that solicits critical information regarding a patient's physical statistics (sex, age, height, weight, etc.) as well as medical history, including prior and recurring physical conditions, past treatments, and, of course, a description of current physical symptoms. This is followed by insurance carrier information and then a consent-to-treat statement and a legal release statement, which the patient signs. The genre is at once a patient record and a legal document, helping the doctor treat the patient and presumably protecting the doctor from potential lawsuits. But these are not the genre's only functions. The (PMHF) also helps reproduce the social and rhetorical environment within which the patient and doctor interact. The genre, for instance, reflects how our culture and science separate the mind from the body in treating disease, constructing the patient as an embodied object. It is mainly rhetorically concerned with a patient's physical symptoms, suggesting that we can treat the body

separately from the mind—that is, we can isolate physical symptoms and treat them with little to no reference to the patient's state of mind and the effect that state of mind might have on these symptoms.[3] In so doing, the PMHF reflects Western notions of medicine, notions that are rhetorically preserved and reproduced by the genre and that in turn are physically embodied in the way in which the doctor recognizes and treats the patient as a synecdoche of his or her physical symptoms (for example, "I treated a knee injury today" or "The ear infection is in room 3"). The PMHF, then, is at work on the patient, socializing or scripting the individual into the role of "patient" (an embodied self) prior to her meeting with the doctor at the same time as it is at work on the doctor, preparing her to meet the individual as an embodied "patient." So powerful is the socializing power of genre in identity formation that we more often than not accept and act out our genre roles. As Teresa Tran explains, "Also on the [PMHF], there is a part that says 'other comments' which a patient *will understand* as asking whether or not he or she has any other physical problems, not mental ones" (2; my emphasis). Even when a patient ostensibly has a choice, the genre and the cultural ideology that it reflects and reproduces are already at work in constituting the patient's subject position in preparation for meeting the doctor. The genre, thus, helps us assume certain social roles, roles established by our culture and rhetorically reproduced and enacted by the genre, which in turn help us perform certain activities in certain ways.

The PMHF, then, rhetorically helps to shape and enable the social interaction between doctor and patient. As a genre, it is both a habit and a habitat—the conceptual habitat within which individuals perceive and experience a particular environment as well as the rhetorical habit by and through which they act within that environment. But the PMHF does not function in an ecological vacuum. It is one of a number of genres that enables its users to maintain and reproduce the sociorhetorical conditions shaping and enabling the larger environment or "ecosystem" we call the "physician's office." These genres individually constitute their own microenvironments—their own social situations, practices, and relations (relations between doctors and patients, nurses and doctors, doctors and other doctors, doctors and pharmacists, etc.)—and together, these related genres—what Amy J. Devitt calls "genre sets" ("Intertextuality") and what Charles Bazerman calls "systems of genre" ("Systems")—interact to constitute the macroenvironment we recognize as the physician's office. As a result, the physician's office becomes, so to speak, a "biosphere of discourse," one constituted by various interconnected, sometimes competing, genre habitats.[4] Within this genre-constituted and genre-mediated environment,

communicants assume and enact various genre identities, social practices, and relations—ways of scripting and speaking themselves into existence in particular environments—much like we write ourselves into and enact the role of patient in the PMHF and, in so doing, shape and enable the rhetorical ecosystem of the physician's office.

GENRES AS RHETORICAL ECOSYSTEMS: WHY

In "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," Martin Heidegger writes that "a boundary is not that at which something stops but . . . the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing"—its coming into being. So far, I have been arguing that as human beings, our presencing takes place within rhetorical and social boundaries or environments we call "genres." As we move from one sociorhetorical environment to the next, we shift genre boundaries, which maintain and reproduce certain ways of perceiving a particular social activity, ways of relating to others, and ways of lexicogrammatically and rhetorically interacting with one another within the environment. The ways in which we use language to perform certain social activities and to enact certain social relations and identities changes as we adjust from one genre-constituted environment to the next.

The environment and its participants' activities and identities are, therefore, always in the process of reproducing each other within genre: the PMHF rhetorically maintains the social conditions within which we enact our roles and activities, and our roles and activities in turn reproduce the very conditions that make such roles and activities possible and meaningful.[5] This ecological process is what Anthony Giddens, in *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration,* refers to as the "duality of structure." Giddens's theory of structuration is largely an attempt to reconcile what he perceives as inaccurately dichotomized views of human agency and social systems, what he calls "hermeneutic sociologies" ("the imperialism of the subject") versus "structuralist sociologies" ("the imperialism of the social object") (2). Both sociologies are inaccurate, Giddens argues, because they overlook the extent to which human actions both enact and reproduce social structures. In their social practices, human agents reproduce the very social structures that subsequently make their actions necessary, possible, recognizable, and meaningful, so that their practices maintain and enact the very structures that consequently call for these practices. In all this, genre plays a critical role.

For Giddens, structures, as I have been arguing about genres, do not merely function as backdrops for social activities; instead, they are

"fundamental to the production and reproduction of social life" (36). Structures function on two simultaneous levels: the conceptual and the actual. On the one hand, structures are concepts; they function on the level of ideology, a kind of social collective or what Thomas Kuhn calls "paradigm" that frames the ideological and epistemological boundaries of what we assume to be knowable, doable, and possible in any given situation. On the other hand, structures do not just have a conceptual existence; they are also actualized as social practices. According to Giddens, social practices are what give structures ontological life, manifested as certain technologies, conventions, rituals, institutions, tools, and so on. Social practices, thus, allow human agents to enact and hence reproduce ideological structures—the two recursively interact to form a "duality of structure" on both an epistemological and ontological level. Structures, in short, are both the ideology and the enactment of the ideology at once. As Giddens explains: "the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction" (19). Structures constitute the potential for action, and social practices, recursively working within structures, constitute the actualization of that potential, so that structures both provide a defined, socially recognized, and virtual action-potential as well as the means of instantiating that potential as actualized social practice in space and time.

Because structure represents the ideological potential for action, it is related to motive. According to Giddens, "Motivation refers to potential for action rather than to the mode in which action is chronically carried out by the agent. . . . For the most part motives supply the *overall plans or programmes* . . . within which a range of conduct is enacted" (6; my emphasis). Motive exists on the conceptual level of structure; it frames the possible ways of acting and meaning in any given time and space. Operating on the conceptual level of structure, motive comes to frame the ideological boundaries that socially define and sanction a certain appropriate range of conduct within a particular situation. This notion of motive is linked to what Carolyn R. Miller, in "Genre as Social Action," has defined as exigence.[6] Like motive, exigence frames part of how we recognize a situation as requiring a socially sanctioned immediate attention or remedy, and so shapes and enables any subsequent actions we might perform in response to that situation. In fact, like motive, exigence is so entrenched a part of our social knowledge, so ideological in nature, that we as social actors are often unaware of its constitutive presence. Motive becomes such a part of what seems to be "natural" or common sensible that we no longer consider the ideologies that sanction and enable our actions. We just act.

We function, then, in motive-potentials that constitute in part what Giddens calls "structures." But, as we discussed earlier, structures are not just potentials; they are also actualizations of potential. In order for us to transform the potential for action into its actualization—in order to act—we must transform the motive into agency, and this is where intention plays a role. Intention is where motive-potentials become internalized by actors and then actualized as agency. Whereas motive is socially defined, intention is an interpretation and instantiation of social motive. Intention is a form of social cognition, an embodiment of social motive and the means by which individuals become social agents, interpreting and carrying out the social motives available to them. According to Giddens, intention can only exist *in relation to* motive, since "for an event to count as an example of agency, it is necessary at least that what the person does be intentional *under some description,* even if the agent is mistaken about that description" (8; my emphasis). Intention must have some socially defined motive in order to be recognized as a meaningful social action, something that gives it generalizable meaning and value within a particular environment. It must be intentional under some *described* social motive.

The "motive-intention" dialectic just described is situated within and in turn reproduces structure, which provides both the ideological conditions and the institutional conventions agents need for recognizing and enacting their social practices. This recursive process at work in what Giddens calls "structures" is the same one I have been describing as work in genres. Genres are structures in that they maintain the ideological potential for action (in the form of genre motive or exigency) and the typified rhetorical means of actualizing that potential. They are ideological concepts and rhetorical actualizations at the same time, both the way in which we recognize a sociorhetorical environment as requiring a certain response and the way in which we actually rhetorically respond to, and act within, it. This actualized activity—the patient completing the PMHF, for instance—reproduces the ideological conditions—how physicians conceptualize their practices and respond to their patients—that in turn results in the kind of patient-physician interaction that prompted the PMHF in the first place. Genre is at the heart of this ecological process, maintaining a symbiotic relationship between social habitats and rhetorical habits.

Genres, therefore, recursively operate on two levels at once: the ideological and the textual. At the ideological level, genres maintain the ways in which we perceive particular environments as requiring certain immediate and "appropriate" attention and response—in short, exigencies or motives for potential action. At the textual level, genres maintain the rhetorical and lexicogrammatical conventions that allow their users to

participate in these environments in meaningful and recognizable ways. In short, genres are the ways in which we perpetuate particular environments by treating them as particular exigencies. Returning to Heidegger, then, we notice that genre is both the boundary and the presencing, both the ideological construction of an environment and its rhetorical enactment—in short, the habitat that makes habit possible and the habit that makes habitat possible.

CONCLUSION

Writing is not only about learning to adapt, socially and rhetorically, to various contexts via genres; it is also about reproducing these various contexts via genres. When we write, we are enacting these contexts at the same time as we are enacting ourselves, our social practices, and our relations to others within them. The physician's office bears this out. As a rhetorical ecosystem, it is sustained by its genres. Communicants assume ways of being in this environment not only because of its material setting—although that certainly does play a major part—but also because of its sociorhetorical conditions as they are mediated by the available office genres. At the same time, these communicants are also engaged in tacitly reproducing this environment, reproducing it socially as they enact it rhetorically. Clearly, within the ecology of genre, the self/social dichotomy does not hold.

We need to pay more attention to the sociorhetorical ecosystems within which communication and communicators take place and are made possible—the conditions that prompt us to write and that our writing makes possible. And genres are one significant way to do it, since genres rhetorically embody and help communicants reproduce these ecosystems. As such, the environment of the physician's office or any other setting for that matter (think, e.g., of the First-Year Composition classroom with its various genres: syllabi, student themes, teacher end comments, writing prompts, conferences, journals, peer review handouts, etc.) is not only an ontological fact but also a generic fact. It exists largely because we reproduce it in our genres. When communicants use genres, they are interpreting and enacting the social motives (embedded rhetorically within it) that sustain an environment and make it meaningful, and so are becoming socialized into producing not only certain kinds of texts, but also certain kinds of contexts, practices, and identities—ways of being and acting in the world, socially and rhetorically.

NOTES

1. For more on the self-social dichotomy, see the exchange between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae in *College Composition and Communication* 46 (1995): 62–83.
2. I am indebted to Sidney I. Dobrin for these observations on the rhetorical construction of Florida. For more on this topic, see Dobrin's essay, "Writing Takes Place," in this collection.
3. My conclusions regarding the PMHF and its role in shaping the doctor-patient relationship are largely based on, and extend, the research of Teresa Tran, a premed student who was enrolled in a genre analysis course I taught in 1997 at the University of Kansas.
4. I am indebted to Christian R. Weisser for the use of the term *biospshere of discourse.*
5. I use the term *reproduce* deliberately throughout this essay to emphasize the ecological interaction between human actions and social systems. In using the term, however, I certainly do not mean to suggest that human actions and social systems duplicate one another. Reproduction is not the same as duplication or replication because reproduction always involves some variation. This is the case biologically, linguistically, and rhetorically. Ecosystems are not static mainly because they evolve as their organisms evolve. The same is true for genres. In helping communicants reproduce rhetorical environments, genres also help communicants change rhetorical environments because on some level genres always involve some interpretation, which involves some variation.
6. Carolyn R. Miller defines exigence as "a form of social knowledge," involved not only in how we recognize but also in how we respond to a particular situation or event, so that exigence becomes "an objectified social need" (1984, 157).

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Ecocomposition and the Greening of Identity

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> To speak, people must first listen to what the world has to say.
> —Judith Halden-Sullivan, "The Phenomenology of Process"

> If we want to be at home on this earth, even at the price of being at home in this century, we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with its essence.
> —Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics"

Writing instruction has been dramatically transformed in the past forty years. Before the 1960s, writing was seen only as a skill to be modeled and learned, and most English professors saw writing as either a preparation for practical living or as a foundation for the production or critique of literature. Since then, one of the most pervasive theoretical subjects—particularly in composition studies—has been how students explore, define, and extend their identities through discourse. In other words, I think it's fair to say that most of the research, scholarship, and teaching in composition that we've done in the past four decades has intended to enable students to better understand who they are and how language shapes their conceptions of themselves and the conceptions others have of them. The ways in which we envision identity have evolved in accord with the dominant theoretical stances of the time. Specifically, our conceptions of how identity is formed have corresponded to our personal, social, and more recently, political theories of discourse. While this evolution has helped us to conceptualize identity in more constructive ways, we have failed to account for the ecological dimensions of selfhood. Our discussions of identity has been, thus far, constricted by the underlying premise that our identities are fashioned only through our connections with other humans. In fact, this premise is so integral to our belief system that we hardly perceive it. Our current conceptions of identity are *pre-ecological*; we have not yet recognized that the whole spectrum of the nonhuman physical environment is embedded in each of our identities. Other