

Writing Genres

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Dedicated to my colleagues in genre theory,
for their generosity of time and depth of scholarship

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A Theory of Genre

You've got to fit somewhere, and for the sake of fitting, I'm country.

—Shania Twain, *Laurence Journal-World*,
4 September 1998

The significance of generic categories thus resides in their cognitive and cultural value, and the purpose of genre theory is to lay out the implicit knowledge of the users of genres.

—Marie-Laure Ryan, "Introduction:
On the Why, What and How of Generic Taxonomy"

Genre pervades human lives. As people go about their business, interacting with others and trying to get along in the world, they use genres to ease their way, to meet expectations, to save time. People recognize genres, though not usually the power of genres. People say, "I heard the best *joke* today," "I have to give a *lecture* at nine thirty," "I've gotten into *mysteries*," and "Do you have a *travel brochure* for the Apostle Islands?" Genres have the power to help or hurt human interaction, to ease communication or to deceive, to enable someone to speak or to discourage someone from saying something different. People learn how to do *small talk* to ease the social discomfort of large group gatherings and meeting new people, but advertisers learn how to disguise *sales letters* as *winning sweepstakes entries*. Outraged citizens can express themselves in *letters to the editor*, but first-year college students may struggle to dissociate their personal experience from their *research papers*. Genre has significance for people's lives.

Scholars have studied genres for centuries; neither is it a new topic in English studies. In recent years, however, views of genre have changed, shifting from a formalistic study of critics' classifications to a rhetorical

study of the generic actions of everyday readers and writers. This shift is possible in part, of course, because of the work done by previous genre critics and theorists, but it represents a substantial change in what is considered interesting and significant about genre. The theorists most directly contributing to this new conception of genre come from the whole range of English studies: from literature (M. M. Bakhtin, Tzvetan Todorov, Thomas Beebe, and David Fishelov), linguistics (M. A. K. Halliday, John Swales, Aviva Freedman, and Vijay K. Bhatia), and composition and rhetoric (Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Carolyn Miller, Charles Bazerman, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin, and David Russell), to name just a few. Because genre so significantly impacts how people use language, read literature, and write and read nonliterary texts, theories of genre can contribute new perspectives and approaches to many endeavors within English studies as well as a better understanding more generally of how people operate and have operated within their societies and cultures.

This volume examines, interprets, illustrates, elaborates, critiques, refines, and extends a rhetorical theory of genre, a theory that sees genres as types of rhetorical actions that people perform in their everyday interactions with their worlds. A rather complex theory of genre has developed over the last twenty years in the field of composition and rhetoric in particular, building in North America especially on the theoretical synthesis and argument proffered by Carolyn Miller in a 1984 article, "Genre as Social Action." Miller drew from a wide range of rhetorical scholars and theorists to synthesize and then extend a semiotic theory of genre. To explain and develop different issues in this rhetorical and semiotic theory of genre, other scholars have incorporated bits from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of speech genres, from M. A. K. Halliday's functional theory of language as a social semiotic, from Anthony Giddens's structuration theory, most recently from Soviet activity theory, and from other theories and perspectives that have proven useful and enlightening. The results today are enhanced rhetorical theories of genre, much indebted to Miller's original examination and extension of then current genre scholarship.

What I attempt in this volume is not a history of that scholarship nor a detailed, blow-by-blow account of each addition to our understanding of genre. What I hope to do is to synthesize much of the existing scholarship in order to clarify where genre theory stands today; to elaborate and illustrate what I consider to be the essential ideas of contemporary

genre theory so that readers may better understand our claims; to critique current theories where I see disagements or opportunities; and to extend genre theory in order to add new directions or argue for particular perspectives. Although many scholars have advanced theories of genre upon which this book will draw, some essential assumptions have not been fully examined and some implications have not been considered. Nor has anyone attempted the perhaps foolhardy task of elaborating a comprehensive theory of genre, one that encompasses synchronic as well as diachronic perspectives, literary as well as rhetorical genres, and individual as well as social views. In making this attempt, I hope to provoke new questions, not supply all the answers.

Following current genre scholarship and therefore drawing heavily from Miller, this first chapter establishes the basic definitions and tenets I find most significant and productive in current rhetorical genre theory. Readers interested in the scholarly history of these ideas might wish to review Miller's 1984 article, in which she establishes the sources of many of the ideas that current composition theory in North America most often draws from her work. One of the ideas current in genre theory and explained in this chapter is that genre should be redefined rhetorically according to the people who participate in genres and make the forms meaningful, a shift from genre as defined by literary critics or rhetoricians to genre as defined by its users. Breaking with older, traditional notions of genre and moving toward contemporary views, this chapter explains why genre cannot be equated with classification, though genres do classify, and why genre cannot be equated with forms, though genres are often associated with formal features. More current and rhetorical theories of genre tend to follow Miller's definition of genre as typified social action associated with a recurrent situation. Agreeing with this essentially rhetorical nature of genre, this chapter draws out and extends threads introduced by Miller and other scholars to weave a detailed tapestry of genre. It amplifies Miller's challenge to the existence of recurrence as anything other than a construction, and it defines the relationship between genre and its situation as interactive and reciprocal. In fact, as David Russell does using activity theory, this chapter rejects situation as singularly defining of genre. Instead, I expand from situation to include an interaction of contexts at different levels, encompassing the impact of preexisting genres as well as situational and cultural context.

After this initial weaving of a definition and theory of genre, the remaining chapters examine some of the most significant and sometimes unexplored implications of such a theory. Each chapter examines genre

from a different angle: the social, historical, individual, literary, and pedagogical. Chapter 2 elaborates the social nature of genre, its functioning within social groups and social spheres and its entanglement with issues of power. These basic social principles will be illustrated and complicated in chapter 3 through reconsideration of a study of the particular genres written by tax accountants. Chapter 4 focuses on how genres change and their dynamic and historical nature, using examples from others' studies of business genres, genres used by presidents, and freshman themes, and drawing from my own study of change within sixteenth- and seventeenth-century genres. Chapter 5 examines the role of genre as norm, as standard to enforce similarity among different readers and writers. The chapter examines the issue from a linguistic perspective, considering how genre compares with other language standards and demonstrating how genre affects the process of linguistic standardization in even small textual features. Drawing on linguistics and creativity theory, I also argue that genre both encourages standardization and enables variation and that, similarly, genre both constrains and enables individual creativity. Chapter 6 examines whether such a social and rhetorical theory of genre can apply to literary genres as well. It finds that the different fields within English studies ask questions and raise issues that challenge each other's assumptions and advance our understanding of genre for both. Chapter 7 considers the question of whether to teach genres explicitly, especially in light of arguments about language acquisition critiques of genre pedagogies. It proposes that we teach genre awareness, not specific genres, and that we consider carefully the genres we have students write with a view to the antecedents those genres may provide for future writing tasks. Finally, chapter 8 considers implications for the study of reading and writing and suggests questions for future research.

Before addressing these implications and extensions, however, I need to establish the views of genre current in composition and rhetorical theory. I will begin, as others often have, with an explanation of why traditional views of genre are inadequate to capture the complexity of genre as it operates in people's lives.

Genre as Classification and Form

At its worst, genre is a trivial and dangerous concept. It merely names what writers have created (the sonnet) and specifies formal features (fourteen lines), yet it artificially compares unique authors and works of art (Shakespeare and Donne) and stifles true creativity (forcing modern poets to break out into free verse). That negative perception leads to labeling

as "genre writing" what are considered by many the least interesting literary works—formulaic mysteries, romances, westerns, and science fiction. Even at its most positive, genre is traditionally known as artificial and arhetorical, a classification system deriving from literary and rhetorical criticism that names types of texts according to their forms. No wonder that genre has become a topic of little interest to postromantic scholars, who do not care to consider such traditional topics as whether a text belongs to one genre or another, whether one type of text is its own genre or a subgenre of another, whether a new genre derives from this genre or that genre, and what comprises the essential features of a particular genre.

Such a view of genre holds little interest for contemporary language, composition, and rhetoric scholars as well, for, in the past, genre has not only been equated with literary texts exclusively but has also been divorced from contemporary understandings of how language works. Simplified views of genre encourage the very dichotomies in the study of writing that contemporary composition and rhetoric scholars have been undercutting: splits between form and content (and the related form and function, text and context), product and process, and individual and society. Treating genre as form requires dividing form from content, with genre as the form into which content is put. This container model of meaning has been superseded by a more integrated notion of how meaning is made, of the inseparability of form from content, as argued by such theorists as Kenneth Burke in "The Philosophy of Literary Form," and M. M. Bakhtin: "Form and content in discourse are one" ("Discourse" 259). Similarly, treating genre as form and text type requires binding genre to an emphasis on writing as a product, without effect on the processes of writing or, worse yet, inhibiting those processes. As a product-based concept, in fact, this view of genre seems to have more to do with reading than with writing. Genre interpretations have been popular among literary critics, those who have traditionally been more concerned with the reading of texts than with the writing of texts. Even in literature, though, the emphasis with genre has been on the product one reads rather than on the process of reading. Finally, a formal view of genre exaggerates one of the most troubling current dichotomies, that between the individual and the group or society. It makes genre a normalizing and static concept, a set of dictated forms that constrain the individual; genuine writers can distinguish themselves only by breaking out of those generic constraints, by substituting an individual genius for society's bonds. The individual and society are an odds rather than integrated. Although such

simplified versions of traditional views of genre are being replaced by new versions—genre as rhetorical and dynamic, integrating form and content, product and process, individual and society—the conceptions of genre as classification system and formula have such a long history and are so well established that they are not easily dethroned. They also, of course, have some truth to them. An explanation of new theories of genre thus begins with the old.

Genre as Classification System

The conventional conception considers genre a classification system of texts based on shared formal characteristics. Since formalisms in general have sustained much of the work in linguistics, rhetoric, and literature in the past—the fields out of which genre theories have developed—it is not surprising that most genre theories in the past have been concerned with classification and form, with describing the formal features of a particular genre, describing the embodiment of a genre in a particular work, or delineating a genre system, a set of classifications of (primarily literary) texts. The emphasis on classification can be traced back to the followers of Aristotle, who turned his initial treatment in the *Poetics* of the epic, tragedy, and comedy into an infinitely modifiable classification scheme. The rhetorical division of discourse into epideictic, judicial, and deliberative can be seen as a similar classification system, one still in use by some rhetoricians today. Other writers propose broader or narrower schemes of text types: literature and nonliterature; narrative and nonnarrative; narrative, exposition, argument, description; the lyric, the sonnet; the Petrarchan sonnet. Whether called genres, subgenres, or modes, whether comprehensive or selective, whether generally accepted or disputed, these systems for classifying texts keep genre focused on static products.¹

Classifications are the effects of genre but not the extent of genre. To study genre as a rhetorical concept, one need not necessarily agree upon or even respond to many of the questions that have been raised about generic classifications—such as how many genres there are, whether *x* is a subgenre of *y*, whether this text is an instance of genre *y* or genre *z*. Tzvetan Todorov rather breezily claims, “We do not know just how many types of discourse there are, but we shall readily agree that there are more than one” (9). Though interesting in particular contexts, such classificatory questions reflect the particular purposes underlying particular classification schemes rather than the nature of genre itself. Groupings of complex items like texts are more like metaphors

than equations: how texts are grouped depends on which features the classifier has selected to observe—common prosody, organization, tone, aim, or effect on the reader for example. Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, for example, can be classified as a narrative, an episodic novel, a pseudo-autobiography, or an eighteenth-century novel, depending on the classifier’s interests. Even less transitional works can be classified in multiple ways: a memorandum from a departmental chair can be classified as business correspondence, memoranda, internal correspondence, or academic writing, depending on the classifier’s perspective. An article in the *New York Times Book Review* can be classified as a review, an essay, a review essay, a magazine article, or journalism. Each of these works could also be classified in other ways, as purpose and interest dictate. Which of these labels are “actually” genres, which the “right” genre labels? Such classificatory questions may be interesting for the questions they raise about the nature of journalism today, the business side of academic life, or the development of the novel, but they do not define the essence of genre. As Heather Dubrow points out in her history of literary genre theory, the problem with defining genre based on *genus* (kind) is that what we will call a kind depends on “exactly what we think a genre is and hence what characteristics we take into account when deciding whether to grant that label to a given literary type” (5). Defining genre as a kind of text becomes circular, since what we call a kind of text depends on what we think a genre is.

That *conundrum* does not mean that genres do not involve classification nor that devising a classification scheme is necessarily a waste of time. There are purposes for which classification systems are helpful. After all, we do not reject classifications of biological species just because they reflect a principle of selection. Anne Freedman, in her classic 1987 article on genre, “Anyone for Tennis?” lists filing systems, library classification systems, and disciplinary divisions within a university as examples of helpful classification systems (106). Similarly helpful, Aristotle’s systems of classification clarified the purposes of literature and of rhetoric. The classification system that is the modes may have been created, according to Robert Connors’s research, to ease the teaching of writing. Classifying texts has enabled scholars to clarify their arguments and discover new understandings, and that kind of genre work may still accomplish some purposes for literary and rhetorical scholars. But no one classification scheme delineates all genres. Genre scholars have long recognized that different classification systems serve different purposes. For a particular project, I might want to group all texts into one of three categories,

comedy, tragedy, or tragicomedy; for another project, I might want to use four categories, narration, exposition, description, and argumentation; for another, just two categories, literature and nonliterature. For a project that involves working with texts in a more limited context, as in an accounting firm, for example, the classification scheme would cut smaller pieces of the world: say, letters to clients, research memoranda, internal memoranda, and sales letters. The particular labels that scholars give to genres will vary for different scholarly purposes. Rather than making the concept so broad as to be useless, as some have argued, allowing such flexibility in the definition of genre for scholars keeps the concept fluid and dynamic, able to respond to scholars' changing needs over time.

So far, I have been discussing the genre labels given by scholars and critics, but the most significant genre labels for a rhetorical definition of genre—and the classifications of most concern to rhetorical genre scholars—are the labels given by the people who use the genres. In addition to being named by analysts after the fact, genres are named as people use them, and texts are classified as they are being used. Concerned citizens write letters to their editors, students write essay examinations, teachers write syllabi, and doctors write prescriptions. Using other channels, presidents give inaugural addresses, artists paint portraits, and musicians play country songs. Most current rhetorical genre scholars base their analyses of genre not on the classifications of critics and analysts but on the ways people classify texts into genres as they use them. Carolyn Miller argues for analyzing the everyday genres that people use, and by 1997 David Russell takes as a given that participants' recognition of a genre is what rightly determines whether one genre is distinct from another ("Rethinking" 518). Genre has been redefined, then, from a classification created by critics to a classification that people make as they use symbols to get along in the world.

The cognitive origins of these common genre classifications are not well established. Of course, people classify many things, not just genres. All of language is based on classification, as words classify unique items into linguistic classes: each chair is a unique construction of materials, shapes, and designs, for example, but people call all manner of things they sit on "chair." Genre labels, too, classify unique items, but they classify symbolic actions rather than just types of texts, as I will explain further below. "Genre" itself is a label that scholars have put on one kind of classification, cutting the complexity of human cognition and of the world into this one part. Whether genres are a particular manner of classification or the same kind as all human classification is a question

deserving examination by neurologists, cognitive psychologists, and psycholinguists. What we know is that language users perceive genres without being taught them apart from learning language (once they know the words, they describe themselves as telling "jokes" or "stories," for example), and different groups develop new words to describe the different genres they use. People classify unique actions under common labels, and we scholars call those labels "genres."

That the concept of genre has a reality for language users adds significance to the scholar's study of genres: studying genre is studying how people use language to make their way in the world. Examining genres as defined by language users rather than by scholars and critics gives us quite different answers to such questions as which classificatory systems are best and how many genres there are. This basis in user recognition underlies such claims as Carolyn Miller's that "the number of genres current in any society is indeterminate and depends upon the complexity and diversity of the society" (163). With a user-based classificatory system for defining genre, the scholar's role in determining the proper classificatory system is replaced by another role, described by Miller as "ethnomethodological: it seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates" (155). Marie-Laure Ryan earlier notes the importance of such an ethnomethodological enterprise: "The significance of generic categories thus resides in their cognitive and cultural value, and the purpose of genre theory is to lay out the implicit knowledge of the users of genres" (112). I would add that literary and rhetorical critics are themselves people who use genres, and explicating their implicit knowledge reveals the literary and rhetorical values of our culture. Where earlier genre scholars were most interested in literary genres as defined by critics, today's rhetorical genre scholars are more often interested in everyday genres as named by their everyday users. Defining genre according to those common classifications reveals not only "something theoretically important about discourse," as Miller points out (155), but also something important about how people think and how people act, as Miller, Ryan, and others point out. The classificatory nature of genre is an essential part of understanding genre and its significance, but such classification is defined rhetorically rather than critically, by the people who use it, for their purposes of operating in the everyday world.

Genre as Form

Although the classifications named by genre labels would seem to be based on common formal patterns, form alone cannot define genres.

Theoretically, equating genre with form is tenable only within a container model of meaning, for it requires a separation of generic form from a particular text's context. Denying the container metaphor, J. R. Martin et al. write, "It is very important to recognize that genres make meaning; they are not simply a set of formal structures into which meanings are poured" (64). Similarly, I. R. Titunik summarizes P. N. Medvedev's ideas about literary genre: "Genre is not that which is determined and defined by the components of a literary work or by sets of literary works, but that which, in effect, determines and defines them" (175). The problem of circularity also arises for form as it did for classification: A genre is named because of its formal markers; the formal markers can be identified because a genre has been named. The formal regularities we can observe in genres do not alone create the genres; they result from the genres.

On one level, genres do originate in repeated textual patterns, in forms. Readers and listeners recognize formal markers of a particular genre and identify the genre accordingly. "Once upon a time" begins some fairy tales, and "Have you heard the one about" marks some jokes. Business letters follow particular formats for inside addresses and even envelopes, and sonnets have fourteen lines. More complex discourse forms mark genres as well: contracts use a specified legal language and terminology, lab reports include required sections, tragedies follow a rise and fall of action. Such discourse markers have traditionally defined genres for many scholars and critics, and there is no doubting that certain textual forms identify certain genres. As Richard Coe argues in "An Apology for Form," the formal elements of genres are significant and meaningful, and studying the formal elements can offer insights about genres.

Practically, though, identifying reliable formal features of some genres has proven troublesome (consider the diverse forms of the novel, for example, or the essay). The formal features of some genres are at best minimal. Peter Medway has described a genre, called the architect's notebook, that students at his university write. The notebook is a particular kind of notebook physically, of a particular size, color, and material. Those studying to be architects carry the notebooks with them, and they refer to what they write as architects' notebooks. Medway's examination of the insides of these notebooks, however, revealed no common textual traits among the notebooks. Some included pictures, some did not; some used full sentences and paragraphs, some did not; some wrote about architecture, some did not. Such a "baggy genre," as Medway calls it, has little in the way of formal features to define it as a genre.² One response would be to deny genre status to kinds of texts that

do not have clear formal markers, and in fact some have argued against the existence of a novel or essay genre on the basis of the looseness of its textual characteristics. To deny generic labels to genres identified as such by their users, however, would seem presumptuous, especially in a rhetorical theory of genre that emphasizes the users and uses of genres. Readers say they have read a novel, and writers say they are writing essays. Architecture students say they are writing an architect's notebook.

Historically, too, identifying genres with formal features proves troublesome, for the formal characteristics of genres change over time but the users' labels of the genres do not necessarily change. Trying to solve this analytic problem by distinguishing definitive from insignificant forms has generally been unsuccessful, at best possible only after the fact and only for one historical period at a time. Rather than denying the validity of the users' genre recognition or trying to narrow it to a few forms, the task of the genre scholar is to identify what it is that makes users recognize these as genres.

Comparing genre labels to other words again may help clarify the relation of form to genre: studies of language show that speakers do not select words to classify items solely according to formal properties, that a speaker calls this rocker a "chair" not because of any formal properties of the rocker (though the rocker does indeed have a flat surface connected to an upright surface) but rather because of the speaker's perception of the rocker's function for that speaker at that time. People call a container a "cup" when they drink from it; they call a similarly shaped object a "bowl" when they spoon soup from it. Even more obviously, an emotion is not labeled "love" because of its association with heart rate or skin temperature but because of the speaker's perception of the emotion's meaning. Similarly, people do not label a particular story as a joke solely because of formal features but rather because of their perception of the rhetorical action that is occurring. At most, then, genres are associated with but not defined by textual form. The rhetorical and linguistic scholarship argues that formal features physically mark some genres, act as traces, and hence may be quite revealing. But those formal traces do not *define* or *constitute* the genre. The fact that genre is reflected in formal features does not mean that genre *is* those formal features.

To examine the relationship between form and genre, Karllyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson in 1978 reviewed substantial criticisms from rhetorical scholarship and concluded that "rhetorical forms that establish genres are stylistic and substantive responses to

perceived situational demands" ("Form" 19). Any form, they note, may appear in isolation in other genres, but the "constellation" of forms in a genre, "bound together by an internal dynamic," fuses the elements so that "a unique kind of rhetorical act is created" ("Form" 20, 21, 25). That "unique kind of rhetorical act" is a genre, an action performed beyond any particular formal features. Carolyn Miller delineates Campbell and Jamieson's fusion further, describing a fusion of form with substance to create symbolically meaningful action ("Genre" 159-61). Campbell and Jamieson, Miller, and many genre scholars since look then not to patterns of form to define genre but to patterns of action. To understand those actions requires understanding the contexts within which they occur, contexts that in rhetorical scholarship have been called rhetorical situations.

Genre as Response to Recurring Situation

Although devising classification schemes and delineating formal traces of genres still have value in genre studies, those classifications and forms will not be fully understood without examining the rhetorical situations behind the genres being examined. Part of what architecture students recognize in their architects' notebooks is the situation of being an architecture student, a situation that requires keeping an architect's notebook. Part of what all readers and writers recognize when they recognize genres are the roles they are to play, the roles being played by other people, what they can gain from the discourse, and what the discourses are about. Picking up a text, readers not only classify it and expect a certain form, but also make assumptions about the text's purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader. If I open an envelope and find a letter from a friend, I understand immediately a friendly purpose of sharing news and maintaining a relationship, I enter the role of friend and see the writer as friend, and I respond-read accordingly. If, in a different scenario, I open an envelope and recognize a sales letter in my hand, I understand that a company will make a pitch for its product and want me to buy it. Once I recognize that genre, I will throw the letter away or scan it for the product it is selling—hence the many sales pitches that now arrive in our mailboxes disguised as personal letters or important government messages. Such attempts to use form to mislead us about the actual genre again indicate the separability of formal features from the essence of a genre. What I understand about each of these letters and reflect in my response to them is much more than a set of formal features or textual conventions. A rhetorical theory of genre,

therefore, must look beyond and behind particular classifications (which are only the indicators of genres and change as our purposes change) and forms (which may trace but do not constitute genre). As recent theory has it, genre entails purposes, participants, and themes, so understanding genre entails understanding a rhetorical situation and its social context.

One major strain of recent genre theory that connects genre to purposes, participants, and themes derives from the notion of genre as typified response to recurring rhetorical situation. Campbell and Jamieson trace the idea's roots to a 1965 discussion of genre by Edwin Black, in which he describes genres as responding to types of situations that recur ("Form" 14). Carolyn Miller's definition, developing out of the body of rhetorical scholarship that followed, defines genres as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159). Much of North American genre scholarship in composition and rhetoric has followed Miller's definition. While drawing on various theoretical groundings, other scholars acknowledge Miller's definition in delineating their own: David Russell uses Vygotskian activity theory to define genre as "typified ways of purposefully interacting in and among some activity systems" ("Rethinking" 513); Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin use Giddens's structuration theory to define genres as "dynamic rhetorical forms that are developed from actors' responses to recurrent situations and that serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning" (4); and I elsewhere followed Miller, Halliday, and Bakhtin in defining genre as "a dynamic response to and construction of recurring situation" ("Generalizing" 580). Although these scholars use quite different theories to articulate and elaborate their definitions in important ways, they all echo Miller and her rhetorical antecedents in including some common elements of a genre definition: that genre is action, that genre is typified action, that typification comes from recurring conditions, and that those conditions involve a social context. None of these assertions is simple, as these scholars and others have demonstrated in elaborating their theories at length. To reduce those complex theories to common elements, I had to generalize verbs and use possibly objectionable broad concepts, like social context. But these common elements do capture the essence of a reconceived genre theory, even as they must be complicated by those scholars and in the rest of this book to capture the theoretical complexity of genre.

To say that genres are actions is in part to say that genres are not classifications not formed, as argued in the previous sections. Genres help

people do things in the world. They are also both social and rhetorical actions, operating as people interact with others in purposeful ways. To say that genres are typified actions is in part to say that genres are classifications but classifications made by people as they act symbolically rather than by analysts as they examine products. To examine the nature of this typification further and to elaborate the nature of recurring conditions and social context and their interactions with genre, I will first trace the relationships between social context and genre that others have proposed, leading to my own characterization of that relationship.

Miller's definition of genre, "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159), has been considerably complicated over the years by Miller and others, but it remains an oft-cited mantra for many genre scholars. Although also deriving from Aristotle and Burke, the connection of genre to situation has been most frequently drawn from the 1968 work of Lloyd Bitzer. In his elaborate exploration of rhetorical situation, Bitzer refers to what happens when situations recur:

Due to either the nature of things or convention, or both, some situations recur. The courtroom is the locus for several kinds of situations generating the speech of accusation, the speech of defense, the charge to the jury. From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established. This is true also of the situation which invites the inaugural address of a President. The situation recurs and, because we experience situations and the rhetorical response to them, a form of discourse is not only established but comes to have a power of its own—the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint upon any new response in the form. (13)

According to this model, these "rhetorical forms" (though never called "genres" by Bitzer) develop because they respond appropriately to situations that speakers and writers encounter repeatedly. In principle, that is, language users first respond in fitting ways and hence similarly to recurring situations; then the similarities among those appropriate responses become established as generic conventions.

That texts respond to situations is a conception found also in the work of Kenneth Burke, who asserts that "[c]ritical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose" (1). In Burke's model, writers develop strategies for "encompassing" situations,

strategies that "size up" situations in ways that have "public content." Burke notes that similar situations enable us to see "poetic acts" as relevant, and I would add (and will expand later) that similar strategies for encompassing those situations, public as they are, are also visible and may appear as relevant to our similar situations. This combination in discourse acts of situation and strategy (a bifurcation that Burke claims is the precursor of his five-part dramatic act) thus enables us to see genres as strategies that have commonly been used to answer situations.

That generic features suit their situations appears clearly in a relatively fixed genre like the lab report: its particular purposes and reader's needs can be met well by its formal features—such as a quick statement of purpose, separate methods and results sections, and clear section headings that allow the reader to skip to results and check methods only if something looks wrong in the results. If all writers of lab reports use these forms, then all lab reports will respond in some appropriate ways to the needs of their situation. Even a more loosely defined genre reveals the appropriateness of generic conventions to situation. The opening of a letter to a friend, for example, just like all our everyday greetings, signals affection and maintains contact, whether the standard "Hi! How are you?" or a more original nod to the relationship. The features that genres develop (at least at first) respond appropriately to their situations.

Such critics as Scott Consigny and Richard Vatz, however, note how deterministic such a connection of genre to situation can be. In fact, of course, multiple genres can respond to a situation, and speakers and writers can choose fitting responses that are not generically determined. As Carolyn Miller points out, the language of demand and response invites an externalized and deterministic view of situations and genre ("Genre" 155–56). In practice, as well, the genre a writer needs for a particular situation often already exists and hence already guides responses to that situation (an idea that I will say more about later in this chapter). If each writing problem were to require a completely new assessment of how to respond, writing would be slowed considerably, but once a writer recognizes a recurring situation, a situation that others have responded to in the past, the writer's response to that situation can be guided by past responses. Genre, thus, depends heavily on the intertextuality of discourse. As Bakhtin points out in his important essay on speech genres, a speaker "is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe" ("Problem" 69). The fact that others have responded to similar situations in the past in similar ways—the fact that genres exist—enables writers and readers to respond more easily

and more appropriately themselves. This initial insight—that genres respond appropriately to their rhetorical situations—reveals the rhetorical nature of genre. Knowing the genre, therefore, means knowing such rhetorical aspects as appropriate subject matter, level of detail, tone, and approach as well as the expected layout and organization. Miller concentrates on what genre reveals about purpose, object, and motive, and she concludes that “what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have” (“Genre” 165). Knowing the genre means not only, or even most of all, knowing how to conform to generic conventions but, more importantly, knowing one way of responding appropriately to a given situation.³

Connecting genres to situation provides genre with an essentially rhetorical nature. It helps explain how language users know to take particular reader and writer roles, how they select a particular genre when they have a particular purpose, and why certain genres are most commonly used within particular groups. Certain people commonly encounter certain situations, so they need ways of responding to those situations and they learn what is appropriate in those situations. As “situations are shorthand terms for motives” (Burke, “Permanence and Change, qtd. in C. Miller, “Genre” 158), genres are shorthand terms for situations. This relationship of situation to genre has formed the basis of a current rhetorical genre theory, but it needs to be elaborated to comprehend more complex views of both genre and situation. One problem is how to define situation. Bizzer offers one of the most fully detailed definitions of what he calls rhetorical situation:

Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. . . . Any *exigence* is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be. . . . An exigence which cannot be modified is not rhetorical. . . . Further, an exigence which can be modified only by means other than discourse is not rhetorical. . . . An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and

when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse. (6–7)

Bizzer’s article explains and exemplifies this definition of rhetorical situation and its essential component, rhetorical exigence, at some length. Other theorists, notably again Richard Vatz and Scott Consigny, have criticized Bizzer’s definition not only for being too deterministic, requiring that there be only one fitting response to any situation, but also for requiring a narrowly defined rhetorical exigence that excludes many kinds of writing and speaking. Since Bizzer limits rhetorical situation to only those situations with rhetorical exigencies that require discourse action, Bizzer’s definition of rhetorical situation is too narrow for the wide range of discourse for which genre theorists need to account.

For a broader inclusion of language behavior and a shift away from rhetorical exigence to function, many genre theorists, including Burke (111), have turned to B. Malinowski’s concepts of context of situation and context of culture, especially as developed later by M. A. K. Halliday and others. Context of situation, as Halliday defines it, consists of a field (roughly, what is happening, purposes), a tenor (who is involved, their roles), and a mode (what role language is playing) (31–35). Those components of situation predict what Halliday calls “register.” He defines register as “the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. It is the meaning potential that is accessible in a given social context” (111). Significantly, like genre, register is a semantic concept, not a formal one. Halliday most often lists genre as part of mode, a textual part of situation rather than an overall response to the situation (143–45). In this respect, Halliday’s social semiotic definition of situation will not adequately capture the complexity of genre that I am attempting here to establish. Yet at other times Halliday describes generic structure as being at a higher level of semiotic structure, one of three factors (along with textual structure and cohesion) that constitute text. This notion of generic structure, Halliday writes somewhat vaguely, “can be brought within the general framework of the concept of register” (134).

Perhaps because of Halliday’s willingness to include generic structure at this higher semiotic level, and surely because of the similarity of Halliday’s description of register to others’ notions of genre, Hasan, Martin, and other followers of Halliday have taken what Halliday says to be true of register to be true of genre as well, even equating Hallidayan register with their genre. Genres thus become the semantic resources

associated with situation types, the meaning potential in given social contexts. To the extent that register represents semantic resources associated with situation types, it seems a concept closely parallel to new definitions of genre, and it enables us to broaden beyond rhetorical exigencies and Bitzer's more narrowly defined rhetorical situation. All texts participate in contexts of situation, according to Halliday, and all participate in registers, so all texts participate in genres. To the extent that register represents the meaning potential available in a given social context, however, Halliday's concept of register seems much broader than genre. Registers appear to be the broadest associations of language and context, the language used by a mother at play with her child or a lawyer in discussion with her client rather than the more specific generic situation of playing house or conducting an initial interview. Definitions of genre that genre scholars derive from Halliday's broad notions of context of situation and corresponding functions seem similarly large, as in Martin, Christie, and Rothery's definition of genre as "a staged, goal oriented social process" (58), a definition that seems to encompass much more than typified genre. While Halliday's notion of context of situation thus broadens rhetorical situation so that it can be associated with a wide range of genres, it needs narrowing again to apply more specifically to genre as distinct from register or other social actions.

In a 1997 article on "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis," David Russell attempts to broaden the level of analysis to include nonlinguistic actions and to capture better the multiple, collective, and interactive social nature of those actions. He uses activity theory in part to avoid a dualism that can come from separating context and text, dealing with an activity system instead of a context. Reminiscent of Halliday's field, tenor, and mode, Russell's analysis breaks an activity system into subject(s), object/motive, and mediational means (510). Activity systems have the benefit over rhetorical situations of encompassing much more than narrowly defined rhetorical exigencies, including even the nonlinguistic, and much more than the immediate situation, including cultural values and other, interacting activity systems. In some ways, it collapses Malinowski's context of situation and context of culture into one activity system. As a result, it shares some of the problem of breadth of Halliday's context of situation and may even less provide a way to distinguish genre from other social actions. Both Halliday's and Russell's theories do, however, move away from the notion of genre as a unidirectional *response* to context of situation or activity system. Simply defining situation differently will not eliminate problems

remaining with the notion of genre as response, with the nature of recurrence of situation, and with missing components of context. What is needed is a more dynamic and interactive view of the relationship between genre and whatever the surrounding conditions may be.

Constructing Genre and Situation

An initial problem with defining the surrounding conditions of genres can be seen by trying to specify what a concept of context must include. Not everything about the surrounding environment (the temperature, what is happening in the next block) is relevant for the language use being considered, and some things outside the surrounding environment (potential readers, previous texts) are relevant. It is in this sense that situations cannot be strictly material.⁴ The very notion of context "surrounding" genre gives it a separation from discourse and yet a physical materiality that reinforce a container model of meaning, with artificially separated text and context, to which many have rightly objected. Yet, if the context of situation is not simply a physical fact of the surrounding environment, as it clearly is not, where does it come from? One answer has been that writers and readers construct it, that people's actions around discourse delineate what is relevant and not, what constitutes the situation. Carolyn Miller writes, "Situations are social constructs that are the result, not of 'perception,' but of 'definition.'" ("Genre" 156). Semiotic structures similarly result from human definition, and Halliday and Hasan also describe situation as constructed:

Any piece of text, long or short, spoken or written, will carry with it indications of its context. . . . This means that we reconstruct from the text certain aspects of the situation, certain features of the field, the tenor, and the mode. Given the text, we construct the situation from it. (38)

Similarly, Russell explains that activity systems are "mutually (re)constructed by participants historically" so that he "treats context not as a separate set of variables but as an ongoing, dynamic accomplishment of people acting together with shared tools, including—most powerfully—writing" ("Rethinking" 510, 508–509). The activity system, context of situation, or rhetorical situation is created by people through their use of discourse.

Neither the construction of situation nor, even more clearly, the recurrence of situation can be simply a material fact but instead must be rather what Miller calls "an intersubjective phenomenon, a social oc-

currence" ("Genre" 156). Situations cannot recur, Miller concludes from the work of Robert A. Stebbins and others. No two situations are identical, in either their material or constructed reality. Even the most closely allied situations will vary from one another, as performances of the same play vary from one another. Applying performance theory to genre, intriguingly, might offer ways of describing the singularity and yet generic commonality of each symbolic act, each discourse performance, an idea worthy of fuller elaboration than space in this chapter allows. Each performance of a play repeats the play with variations and is a distinct act. While maintaining much commonality with all other performances of the same play, the actors and audience differ, the sets, props, costumes, sound, and lights differ, the blocking and staging differ, the interpretation of its meaning differs. (I will explore this inherent variation and creativity in chapter 5.) Yet promoters advertise that the same play is being performed, call it by the same name, and audiences expect to see the same play. The variations of the particular performance are, in fact, what is appreciated, why the audience attends the play rather than reading the script. The parallels with discourse and genres seem to me fairly substantial. Each text varies in details, in who the participants are, what language is used, what meanings are achieved, yet readers and writers identify that the texts are of a common genre. The play and genre recur, even though the specific performance (artistic or linguistic) varies in substantial ways.

Carolyn Miller traces such recurrence to socially constructed types based on Alfred Schütz's notion of a common "stock of knowledge." This "social construct, or semiotic structure," in Miller's terms, develops from existing typifications, which develop from "the recognition of relevant similarities" ("Genre" 156–57). If stocks of knowledge and types equal genre, then Miller is arguing, as would I, that people construct the recurring situation through their knowledge and use of genres. They recognize similarities of one discourse to another because they already have a typified stock of knowledge or a socially created set of genres (a term I will develop in the next chapter). If this is so, then the significance of that preexisting set of genres may not have been sufficiently acknowledged in current genre theory. Preexisting genres are part of what enable individuals to move from their unique experiences and perceptions to a shared construction of recurring situation and genre. Miller dismisses subjective perception as the source of what recurs, for perception is "unique from moment to moment and person to person" ("Genre" 156). Yet I would argue that individual perception must be the source of re-

currence, for discourse exists only through the actions of individuals. All discourse is situated in unique experiences, changing from moment to moment and person to person. Discourse exists only when individuals act, and their actions will always be grounded in their uniqueness as well as their social experience. If genre is based on recurrence at all, it must be a recurrence perceived by the individuals who use genres. Existing genres, as part of individual knowledge as well as social typifications, can bridge the unique and the social, so they must play a significant role in people's perceiving similarities. A writer or reader recognizes recurrence because she or he recognizes an existing genre. But for existing genres to exist at all, people must have perceived similarities among disparate situations. Paradoxically, then, people recognize recurring situations because they know genres, yet genres exist only because people have acted as though situations have recurred.

This paradox works, I propose, because people construct genre through situation and situation through genre; their relationship is reciprocal and dynamic. If genre responds to recurring situation, then a particular text's reflection of genre reflects that genre's situation. Thus the act of constructing the genre—of classifying a text as similar to other texts—is also the act of constructing the situation. As mentioned earlier, when readers recognize the genre of a particular text, they recognize, through the genre, its situation. When, for example, readers recognize that they are reading a freshman theme, they recognize simultaneously the writer's and reader's roles. Like readers, writers also construct situation by constructing genre. A writer faced with a writing task confronts multiple contexts and must define a specific context in relation to that task. Writers must determine their persona, their audience, their purposes. By selecting a genre to write in, or by beginning to write within a genre, the writer has selected the situation entailed in that genre. A teacher's assignment may ask for a letter to the editor, but the student writer who begins with an inverted-triangle introduction common in freshman themes is still writing a school essay for the teacher, is still constructing his or her role as student filling a school assignment rather than as citizen trying to persuade fellow citizens. Acting with genres creates the contextual situation. "Thus context is an ongoing accomplishment," in Russell's pithy phrase, "not a container for actions or texts" (513).

This relationship between genre and situation, as constructed by readers and writers, listeners and speakers, is not unidirectional but must be reciprocal. About poetic acts, Burke suggested thinking of situation and strategy, or scene and act, as "each possessing its own genius, but

the two fields interwoven" (64). Situation and genre are so tightly interwoven as to be interlocked. People construct situations through genres, but they also construct genres through situations. The letter to the editor written for an assignment in a writing class may be a different genre from the letter to the editor written out of concern for a local issue. The genre is constructed differently because the situation is constructed differently. Cases where the genre is chosen rather than assigned make explicit the role of situation in constructing genre: people identify the situation in order to choose an appropriate genre. Once the genre is chosen, however, the genre reciprocally acts to shape the situation. Writing a letter to the editor entails certain roles for the writer and reader, leads readers to expect certain types of subject matter, and lends itself to particular types of purposes. If the writer defines the situation differently, the writer must work to alter that given situation in the particular letter; if successful, the text may lead readers to construct the situation differently, opening the way for constructing the genre differently. Letters to the editor in my hometown newspaper, for example, sometimes plead with thieves to return items stolen from the writer's property, overlaying onto the usual purpose of persuading a mass audience to action a different purpose of persuading a single person to action. Writers and readers in this case must use this genre to construct a different situation from the usual, and they use the situation to construct the genre differently from the usual. Situations construct genres, genres construct situations.

In fact, such cases where writers and readers are violating, challenging, or changing the connection of a genre to a situation can be most revealing of their integration and interdependence. Consider, for example, what happens when writers and readers match genre and situation differently. Suppose a writer of a formal scholarly article tried to vary the *situation*—say by changing the relationship of the writer and reader and treating the audience as a friend. What readers will likely note is a problem of *genre*, either noting a flawed text that violates the genre or concluding that the writer is trying to change the genre (the interpretation probably depending on whether the writer is a student or an established scholar, part of the cultural context to be discussed below). Conversely, a writer who mixes or shifts *genre* in the middle of a text causes confusion for the reader, not because the reader cannot label the genre but because the reader cannot be sure of the writer's purpose or the reader's role—cannot be sure of the *situation*. In watching *Twin Peaks*, a television series blending mystery, fantasy, and more, viewers

asked not "Is this a murder mystery or is this a fantasy?" but rather "Am I supposed to believe this?" and "Aren't they going to tell me who did it?" For a final example, a reader who "misreads" a text's *genre*—who reads "A Modest Proposal" as a serious proposal, say—most significantly misreads the *situation* as well. Genre and situation are tightly interwoven, as genre theory has long recognized, but it is genre that determines situation as well as situation that determines genre. To say that *genre responds* to situation not only is deterministic but also oversimplifies their reciprocal relationship.

As I will discuss further in chapters 4 and 5 and as many other scholars have noted, people can create and alter genres; that process too reveals the integration and interdependence of genre and situation. Writers can try to vary the matchup of situation and genre. A "change of scene," Burke notes, announces "a new kind of act" (106 note). The scholarly personal essay (or personal scholarly essay) can be seen as an attempt to change the scholarly article's genre, situation, or both. Perhaps writers of such essays wish the scholarly article genre would encompass personal experience; perhaps such writers wish the scholarly situation entailed greater intimacy between colleagues; perhaps writers of such essays wish that the scholarly situation called for a personal genre. Similar interpretations of both situation and genre can be offered for *écriture féminine* and other alternate, diverse styles of discourse. To alter the situation, the genre must be altered, and to alter the genre, the situation must be altered.

To reunite some of the more complex threads of this developing rhetorical theory of genre, and to suggest some of the implications, I would like to extend an example that Russell gives of going grocery shopping with his daughter. In my much-reduced version of Russell's narrative, they make a grocery list, discover that it helps them in their goal of getting food for the household, so they begin making a grocery list every week and modify as needed over time (516–17). The situation called for the genre. Yet, following Miller's and other's arguments described in this chapter, I would point out that their second trip to the grocery store could not possibly have been identical to the first trip to the store. To define it as the same, they must have ignored the fact that the day or time was different from their first trip or that they were wearing different clothes, for example, and acted as though the situation were a recurrence of their first grocery shopping situation. Even as they adapted their grocery list to changing details of each unique shopping trip—including different items that the household needed or shopping

at a different store—they defined the situation as the same as other grocery shopping trips and used the same genre of the grocery list to help structure the situation. So the situation of needing food led to using the genre of the grocery list, which is defined by and takes particular shapes as it is constructed by the situation. Simultaneously, the act of choosing the genre of the grocery list constructed their situation—writing and posting for the rest of the household a grocery list created for them the roles of grocery shoppers, created an expectation that they would gather food at a regular interval, and structured what they would buy and how they would proceed through the store. In addition, using the grocery list created a recurring action and situation where one had not necessarily existed. Russell points out that they could have gathered food by going to a farmer's market or growing their own food. I would add that they could shop at a grocery store in a different way, with different household members shopping each week, picking up only what occurs to them, and moving randomly through the store. The prior existence of grocery lists encourages them to behave in certain ways; it shapes their individual perceptions toward a socially typified way of acting in their unique situation. Using the grocery list meant that they defined the need for food as calling for the same action each week, defined the situation as recurring: the same participants (the two of them must go grocery shopping), the same purpose (they must gather all the items their household members request), and the same process (they must shop in an orderly, planned way through the store). Keeping a grocery list each week entails assuming all that similarity in what could be a different experience each week with only the need for food in common. Keeping a grocery list each week creates the sense of recurring situation. Keeping a grocery list makes the situation recur.

So far in this chapter, I have sketched some basic principles of a rhetorical theory of genre that develops from Miller's definition of genre, explaining and sometimes extending what it means for a genre to be typified social action in response to recurring rhetorical situation. (The issue of social action is being left largely for complicating in the next chapter.) The definition of one component, rhetorical situation, has been broadened from Bitzer's to encompass all kinds of discourse situations, involving Halliday's field, tenor, and mode, though such a broadly defined situation still does not adequately distinguish genre from register. The nature of genre as response has been clarified, for the relationship is not deterministic but rather messily reciprocal, with genres responding to situations and situations responding to genres. In fact, the genres

themselves define and create the situations as much as the situations create the genres, for people construct situations through their use of genres. Finally, rhetorical situations never actually recur, for each situation is unique. Thus, the recurrence of rhetorical situation must also be constructed as people use genres, a matter of what people define as similar, whether similar in genre or similar in situation. Genre and situation are reciprocal, mutually constructed, and integrally interrelated.

Genre as Nexus of Situation, Culture, and Other Genres

Even mutually constructed and integrally interrelated, situation and genre do not capture all of the action, however. Later in Russell's story of grocery shopping with his daughter, he notes that he had appropriated the grocery list from his mother and was passing it on to his daughter ("Rethinking" 517). He and his daughter did not invent the grocery list as a genre to help with their grocery shopping task in the activity system of grocery shopping. Rather, they followed the actions defined by their predecessors and learned from interacting with others. The sense of the past and the transmission of cultural values implied in Russell's learning the genre from his mother is inadequately acknowledged in connecting genre to rhetorical situation, context of situation, or even activity system. Even more absent from those versions of context is the *existence* of genres other than the one being studied, the always already existing genres that are also a significant part of context. To reintegrate these contexts with context of situation and to recognize their role in genre action, I propose adding two elements to the essential components of a genre definition: culture and other genres.

Culture (loosely defined as a shared set of material contexts and learned behaviors, values, beliefs, and templates) influences how situation is constructed and how it is seen as recurring in genres. In part, culture defines what situations and genres are possible or likely. Miller and others have noted the cultural significance of genres, that genres may reveal our culture's values and, in Miller's words, "help constitute the substance of our cultural life" ("Genre" 163). Miller also recognizes culture as a level in her hierarchy of meaning ("Genre" 162), part of what gives significance to human actions. Her hierarchy, above the level of genre, includes "form of life" (following Wittgenstein's term), culture, and human nature, and she notes that "genres are provided interpretive context by form-of-life patterns" ("Genre" 161) and, I would presume, by culture and human nature. I am arguing for culture as more than an interpretive context for genre but as an element in the dynamic construc-

tion of genre. Although one might see the effects of culture as implicit in Miller's hierarchy, Miller's semiotic fusion of substance and form and her hierarchy of meaning emphasize how "lower" levels constitute and construct higher levels but encourage less attention than I think necessary to how the higher levels simultaneously constitute and construct the lower levels.

Russell argues for doing away altogether with the "macro-micro distinction" inherent in such levels, and he proposes a blend of activity and genre systems to enable analysis of "the macro-level social and political structures (*forces*) that affect the micro-level actions" of people in education activity systems ("Rethinking" 509, 505). Russell also notes the difficulties of a Bakhtinian conversational model of context, limited as it is to the verbal, the dyad, and the local. Russell instead treats context (and perhaps culture?) "not as a separate set of variables but as an ongoing, dynamic accomplishment of people acting together with shared tools" (508-9). Although I will object in chapter 2 to Russell's treatment of writing and genre as tools, here I endorse his attempt to undermine the separation of context from actions or text. Yet Russell himself finds it necessary to separate the macro from micro level in his analysis (e.g., discussing "micro-level interactions" [512] and "macro-level contradictions" [532]). The attempt to fuse the macro and micro may in fact disguise too much the impact of each. Russell treats elements of objects and power (what I would consider part of ideological culture) as something that develops within activity systems and that may conflict across systems, creating double binds for individuals. With the concept of activity system including such apparently diverse and yet equally important activity systems as a cell biology course and a research university, it may be difficult to locate the material and ideological contexts that I wish to analyze and which I believe would often overlap multiple activity systems. On the other hand, the emphasis on the activity systems within which people operate makes it difficult to see the individuals, the people whose actions construct these systems. Although applauding Russell's move to see context in text, I think that the emphasis on systems too easily loses sight of the messy, the lived experience, the intensely local and micro-level construction of those systems by people, even as it makes it difficult to analyze cultural constructions that may extend over multiple activity systems.

What I wish to capture by adding the concept of culture to our genre definition are the ways that existing ideological and material contexts, contexts beyond the more immediate context of situation of a particu-

lar genre, partially construct what genres are and are in turn constructed (reproduced) by people performing genre actions. Extending Russell's example again, the grocery list genre exists in part because of the material fact that large grocery stores are common in Russell's culture. His use of the grocery list reflects the common cultural expectation that people in cities in the United States buy their food rather than grow it. And the existence and structure of the grocery list reflects a common cultural valuing of order and efficiency. Catherine Schryer points out that genres encompass orientations to time and space, orientations that seem to me ideological and cultural more than situational ("Genre" 81). Burke, too, notes the "material interests" engaged in verbal action and describes how this cultural context affects the "idiom" in which one speaks (111-12). The effect of culture on defining genre appears also in a study of readers of romances by Janice Radway. Radway describes how cultural values and ideologies place women in situations in which they are more likely to read romances than other genres. She also describes the material cultural context of placing romances in grocery stores and its effects on spreading the reading of romances. One effect is that readers can easily identify the genre: books placed in a particular section of the grocery store will be the kind of books the women want to read, that is, romances, thereby increasing their purchase. The material and ideological culture partly constructs the situation (as women become housewives) and the genre (as romances become the books found in grocery stores). This (what I will term, following Malinowski) "context of culture" has profound effects on situation and genre that seem readily apparent and will become even more so through the social and historical studies in the rest of this book. The ways that genres also construct or reproduce the culture, in the reciprocal relationship so essential to genre, will be examined further in the next two chapters. Though the cultural context has perhaps been the least investigated until recently, a definition of genre that includes a distinct context of culture provides a source for explaining significant facets of genre.

The second element I wish to integrate into the definition of genre is the influence of other genres. Its effects on the identification of situations and cultures may be less readily apparent, though it stems directly from the constructive nature of genre already described. As noted earlier and by others, one never writes or speaks in a void. What fills that void is not only cultural context (ideological and material baggage surrounding our every action) and situational context (the people, languages, and purposes involved in every action) but also generic context,

the existing genres we have read or written or that others say we should read or write. The “context of genres” that I propose includes all the existing genres in that society, the individual genres and sets of genres, the relatively stagnant and the changing genres, the genres commonly used and those not used. While the existence of other genres has certainly been acknowledged by many others, including context of genres in my definition emphasizes the fact that genres are always already existing, emphasizes the past in the present. Adding a context of genres to genre theory acknowledges that the existence of genres influences people’s uses of genres, that writers and speakers do not create genres in a generic void, that people’s knowledge and experience of genres in the past shape their experience with any particular discourse and any particular genre at any particular time. The context of genres is distinct from the theoretical concept of genre that I am trying to explain and elaborate in this chapter. As opposed to an abstract concept of genre, the context of genres is the existence of particular genres, the already existing textual classifications and forms already established and being established within a given culture, the set of typified rhetorical actions already constructed by participants in a society.

This context of genres influences each symbolic act, sometimes more visibly than others. Jamieson has demonstrated how existing genres constitute antecedent genres when people must construct new genres for new situations and cultural contexts, an idea explored more fully in chapter 4. Many teachers are familiar with how students draw from known genres, like narratives or personal experience essays or plot summaries, when asked to write unfamiliar genres, like critical analyses. The existence of prior known genres shapes the development of new or newly learned genres. A similar influence of existing genres operates on all language users all the time. Let me extend Russell’s example one more time. Russell uses the genre of the grocery list because it already exists in his repertoire, as learned from his mother. He may have learned it easily, and his daughter may have picked it up easily, because each already knew related genres, other types of lists, for example. Russell’s daughter now knows the grocery list genre because it already existed in the world, her father’s world, and was taught to her. As she continues to use it in later years and even to change it with her use (perhaps adapting it to online grocery shopping), the genre will continue to resonate with her past experiences of making lists with her father, a resonance that itself resonates with her father’s past experience with the genre and his mother’s past experience before that. Genres are always already existing. People

interpret situations, select genres, and function culturally within a context of existing genres that brings the past perpetually into the present.

Thus context of situation, context of culture, and context of genres all influence the actions of writers and readers, speakers and listeners, and they do it partly through genre. Each kind of context has both a material and a constructed reality, for what makes them “contexts” is the extent to which people give them significance, as described in the preceding section for context of situation. All three contexts interact, and at the nexus of that interaction lies genre. A genre constructs and is constructed by a notion of recurring situation, entailing participant roles, purposes, and uses of language. A genre constructs and is constructed by cultural values, beliefs, and norms as well as by material culture. A genre constructs and is constructed by the set of existing genres surrounding it, genres used and not used by fellow participants in the society. These contexts of situation, culture, and genres act simultaneously and interactively within a genre, and genre sits at the nexus of such interactions, for genre is what Bakhtin calls “the *wholeness* of the utterance,” a unity and a unifier (“Problem” 60).

This nexus is similar to the nexus of contexts that Burke sees coming together in the individual, in whom all the “social idioms” are incorporated to “build ourselves” (112).⁵ Miller and Russell, too, like other genre scholars, place genre between the textual and the contextual, the individual action and the social system. Contexts for Burke become incorporated within an individual. Seeing contexts incorporated instead within genre, as I do, helps give writers access to the variety of changing situations, cultures, and generic contexts without being overtaken by them. A language user operates within the contexts of culture, situation, and genres as they inhabit the genre of the discourse. Since people use many genres, people can participate in multiple contexts just as they do multiple activity systems, experiencing the similarities, the contradictions, and the double binds as they go. The layers of contexts—of situation, culture, and other genres—create other places for such double binds or concurrence to occur. Writing an academic lab report entails adopting scientific “objectivity” as well as academic subservience to teacher authority (culture), encourages defining the situation as student reporting to teacher on what was done and what the teacher already knows (situation), and draws on the writer’s experience with other lab reports and academic papers and the teacher’s experience with other scientific genres. Because genre encompasses these contexts and individual discourses encompass genre, when we examine a genre, we have

access to all three contexts; when we examine a particular discourse through the lens of genre, we have access to these contexts and to the unique situation of that discourse, how this discourse varies from and works within those generic expectations. In studying genre, thus, we can study the concrete and local as well as the abstract and general. Not as removed as situation or activity system, genre mediates between text and content. Not as general as meaning, genre mediates between form and content. Genre allows us to particularize context while generalizing individual action.

Reluctant as I am to reduce this reciprocal, constructed, and individually situated theory to a formula, I offer figure 1.1 to try to clarify the angles of analysis and the interacting elements. I hope that this visual representation, while not nearly as theoretically elaborated as Miller's or Russell's graphics, provides some clarity that can prove useful for studying genres in later chapters and for others who may find it helpful.

While this figure roughly represents the distinctions I am proposing between the contexts, the mediating genre, and the individual action, this flat figure falsely implies static levels and cannot begin to represent

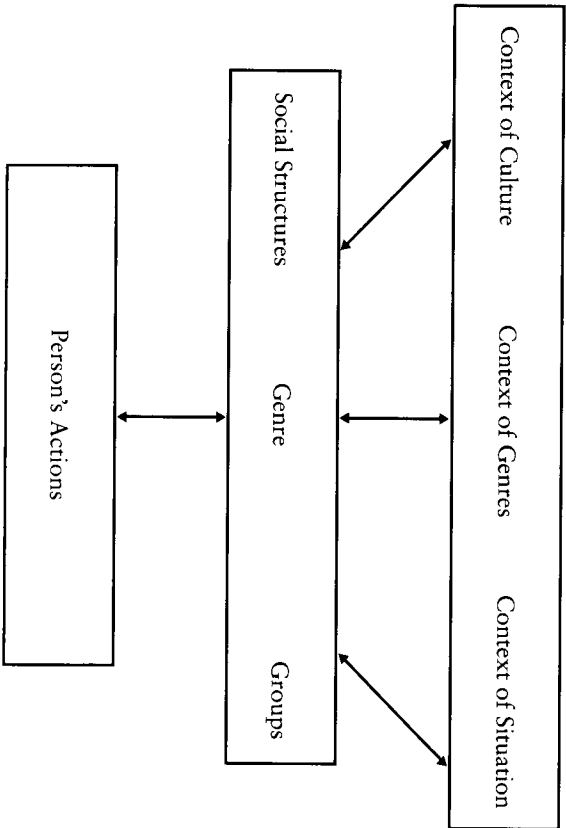


Fig. 1.1. Interactions of contexts, genre, and action

the interactions of the three contexts with one another and through a genre, a dynamic perhaps better represented by a set of overlays, overlapping circles, three-dimensional cones, and moving waves rather than boxes and arrows. The contexts of situation, culture, and genres interact amongst themselves, with the context of situation in part specified by the contexts of culture and genres, the context of culture in part specified by the contexts of situation and genres, and the context of genres in part specified by the context of situation and culture, all operating simultaneously and dynamically. Partially undercutting the micro-macro distinction necessary for analysis, each one of the three contexts captures a different level of social context: the context of culture draws attention to the macro level of context, the context of situation draws attention to the micro level of particular situations, and the context of genres re-sists such dualism and draws attention to a level between the macro and micro levels. The context of genres encompasses the already typified situations, so it is a level above the particular context of situation, but it also encompasses the specific ideological and material conditions of the existing multiple genres, a level more particularized than the context of culture.

I propose, then, that genre be seen not as a response to recurring situation but as a nexus between an individual's actions and a socially defined context. Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals' actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genres. Genre is visible in classification and form, relationships and patterns that develop when language users identify different tasks as being similar. But genre exists through people's individual rhetorical actions at the nexus of the contexts of situation, culture, and genres.

Although this reconception of genre is theoretically complex, I want to be careful not to simplify the definition and relation of genre and contexts. Many areas of genre theory still need further research and exploration. For example, not all genres allow a simple matchup with a particular set of contexts; some might interact with multiple contexts. Not all contexts that people define as recurring produce recognized genres, and some may produce more than one genre. People may, of course, mix genres and mix contexts, and they may use genres badly. Genres may be unsuccessful, fail, or die out. Genre is too rich a subject to be mined completely in just one volume, though I hope the chapters that follow will dig deeply.

One of the great appeals of studying genre, to me, is that genre is based on what people already know and do. People recognize genres, and people are the ones who define whether a genre exists. Shania Twain understands that everybody has to be something, everything participates in genre. Only by ignoring what language users themselves know can we ignore the significance of genre. It is the intriguing job of genre scholars to figure out what lies behind what everyone already knows.

2 An Analysis of Genres in Social Settings

Explanation entails simplification; and any simplification is open to the charge of “oversimplification.”

—Kenneth Burke, “Philosophy of Literary Form”

Describing the social significance of genre is at once necessary and impossible. As complex as society is, so is genre’s working within that society. As we complicate our understandings of society, its relationships and workings, we must similarly complicate our understandings of genre and how it works, for genre develops within, embodies, and establishes society’s values, relationships, and functions. In the preceding chapter, I explored genre’s relationship to situation and genre’s rhetorical power, and I distinguished three kinds of contexts: contexts of situation, of culture, and of genres. In this chapter, I deepen the examination of genre’s rhetorical contexts by exploring genre’s relationship to the particular social structures and groups with which it reciprocally interacts. In terms of figure 1.1, this chapter examines especially the mediating level between contexts and individual actions. Groups, social structures, and genres translate contexts into socially specific settings, and they transform individual actions into contextually meaningful social actions.

Genres operate socially, as what Miller calls social actions. But what makes genre inherently social? First of all, genres require multiplicity, multiple actions by multiple people. All discourse is predicated on two people, a writer and reader or speaker and listener (though one could debate whether one person can play both roles or whether discourse makes a sound if it falls in an empty forest). But genre is predicated on more than two people, on multiple people acting repeatedly, thus creating the perception of recurrence. The social nature of genres involves more than simple multiplicity, though, for that perception of recurrence