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Writing and Desire: Synthesizing Rhetorical Theories of Genre and Lacanian Theories of the Unconscious



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Abstract: To clarify the role of desire in discursive practice, this article examines rhetorical theories of genre and Lacanian theories of the unconscious. The former, it is argued, might be refined to shed more light on actors' unconscious investments in and resistance to the desires maintained by genres. The latter, meanwhile, might be refined to address how desires are materialized in concrete situations. These refinements can be achieved when the two approaches are synthesized in a theory that figures genres as resources by which actors coordinate and materialize desires. This argument is developed through an extended investigation of students' desires to perform particular kinds of identities as they compose career portfolios.

Recently, upon concluding a multi-year research project, I thought about the data that got away: the statements, texts, and events for which I never fully accounted. The project focused on high school-based career portfolio programs, which required students to assemble portfolios of artifacts from courses, extracurricular activities, and everyday life (see Collin). In personal essays, students explained how their portfolios chart their career trajectories. At the end of the year, students used their portfolios in mock professional interviews to explain to adults their plans for finding good work. As schools often defined the latter in terms of middle class careers, many working class and small farming students refused or struggled to take up the desires endorsed in portfolio programs. They grumbled about their disinterest in or discomfort with assuming middle class desires for middle class lives. As self-described "farm kids" often joked, it is difficult to represent years of shit shoveling in a portfolio designed to show your lifelong desire for personally meaningful, stimulating work. These jokes were met with raucous, explosive laughter from other students. Despite the frequency of these jokes and the intensity of others' reactions, I never did them justice in my analysis.

I analyzed portfolio programs by using theories developed in rhetorical genre studies (henceforth "RGS"; see this journal's [special issue on RGS](#), introduced in Weisser, Reiff, and Dryer; see also Bawarshi; Collin; Devitt; Miller). RGS defines genres as flexible resources communicants use to build and act in different contexts. More specifically, RGS posits that genres maintain desires to perform socially recognizable acts in recurrent situations. Thus, RGS defines desire mainly as social motive. While this definition is not wrong, it does not address—and is not built to address—the psychic processes whereby actors invest in or resist desires maintained by genres. Therefore, when using RGS to study career portfolio programs, I could only note that many farm kids seemed uncomfortable adopting or even performing the middle class desires maintained by the portfolio genre. I had few ways of explaining why so many farm kids resisted middle class desires by making shit-shoveling jokes. Moreover, I could not account for the force of students' laughter.

In this article, I develop a theory that brings into view some of the psychic processes of genre work. A more psychoanalytically attuned theory of genre can help teachers and researchers of composition deepen their understandings of how and why different writers take up, adapt, or resist different forms of writing. To build this argument, I blend RGS with Jacques Lacan's theories of the unconscious. By the latter, I mean the content, structures, and processes of the psyche of which people are not ordinarily aware. Lacan's theories describe how unconscious desires flow through socio-symbolic orders and fuel the processes by which people become socially recognizable subjects. Heretofore, RGS has not made much use of psychoanalytic theories of desire and the unconscious. At the same time, RGS can augment Lacanian theories by specifying the rhetorical tools actors use

to engage socio-symbolic orders and materialize desires. By synthesizing RGS and Lacanian theories of the unconscious, researchers may study the typified ways by which actors invest in or resist specific genres and the desires they channel.

Genre Theory

Over the past three decades, researchers working in disparate fields of language study have come to imagine genres not as inert linguistic tools, but as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller 159). For instance, at the schools I studied, the genre of the career portfolio is based in the recurrent situation of the professional interview. Students use the portfolio genre to coordinate their actions with adult interviewers to build the interview situation. The latter, conversely, sets a scene in which people use career portfolios in particular ways. In other words, when students take up the genre of the career portfolio, they are called (but not forced) to present themselves in a certain manner. It is not the career portfolio on its own but the full situation of the professional interview that calls writers to figure themselves in a particular way (e.g., as well-rounded, accomplished persons). The career portfolio functions as a resource both for discovering and realizing the qualities of the professional interview. Thus, situations give rise to genres, and genres help people construct situations.

Informing this notion of genre is a theory of desire grounded in Kenneth Burke’s argument that “situations are shorthand terms for motives” (Burke, *Permanence and Change*, qtd. in Miller 158). That is, the desire to act arises not from the lone individual but from the social field, which includes individuals. Specifically, desire emerges from the relations among a situation’s dimensions. Burke defines the latter as scene, act, agents, agency, and purpose (*Grammar of Motives*). Thus, when they recognize a particular situation, actors face a desire to see themselves as certain kinds of persons (agent) who are capable of certain actions (agency) and who seek to carry out specific actions (act) for specific reasons (purpose) against a particular thematic background (scene). Extending and transforming Burke’s argument, RGS posits that a given genre maintains the desire to build a situation in a specific way and offers the rhetorical means for acting on that desire. Consider the genre of the career portfolio and the situation of the professional interview. The portfolio maintains the desire for a young person to figure themselves as an accomplished student pursuing their dreams and moving from success to success through school and into a rewarding career. The genre of the career portfolio makes available this desire as well as the rhetorical means of realizing this desire. Specifically, the genre offers writers topics (personal achievements), tones (assertiveness tempered with humility), artifact types (certificates of achievement), constructions (first-person statements), and so forth. While creators of career portfolios may employ other kinds of topics, tones, artifacts, and constructions to build the situation in alternate ways and to realize alternate desires, interviewers may not accept such adaptations of the genre. Changes to genres are worked out mainly through social negotiation.

Some genre theorists have developed a more detailed view of desire informed by structuration theory. In this approach, derived largely from the work of Anthony Giddens but informed also by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, genre is a kind of structure. It is a flexible resource for assessing desires—what can and should be done in a situation—and for acting on that knowledge. Crucially, structuration theory posits that assessments of situations are shaped by ideologies, or theories of how society should be organized and how social goods should be apportioned. Thus, when actors internalize desires as personal intentions and fulfill these intentions via socially recognizable acts (e.g., genre work), they materialize situations, desires, and ideologies, and they reproduce structures. Moreover, structuration theory posits that while structures must always be adapted to fit the particularities of new moments, participants in situations may not recognize all adaptations as legitimate. For example, by using the genre of the career portfolio, an actor (a) internalizes as a personal intention the desire to present themselves in ways valued by colleges and professional workplaces and (b) acts on this intention by mobilizing the conventions of the genre. Through this and other acts (e.g., dressing in professional attire), they materialize the situation of the professional interview, the desire to present themselves in ways valued by colleges and professional workplaces, and the genre’s ideology of work-as-personal-fulfillment. And by rebuilding the situation through composing and presenting a career portfolio, they reproduce the genre as a structural resource of professional interviews. Thus, through generic activity, ideologies and desires are mobilized, and the social world is rebuilt.

An increasingly popular way of understanding desire in RGS involves the concept of uptake. Popularized in RGS by Anne Freedman, uptake refers to the ways a generic act prompts and is prompted by other generic acts. Thus, via a series of uptakes, desires are circulated through systems of genres and through networks of material spaces (see Dryer). Desires may therefore be understood not as isolated phenomena experienced by individual actors but as motives distributed across the social world. For example, education standards for career preparation lead some high schools to create guidelines for career portfolio programs, which prompt teachers to create portfolio assignments, which generate portfolio items, which call for grades. Each uptake between each pair of genres

involves complex negotiations of desire. Actors must work out what is being demanded and what kinds of performances will satisfy demands.

To show how uptake is often a matter of creativity and negotiation, not simple demand and response, authors including Anis Bawarshi, Gillian Fuller, and Alison Lee blend Freadman's theory of uptake with Gilles Deleuze's theories of desire and rhizomatics. For Deleuze, desire is a primal force always pushing against and exceeding boundaries (e.g., the boundaries of genres). Thus, rather than view the world as operating mostly through the centralizing logic of trees (all branches and roots come from or support the central trunk), Deleuze sees the world as working mostly through the dispersing logic of rhizomes. That is, Deleuze puts the accent on difference and creation, not on similarity and repetition. Thus, the rhizomatic account of uptake highlights the disparate, complex forces brought to bear in the production of texts. As Bawarshi explains,

Thinking of uptake in rhizomatic ways allows us to understand causation in more complex, less predictable ways, and to recognize the interlocking systems and forces at play in performances of genre. It also invites us to look not just at genres as artifacts but also at the performative spaces between them. (forthcoming)

Fuller and Lee note, along with Bawarshi, that although desire can flow in unexpected ways through genres, authorities often try to channel desire in typical directions. For instance, Fuller and Lee show how even in progressive classrooms, teachers often unconsciously direct student writing into the "right" generic grooves. Despite the fact that authorities try to channel desire into established cultural patterns, Fuller and Lee follow Deleuze in rejecting the idea that desire is patterned in a more general sense. That is, they reject the argument, linked by Deleuze to Lacan, that desire is always formed in and routed through some kind of social circuit. While there is much to be gained by viewing genre and uptake in terms of Deleuzian becoming, I work below to see them in terms of Lacanian circuiting.

Recently, several genre scholars have focused on subjectivity and have asked how subjects take up the desires of established genres and/or channel other desires that exceed generic boundaries. For instance, Kimberly Emmons seeks to refine Freadman's definition of uptake to focus less on the relations among genres and more on the dispositions of the subjects who emplace themselves and are emplaced in genred contexts. Responding to Emmons' critique, Freadman (Traps) acknowledges that researchers might pay closer attention to subjects' desires to resist and adapt generic uptakes. In so doing, researchers can better appreciate the agency subjects exercise as they work within and between genres. Likewise, Heather Bastian argues individuals' unique characteristics and histories shape processes of uptake and must be accounted for in studies of generic practice. An individual's own "intentions and designs," Bastian argues, shape how the individual takes up, adapts, or resists desires maintained by different genres. Approaching these questions from a different angle, Rebecca Nowacek considers how subjects become "agents of integration" who can respond to the uptakes of the genres of one domain by adapting the knowledge, desires, and identities of other domains. Nowacek points to the unconscious when she notes the emotional dimension of transfer, the exhilaration or frustration subjects feel when they can or cannot realize desires to use one domain's resources in another domain's genres. Building from these ideas, I work below to describe some of the unconscious processes by which subjects are formed and form themselves by taking up genres.

Exploring some of the difficulties of uptake, Melanie Kill notes how actors often resist seeing themselves and others in ways elicited by series of genres. Actors are often psychically invested in alternate identities and relationships and hesitate to rewrite themselves and their worlds. To illustrate her point, Kill describes how many instructors of first year university writing courses use the genre of the literacy autobiography to position themselves as open-minded encouragers and to construe students as unique and reflective learners. While some students appear to have little difficulty taking up desires to compose themselves and their instructors in this way, other students resist these desires and write themselves and others into more familiar identities (e.g., the identities of students and professors who admire great works of literature). Although Kill mobilizes a few psychoanalytic concepts in her analysis (e.g., investment and unconscious awareness), she does not attempt to present a psychoanalytic reading of the unconscious processes at work in generic activity. Thus, she shows *that* genre work involves psychic investment and unconscious processes, but she does not attempt to show *how*.

In sum, RGS's concept of desire makes visible for analysis some of the social aspects of communication. Rather than figure desire as a solely personal phenomenon, RGS shows how desire emerges in social situations and is distributed across discursive-material space through uptakes. Moreover, RGS highlights how the desires maintained by genres are taken up and internalized by actors as personal intentions. It is in this gap between social desire and personal intention where RGS could be developed further. RGS, which is not grounded in psychology or psychoanalysis, offers few ways of understanding the unconscious processes by which actors invest in or resist the desires maintained by genres. To work past this limit and to build a more psychoanalytically

attuned theory of genre, I blend RGS with Lacanian theories of the unconscious. Before presenting this synthesis, I introduce Lacanian ideas relevant to the current project.

Lacan's Theories of the Unconscious and Society

Overview of Lacan's Project

Arguably the most influential figure in post-war psychoanalytic thought, Lacan endeavored in his clinical and theoretical work to illuminate the structures and processes of the unconscious. Drawing from thinkers including G.W.F. Hegel, Sigmund Freud, and Claude Levi-Strauss, Lacan studied how the unconscious develops in social fields and how desires emerge in the fissures between the real and the symbolic. Lacan's ideas have been taken up, adapted, and argued against in fields as diverse as feminist inquiry (see Irigaray; Rose), film studies (see

growing number of researchers have used Lacan's ideas to examine the place of desire in composition (see Alcorn; Bracher; Rickert).

Central to Lacan's project is his argument that the unconscious is a social and cultural achievement, not an individual possession. He writes, "[T]he unconscious is that part of the concrete discourse, in so far as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse" (Lacan, *Function* 49). Thus, for Lacan, an individual's unconscious is developed through their engagements with socially defined others within systems of meaning. While Lacan shares with poststructuralists the belief that individuals are subjectivated in different ways by different cultural codes, Lacan maintains that the subject is more than just an unsteady construct dispersed across multiple discourses. Lacan argues that despite their dispersion across codes, subjects desire a sense of wholeness as social beings. That is, people desire a sense of personal completion in their social positions as mothers, Americans, professors, and so forth. This desire for completion as a social subject, however, can never be satisfied in full. Thus, for Lacan, subjects are split—they are forever trying to achieve wholeness as social beings, but they can never do so. As explained below, this experience of lack is not a natural feature of *homo sapiens* but is an effect of coming into consciousness as a social subject in a system of meaning. Further below, I argue that genres help coordinate people's emergence into systems of meaning and channel subjects' desires for completion in particular ways.

Three Orders: The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic

Lacan views the unconscious as emerging in relation to three orders of the world. The first order, the Order of the Real, is life in its full plenitude. The Real is what exists before and beyond humans' efforts at symbolization. The Imaginary Order, the second order of the world, is the moment of humans' fantasies of sufficiency and wholeness. Lacking the fullness of the Real in their cultural roles, humans develop imaginary constructions of personal and social completion. The Symbolic Order, or the big Other, is the order of socio-symbolic meanings. By coming into consciousness in a particular Symbolic Order, actors discover a particular network of signs to use to understand themselves, others, social relationships, values, and so forth. Because signs are limited, human creations, however, they cannot perfectly account for the fullness of the Real. Thus, much like the human subject, the big Other is split and constituted by lack.

Through the interactions of the big Other and the Imaginary Order, subjects develop socially meaningful fantasies about the types of complete people they should be. For instance, a subject may seek to realize the social order's visions of a professional worker with a successful career. Terms in which people invest their identities—terms such as professional and career—function as master signifiers. When a subject identifies with certain master signifiers, explains Lacan, the rest of the Symbolic Order arranges itself for that subject in typified ways. For instance, if a subject understands professional and worker as their master signifiers, they are invited to relate to other signifiers linked over time to those key terms. They are invited, for example, to value meritocracy, initiative, and personal expression and to reject micromanagement and time off task. Through identifying with a particular set of master signifiers, subjects locate themselves in the social world.

Desire is Lacan's term for humans' longing for self-identity with master signifiers, their unattainable wish to achieve the fullness of the Real in the Symbolic. Because desire is coordinated through the workings of the big Other, desire can be seen as the desire of the Other. That is, one aspect of desire is people's longing to be the full selves—the full professionals, mothers, Catholics, etc.—they think society desires them to be. Furthermore, people feel compelled to desire in the ways society wants them to desire. They feel compelled to want what the big Other tells them they should want in the way the big Other tells them they should want it. If they desire the right thing in

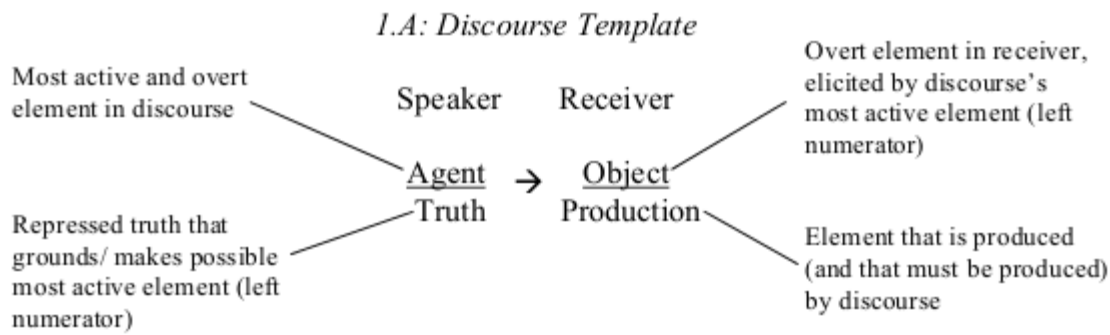
the right way, people hope, they can become full, self-sufficient beings. If I commit myself to building a great career and making lots of money, hopes the professional, I can become a whole person. Because individuals are constituted by lack when they emerge as social subjects, however, desire can never be satisfied once and for all.

Individuals experience their emergence as subjects in the Symbolic Order as a traumatic loss of the vitality and plenitude of the Real. While a sense of fullness can never be achieved in the Symbolic Order, the subject fixates on a particular object or substance and imagines this object as being capable of filling in their lack. Lacan calls this object the *objet petit a*, or the object/cause of desire. The *objet a*, however, does not derive its power from its actual properties—no object has what it takes to complete the subject as a social being. Rather, the *objet a* draws its power from the position it occupies in the Symbolic Order: it is a stand-in for the sense of fullness and enjoyment available in the Real but given up upon entry into the big Other. As Lacan argues, “Something becomes an object in desire when it takes the place of what by its very nature remains concealed from the subject: that self-sacrifice, that pound of flesh which is mortgaged in his relation to the signifier” (Desire 28). Thus, when subjects engage the big Other in a specific way by investing themselves in particular master signifiers, they lose the vitality of the Real and come to believe they can regain this vitality through an *objet a* consistent with the field of meanings coordinated by their master signifiers. For example, capitalist subjects invested in master signifiers such as wealth and success often see money as their *objet a*: consistent with the Symbolic Order of capitalism, money may appear as that which can make them whole. It is their object/cause of desire. Consumers in capitalist societies, meanwhile, are called to see products in commercials as *objets a* (e.g., “Coke is it!”). Because desire can never be satisfied, however, attainment of the *objet a* does not lead to contentment. It leads people to want more or it leads them to suspect the particular version they have is not quite it. People come to believe they need more money or more possessions. They will never be satisfied with these stand-ins for the vitality of the Real, however, because the Real cannot be presented in the Symbolic Order. Therefore, the social subject never ceases desiring.

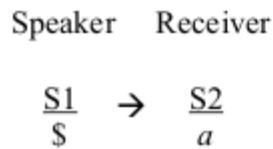
While Lacan’s full theory of the unconscious and the social order includes many more moving parts, the concepts I employ in the current project are master signifiers, knowledge organized by master signifiers, the split subject, and *objet a*. In the synthesis presented below, I argue that genres help organize these elements in relation to one another. Genres, that is, bring together specific types of these elements in recurrent situations. To set up this synthesis, I discuss Lacan’s theory of discourse.

Discourse

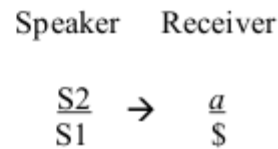
Lacan argues that elements in symbolic networks can be arranged in four different discourses, or circuits of social connection (*Ego* 89). In the paragraphs below, I describe discourses of the master and university. Further below, I describe discourses of the hysteric and the analyst. Each discourse construes and relates split subjects, master signifiers, knowledge, and desire in particular ways. In *The Other Side of Psychiatry*, Lacan uses mathematical formulae, or “mathemes,” to show how different relations among these elements constitute four different discourses. Mathemes for each discourse are based on the discourse template presented at the top of Figure 1. Each discourse involves a speaker and a receiver, both of whom are characterized by certain active elements represented as numerators and denominators. Numerators are the overt elements of a discourse, while denominators are the elements that are kept more or less covert or repressed so the discourse can work. The template, then, shows that an agentic element (left numerator) sends a message to and calls into action an element in the other (right numerator). The sending of this message is enabled by the suppression of an element that holds a certain truth (left denominator). By becoming activated in the way called forth by the message—and in order to become activated in this way—the receiver produces and represses another element (right denominator). All communication, then, involves the activation and suppression of different social elements.



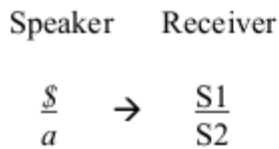
1.B: Master Discourse



1.C: University Discourse



1.D: Hysteric Discourse



1.E: Analyst Discourse

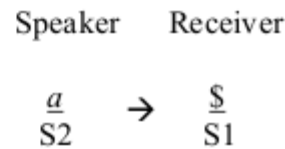


Figure 1.

Lacan's Four Orders of Discourse.

Consider master discourse, or a mode of social connection that seeks to establish and enact a figure's completion and mastery. As shown in Figure 1 (section 1.B), master discourse positions the four elements in specific ways. The agentic element in the speaker is the master signifier (S1), while the speaker's suppressed truth is their split constitution (\$). The master signifier calls into action an element in the receiver. This other element is knowledge (S2) and this knowledge is organized in accordance with the master signifier. For this knowledge to be activated, the receiver must experience enjoyment (a) but must suppress the fact that enjoyment is an active element of the discourse. In other words, in the discourse of the master, speakers present themselves as beings who lack nothing, subjects who are identical to a master signifier. To pull off this performance, they must suppress the truth that, like all social beings, they are constituted by lack. The receivers who participate in the discourse of the master are called to produce knowledge, to understand themselves and the world in line with the master's understanding. The receivers experience enjoyment in this process, but believe it is not their enjoyment but the perfection of the master and the master's knowledge that accounts for their way of seeing the world. For instance, much professional work in the USA runs on a master discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment. The agentic element of this discourse is the master signifier "career." The latter denotes a lifelong project of developing and expressing oneself through paid work. To figure careers as individual endeavors, not socially defined and delimited trajectories, job markets' inequalities and exclusions must be suppressed. That is, the split character of job markets must be covered over. Receivers in this exchange (e.g., job applicants) are called to know the world in ways consistent with this definition of careers. They are called to view job markets as meritocracies and to see workplaces as venues for self-realization. In so doing—and in order to do so—they experience enjoyment. Think of the professional worker's mantra to "do what you love" (see Tokumitsu). This enjoyment is not marginal to the success of the discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment. Rather, it is instrumental to that success insofar as it binds actors into the discourse.

Lacan's second discourse, the discourse of the university (see Figure 1, section 1.C), is a mode of social connection that is legitimated through appeals to systematic knowledge. In university discourse, systematic knowledge (S2) is the agentic element that positions the other as a, or a stand-in for the fullness of the Real. That is, in university discourse, systematic knowledge (e.g., scientific Marxism) hails the receivers and the

receivers, in turn, want to be the kind of full, system-completing subjects (e.g., a committed Marxist) desired by knowledge. Because the receivers cannot achieve fullness in this subject position, they produce themselves as split subjects (\$) and repress the fact that they do not fully embody their position as complete subjects of systematic knowledge. While university discourse legitimates itself by reference to the soundness of its knowledge and the soundness of its knowledge, alone, it actually depends upon the workings of master signifiers (S1). In other words, systematic knowledge is not just an objective account of the world; it is an account of the world structured around key signifiers in which actors' identities are invested (e.g., Marx, labor, and socialism).

For Lacan, then, discourse is not simply a matter of subjects and symbols. It is also, at heart, a matter of desire. How, though, are different discourses and their configurations of elements realized in material situations? How do communicants know to engage in master discourse in one situation and university discourse in another situation? How do they endeavor to change or rearrange elements organized in a particular discourse? These questions may be answered with an approach that synthesizes Lacanian theories of the unconscious with RGS.

Synthesis: Genres and the Unconscious

In a Lacanian view, genres are rhetorical devices actors use to materialize discourses in situations. An actor uses a genre in a given situation to mobilize the right \$, S1, S2, and *a* and to arrange these elements in a typified manner (e.g., as a master discourse or a university discourse). Thus, through their interactions with discourses, genres materialize the unconscious in situations and build situations from elements of the unconscious. Genres themselves are transformed as actors fight to make new discourses typical in specific situations.

Consider, again, the genre of the career portfolio. This genre is typically used to materialize a master discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment in the situation of the professional interview. The portfolio calls actors to build and navigate the interview situation by ratifying master signifiers such as "professional" and "career" (S1), suppressing job markets' inequalities and exclusions (\$), construing actors' lives as series of individual achievements (S2), and expressing desires for the perfect job that will bring about personal fulfillment (*a*). The portfolio genre, moreover, offers actors conventions for materializing and arranging these elements. It calls actors to include the following in their portfolios: narratives about their lifelong passion for a chosen field, lists of personal accomplishments, and artifacts demonstrating individual success. A genre, in other words, offers resources to help actors arrange elements in the "right" kind of discourse.

While genres help actors situate discourses and desires, the latter cannot be reduced to the former. Discourses and desires are not simply contained within genres. Indeed, discourses circulate throughout the social body and are channeled through genres to create material situations. More than one genre can mobilize a given discourse and more than one discourse can be mobilized by a given genre. For example, the discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment can be materialized in genres including career portfolios, yearly work plans, and staff biographies. At the same time, the career portfolio can materialize a discourse of work-as-fulfillment or a university discourse of new technologies (i.e., a discourse of a rationalized world and actors seeking to rationalize the world via new technologies). Actors struggle, however, to get their preferred discourses recognized as typical of a genre. When the performance of a given discourse is recognized as acceptable in a genre, both the discourse and the genre pick up aspects of the other.

In a Lacanian view, however, an actor can never perfectly fulfill the desire to perform a genre's discourse. As explained above, each discourse ratifies master signifiers with which actors try and fail to achieve self-identity. This impossible desire for fullness is a general feature of human social life that takes on specific characteristics as it plays out in different discourses and genres. Thus, although particular desires are generated and taken up through genres, desire as a more general category of experience exceeds genres' boundaries.

In light of Lacan's arguments about the force of impossible desire, RGS's notion of desire as social motive can be refined. RGS, as explained above, reveals how genres (a) maintain social motives for actors to build and navigate situations in typified manners and (b) offer rhetorical conventions with which actors may pursue the motives the genre maintains. While RGS theorists do not contend actors can totally and conclusively fulfill social motives, they have not honed their theories of genre to account for the impossibility of desire. In other words, they have not explained how the deadlocks of desire shape how people take up, adapt, and resist different genres.

As noted above, some RGS theorists acknowledge the complex, often problematic operations of desire in generic practice. Kill and Bastian, for example, note how individuals' personal desires and investments shape how individuals take up—or refuse to take up—specific genres. Similarly, Emmons argues that generic uptake is a negotiation of subjectivity, desire, and disposition. Nowacek, meanwhile, considers actors' desires to transfer cultural resources across genres and across domains. While these theorists show *that* genre work involves psychic

processes of desire, they do not attempt to show *how*.

A Lacanian approach to genre studies complements RGS by highlighting the *how* of desire. In this Lacanian approach, impossible desire is viewed as a fundamental, constitutive force in actors' uses of genres. Consistent with RGS, genres are still understood as maintaining desires and as offering conventions for pursuing those desires. The latter, however, are seen as incapable of being fulfilled. Moreover, deadlocks of desire are understood as shaping how actors work in genres. Thus, a Lacanian approach to genre study explores (a) how actors use genres to mobilize discourses that hold out impossible desires and (b) how the impossibility of desire affects actors' work in genres.

A Lacanian approach to genre study, moreover, foregrounds impossible desire in the process of *learning* genres.

ways. Because recircuiting one's desires means reforming oneself and one's social relations, Rickert continues, actors often struggle or refuse to take up new forms of composition. That is, to cast the process in terms of genre study, actors are habituated to using certain genres to mobilize certain discourses. The latter enable actors to invest in specific master signifiers (S1), see the world in particular ways (S2), and produce themselves as certain kinds of subjects (\$) who desire (a) but fail to achieve identity with their master signifiers. The surplus enjoyment generated in the process binds actors to genre- and discourse-supported modes of being in the world. While actors are not bound forever to a given genre or discourse, they are often unable to shift freely from form to form. Actors may have real difficulty, for instance, learning a new genre and discourse that engages an aspect of the world (e.g., work) that is central to an alternate genre and discourse in which they are invested. Because that aspect of the world is a key coordinate in the actors' genre- and discourse-supported circuit of desire—a circuit in which actors come to know themselves and the world—the actors may hesitate to free themselves from the enjoyment they derive from chasing the desires held out by the familiar genre and discourse.

Given the force of impossible desire, students will have difficulty learning new genres in classrooms that background desire and foreground knowledge. That is, students may struggle to gain a full sense of a genre and its discourse if they key in to knowledge (S2), but neglect desire (a) and the master signifiers (S1) and subjectivities (\$) in which desire is caught up. In such classrooms, Rickert argues, students may develop a kind of cynical reasoning about a genre: I am hitting all the marks the genre requires, but my desires are not channeled through the genre's circuits. Rickert noted such reasoning among some of his students who could use academic essays to mobilize critical theories of consumerism but who maintained their desires for \$300 jeans. These students understood the genre of the academic essay and could use critical theories to produce knowledge of the world, but their desires flowed through alternate channels. Crucially, Rickert argues, the disconnect cannot be resolved simply by offering students more knowledge about the essay genre and critical theories. The problem has less to do with knowledge (S2) and more to do with desire (a) and its relations to other elements of the unconscious. Ignoring desire and doubling down on knowledge recalls Mark Twain's observation that "Explaining humor is a lot like dissecting a frog. You learn a lot in the process, but in the end you kill it." That is, for a joke or other genre to work, actors need the right knowledge (of form, function, content, etc.) *and* the right desires. Overloading the former will not evoke the latter.

How, then, might students learn the knowledge and desires of new genres? Mark Bracher, while acknowledging the difficulty of the task, suggests educators use Lacan's analyst discourse to help their students disrupt and recircuit desires. I conclude this article by considering some of the possibilities of and problems with Bracher's proposal. First, however, I return to the farm kids' jokes about representing shit shoveling in the career portfolio genre. Through an analysis of a typical joke, I mobilize and refine some of the concepts central to a Lacanian approach to genre study.

Shit-Shoveling Redux

In the rural area where the farm kids lived and where I grew up, shit shoveling jokes are common coin. For instance, when I first described career portfolios to my father, he laughed and said, "I don't know what I would've put in a portfolio when I was eighteen. At that age, I'd only shoveled shit." For my father and for others in the region, these jokes are products of a master discourse of hard work. In this discourse, master signifiers (S1) include work, dedication, and group effort. Specifically, work signifies difficult, physically demanding, often unpleasant labor. This form of work is understood as masterful insofar as it is seen as being good for its own sake and as building character in those who engage in it. To sustain this belief in hard work, however, one must suppress knowledge of one's partial alienation from it. That is, one must deny the fact that a key motive for one's efforts is profit, not character development. In this way, hard work takes on a split form (\$). Those hailed by the master discourse of hard work are called to know the world (S2) as a place where unpleasant but necessary tasks

are completed by those made of the strongest stuff. The harder the task, the tougher and more admirable the person. For this discourse to take, the receiver must experience enjoyment (a) in desiring identification with the discourse's master signifiers and forms of knowledge. This enjoyment can take the form of jokes about the wonders of shoveling shit. Given both the foulness of the latter and the value placed on unpleasant tasks in hard work discourse, shit-shoveling jokes can signify the joke teller's enjoyment of embodying the discourse of hard work. Moreover, this enjoyment helps bind the speaker to the discourse of hard work and its network of social relations. The commonness of shit shoveling jokes in the farm kids' region, however, tends to mute reactions to a few good-natured chuckles. Thus, the raucous responses the farm kids' jokes received during portfolio work indicate additional factors were in play.

Some of the force of students' laughter can be accounted for by the obvious mismatch between the farm kids' discourse of hard work and the career portfolio's discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment. That is, the jokes generate some of their force by answering the portfolio's call for stories of fulfilling activities with stories of shoveling shit. In this sense, students' jokes can be read as moments in the ongoing efforts of students everywhere to subvert schooling and its official genre sets (see Apple). To view more sides of these jokes and to achieve a deeper understanding of the role of desire in genre work, I turn now to an up-close analysis of one typical joke.

One day in English class, a teacher taught his students how to compose résumés for their career portfolios. He emphasized to his students the importance of including items that mark their personal achievements and that chart their paths into personally fulfilling careers. Later in the period, while her classmates worked on their résumés, a farm kid approached her teacher with a concern. Within earshot of several students, she told him she was afraid she would appear "trashy" (her term) if she described her experience working on farms. Her teacher responded:

Teacher: You don't have to make it sound trashy.

Student: So...?

Teacher: How about "ranch hand?"

Student: It's not a ranch... I mean, I do chores and...

Teacher: Ah...

Student (*joking, officious tone*): "I remove crap from stalls."

Teacher: (*joking tone*): Yeah, don't say "remove crap from stalls."

Students within earshot exploded in laughter.

From a Lacanian perspective, the humor of the exchange comes out of the tensions between the portfolio genre's official discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment and the student's alternate discourse of hard work. More specifically, the humor of the exchange derives from the impossibility of pursuing the desire of one discourse in the circuit of another discourse. In the student's hard work discourse, shit shoveling exemplifies one's desire for self-identity with master signifiers including work (i.e., difficult, often unpleasant work), perseverance, and group effort. This desire does not translate easily into the circuit of work-as-personal fulfillment, where subjects are called to desire self-identity with master signifiers such as work (i.e., personally fulfilling work), professional, and career. Moreover, by expressing her concern with appearing "trashy"—a gendered and classed insult—the student indicates how activities and desires more or less open to people of all genders in hard work discourse are closed to people of all genders, and particularly to women, in a discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment. Indeed, while women and men in the region perform and talk about many of the same gritty aspects of farm labor, professional discourse makes talking about these practices difficult for everyone and especially for women, who are often imagined in professional discourse as being unsuited to physically demanding work. The student and her teacher highlight the difficulty of translating desire across discourses by using hyper-formal language—a cartoonish version of professional speech—to describe one of the most unpleasant types of farm work.

A Lacanian approach to genre study also indicates there is more to this joke than a mistranslation of discourse and desire. Indeed, a Lacanian lens brings into view the joke's hysterical edge. As shown in Figure 1, section 1.D, Lacan's hysterical discourse is a social circuit in which a split subject addresses master signifiers upheld by a receiver. The speaker demonstrates her incompleteness by questioning her desire to achieve fullness in the Symbolic Order. The receiver is called to resecure master signifiers by producing knowledge of the world coordinated by those signifiers. In the exchange described above, the student emphasizes her split constitution, her inability to present her whole life as that of a self-forming individual moving from experience to personally fulfilling experience. To emphasize her inability to desire what the portfolio calls her to desire, she points to her "inappropriate" enjoyment of the gritty aspects of farm labor. More to the point, she indicates she is stuck in a circuit of desire governed by hard work discourse, but she understands the portfolio genre is calling her to reorganize her desire through a discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment. Caught in this bind, she appeals to her teacher for help. While her teacher accepts her bid to enact a hysteric circuit—he tries to produce knowledge that will resecure her desire

in a discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment—all he can come up with is “How about ‘ranch hand?’” Thus, he tries to solve a problem of desire by producing more knowledge (i.e., knowledge of portfolio-speak). Although his suggestion is weak, no knowledge on its own could satisfy the student’s desire. Some of the desire unaccounted for in this attempt at translation fuels both the student’s joke about writing “I remove crap from stalls”—an obviously poor translation of farm-speak to portfolio-speak—and the other farm kids’ explosive response.

The Lacanian approach to genre study exemplified above shows that genres maintain desires for actors to take up, but these desires are impossible to fulfill. Moreover, this approach shows how the impossibility of desire shapes how actors work in genres. The student described above, for example, struggled to fulfill her desire (a) to switch from a discourse of hard work into a discourse of work-as-personal-fulfillment and (b) to achieve self-identity with the latter’s master signifiers. Other students invested in other discourses faced different challenges pursuing the impossible desires of the career portfolio. Those challenges shaped the ways students worked in the genre.

Conclusions: Implications for Practice

Although the approach presented above is intended to show how genre work may be studied from a Lacanian standpoint, it also suggests some ways genre work may be carried out in classrooms. Specifically, the approach warns educators not to downplay desire in favor of knowledge. When desire is backgrounded, students are less likely to engage fully with genres and their discourses. The latter are fueled by subjects’ desires for self-identity with master signifiers. Furthermore, when desire is ignored, students are more likely to resist new genres and remain fixed in the surplus enjoyment of their favored cultural forms. Indeed, some students who find their desires ignored may mobilize the discourses and genres of anti-school culture, which produce enjoyment precisely by rejecting official genres.

How, then, might educators engage desire when teaching genres? Bracher points to one possibility when he describes how Lacan’s analyst discourse can disrupt and lay bare the desires of other forms of discourse. That is, while teachers are not therapists, they can use analyst discourse to join students in interrogating and changing the arrangements of the unconscious sustained by genres. In analyst discourse, speakers center the receivers’ object/cause of desire (*a*) and refuse to provide an account of the world (*S2*) that sustains the receivers’ desires to achieve identity with master signifiers (*S1*). The receivers, therefore, recognize themselves as split subjects (\$) who will never achieve fullness. They can then begin to form identifications with other master signifiers (*S1*) that will circuit their desires in less oppressive ways. For instance, the teacher described above might decline to explain his students’ lives in terms ratified by the portfolio genre. Rather, he could engage them in explorations of their desires to secure personally rewarding careers. Through this exploration, students might recognize they will never fully embody the roles of good students creating their own good lives. Students might then begin to identify with other signifiers and take on other desires. They might begin to see themselves, for example, as contributors to different communities. While such identifications also sustain impossible desires (i.e., the desire for perfect identification with a community), they may prove less oppressive for some students than their previous investments in individual success.

In a similar vein, Rickert advises educators to pursue a post-pedagogy of the Act. That is, Rickert calls educators to resist laying out all the tracks on which students will run and to acknowledge students’ efforts to fulfill desires not prescribed by schools. When they witness such Acts, educators should not be too quick to reterritorialize them in official discourses and genres. Rather, educators should consider holding open a space for students to work through desires and to explore possibilities for circuiting desires in new ways.

When teaching genres, an educator taking Rickert’s tack would resist defining as errors all her students’ unexpected ways of working with new forms. She would, instead, view some efforts as surprises that reveal the workings of genres and students’ desires. By encouraging students both to find their own ways through genres and to compare and contrast their own paths with established paths, the teacher would prompt her students to develop meta-level understandings of genres and their own desires. For instance, the teacher described above might interpret his students’ jokes not as indications of their ineptness with the portfolio genre but as evidence of their efforts to negotiate the conflicting desires of school and family. Instead of laughing off the student’s joke and prompting her to find some way to cast her life in portfolio-speak, he could encourage her to work out the joke in greater detail. He could tell her to forget about her grade and to fill some or all of her portfolio with artifacts that wring humor out of the contrast between discourses of hard work and work-as-personal-fulfillment. If the student agrees, the whole class could then study her portfolio and discuss how each discourse illuminates the limitations of the other (e.g., hard work discourse shows work often has little to do with projects of personal improvement). Having identified the partiality of two powerful discourses, students are positioned to circuit their desires in less

oppressive ways.

In a similar, yet more planned out approach, a teacher might foreground desire by prompting a whole class to mismatch genre and discourse and thereby mix cultural forms that sustain different desires. For instance, a teacher might introduce a genre like a college admissions essay and talk with her students about the situations in which that genre is used (e.g., admissions committee meetings). The teacher could then prompt her students to form groups (a) to talk out admissions essays in different “inappropriate” discourses, (b) to identify the discourse that is most humorously inappropriate for the genre, and (c) to write comic essays in that discourse. Next, heedless of Twain’s warning about jokes and frogs, the teacher could ask students to explain the humor in their essays in terms of the contrast between the desires maintained by the genre and the desires maintained by the discourse. For instance, a group mobilizing a punk discourse might explain how they wring humor out of the contrast between that discourse’s desire for an upended social order and the admissions essay’s desire for involvement and school spirit (e.g., “In my junior and senior years at Upper Peninsula High School, I served as treasurer of our punk rock booster club, Anarchy in the UP”). In this assignment, humor works as a kind of detection device that indicates how and where desire flows through genres. And in purposefully exceeding genres’ boundaries, humor points in alternate directions desire might flow.

While educators would do well to explore the unexpected in students’ writing, their efforts are limited by institutional pressures. In public K-12 schools in the USA, for example, teachers labor under a standards/testing regime that presses them to teach students the most obvious features of a given genre and then to move on to the next mandated topic. In post-secondary schools, educators have held off such hyper-standardization and testing (for now). However, they are pressured by their colleagues and by their fields, in general, to march through their curricula to cover foundational topics and genres. Thus, in effect, if not intent, traditional schooling puts aside students’ desires and, instead, works to direct students into circuit after circuit of official desire. To counteract the cynicism students often develop from years of chasing the sanctioned desires of schooling, educators at multiple levels should fight to open spaces in which students can discover more meaningful ways of engaging desires and working in genres.

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