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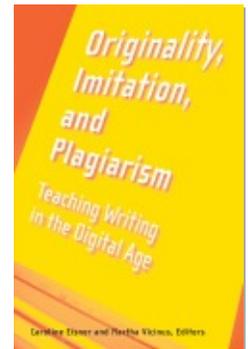
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Genres as Forms of In(ter)vention

Anis Bawarshi

In his chapter in this volume, “History and the Disciplining of Plagiarism,” Michael Grossberg suggests that plagiarism should be differentiated, in part, according to the different spheres of activity in which it takes place. This suggests that plagiarism is not just an issue of intellectual integrity, or lack thereof, but also an issue of disciplinarity. Indeed, in their longitudinal study of first-year writing at Harvard University, Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz describe how first-year students struggle to negotiate the “push and pull” of the novice and expert roles they variously occupy as they learn to write with authority about subjects and methods new to them. Apprentice writers struggle, in particular, to make nuanced, disciplinary-based distinctions about what is significant, what can be assumed, and what must be cited about a given subject (Sommers and Saltz 132). Part of the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge involves acquiring these nuanced distinctions, which can neither be learned once and for all across disciplines nor, when misused, legislated only through plagiarism policies and concerns about intellectual integrity.¹ These distinctions, I argue, have less to do with questions of intellectual integrity than with how we understand the nature of imitation, particularly the complex interaction between imitation and invention that informs our disciplinary knowledge of what to imitate, in what way, and for how long, as well as when to reappropriate or transform what is imitated as our own invention. To understand these complex transactions between imitation and invention, we need to look at the spheres of activity in which they are differentiated, because it is within such spheres that participants make crucial distinctions between what is commonplace knowledge and what must be cited, between what is known and what is new. One important sphere of activity in which this interaction takes place is genre.

In this chapter, I examine the complex relationship between imitation and invention, arguing that imitation and invention exist on a genre-

defined continuum and thereby have a variable relationship that we must acknowledge if we want to understand imitation's inventive power—that genre-differentiated point of transformation where imitation becomes invention. To do this, I will turn to the concept of “uptake” as it has been described in recent genre scholarship. I hope to show that every imitation involves an uptake, and it is in the space of this uptake that we can gain insight into the nature of invention. At the same time, the space between imitation and invention also provides the opportunity for intervening in and resisting normalized uptakes. As I hope to show, genres are integral to this process of in(ter)vention, since they coordinate specific relations between imitation and invention. I will first explain what I mean by uptake as the space between imitation and invention, and then I will present two examples, one from research I have already done on writing prompts and student essays, and the other from the case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* and the controversy it stirred.²

Within speech act theory, uptake traditionally refers to how an illocutionary act (saying, for example, “It is hot in here”) gets taken up as a perlocutionary effect (someone subsequently opening a window) under certain conditions. Recently, Anne Freedman has brought uptake to bear on relations between genres, arguing that genres are defined, in part, by the uptakes they coordinate and sanction within systems of genre and activity: for example, how a call for papers gets taken up as proposals, or, as in Freedman's more consequential example, how a court sentence during a trial gets taken up as an execution. Uptake helps us understand how systematic, normalized relations between genres coordinate complex forms of social action—how and why genres take up other genres and how and why they are taken up within a system of activity, such as, say, a trial or a classroom. Together, these inter- and intrageneric relations maintain the complex, textured conditions within which individuals identify, situate, and interact with one another in relations of power, and perform meaningful, consequential social actions—or are, conversely, excluded from them.

Uptakes, then, can be understood as the ideological interstices that configure, normalize, and activate relations and meanings within and between systems of genres. In her work on *kairos* (defined in classical rhetoric as timing and appropriateness), Carolyn Miller describes rhetorical timing as “the dynamic interplay between . . . opportunity as discerned and opportunity as defined” (312). Uptake coordinates typified relations between opportunities discerned and opportunities defined. These relations are typified because they are *learned recognitions of opportunity* that

over time and in particular contexts become habitual. As Freadman has argued, uptakes have memories—knowledge of uptake is what helps us select, define, and recontextualize one genre in bidirectional relation to another so that one genre becomes a normalized response to another (40). As such, we can think of uptake as defining a horizon of possibility or opportunity that configures a specific relationship between imitation and invention. Knowledge of uptake is knowledge of what to take up, how, and when: when and why to use a genre, how to select an appropriate genre in relation to another, how to execute uptakes strategically and when to resist expected uptakes, how some genres explicitly cite other genres in their uptake while some do so only implicitly, and so on. In short, uptake constitutes a specific relation between the known and the new, repetition and divergence. What's important to note here is that the relation between imitation and invention defined by uptake is not absolute or learned once and for all; rather, it is a *genre-specific* relation that involves recognizing when and how much to imitate; to what extent explicitly and to what extent implicitly; what must be acknowledged and what can be assumed as known; when to reappropriate or recontextualize (in short, *transform*) what's imitated as one's own invention; and whether something is worthy of being imitated in the first place. Such knowledge is often tacitly acquired and ideologically and disciplinarily consequential, especially when it is misused in ways identified as plagiarism.

To illustrate how uptake reveals and maintains particular genred relations between imitation and invention, I will turn to the example of assignment prompts and student essays, two genres related chronologically and kairotically.³ Chronologically, the writing prompt assigns a specific time sequence for the production of the student essay, often delimiting what is due at what time and when. At the same time, the writing prompt also establishes a kairotic relationship by providing the student essay with a timeliness and an opportunity that authorizes it. Participating within this kairotic interplay between two genres, the student must discern the opportunity granted by the prompt and then write an essay that defines its own opportunity in relation to the prompt. In so doing, students negotiate a complex relationship between imitation and invention, in which they are expected to take up the opportunity discerned in the writing prompt without acknowledging its presence explicitly in their essay. This uptake between the opportunity discerned in one genre and the opportunity defined or appropriated by students in another genre appears most visibly in the introductions of student essays.

In one particular case, students had read and discussed Clifford Geertz's essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." They had been assigned to take on the "role of cultural anthropologist"; had conducted some field observations for research; and were then prompted to write, "in the vein of Geertz in 'Deep Play,'" a

claim-driven essay about the "focused gathering" [a term that Geertz uses] you observed. Your essay should be focused on and centered around what you find to be most significant and worth writing about in terms of the "focused gathering" you observed. . . . Some issues you might want to attend to include: How does the event define the community taking part in it? What does the event express about the beliefs of the community? What does the event say about the larger society?⁴

As they take up this prompt, we can see how students negotiate the possible range of relationships, to various degrees of success, between imitation and invention as defined between these two genres.

In those examples where students seemingly work on the periphery of the desired relationship between imitation and invention, the writing prompt can be discerned a little too explicitly in their essays. For example, one student writes the following:

Cultural events are focused gatherings that give observers insights to that certain culture. Geertz observes the Balinese culture and gains insights on how significant cockfighting is to the Balinese: including issues of disquieting and the symbolic meaning behind the cockfights. My observations at a bubble tea shop in the International District also have similarities with Geertz's observations of the Balinese cockfight on the cultural aspect.

The phrases "cultural events" and "focused gatherings" locate the language of the prompt in the essay, but the first sentence simply imitates the language of the prompt rather than invents or recontextualizes it as part of the essay's own constructed exigency. Similarly, in the second sentence, the only way to understand the relevance of the transition into Geertz is to know the prompt, which makes that connection. By the time the student describes her own observations in the third sentence, too much of the prompt's background knowledge is assumed, so that, for the logic of these opening sentences to work, a reader needs the prompt as context. The student has not imitated the prompt in ways expected in this uptake,

although if this were an answer to an exam question, the uptake might have been more appropriate.

Compare the opening sentences of the above essay to the opening sentences of the following essay:

When you want to know more about a certain society or culture what is the first thing that you need to do? You need to make and analyze detailed observations of that particular society or culture in its natural environment. From there you should be able to come up with a rough idea of “why” that particular culture or society operates the way it does. That’s exactly what Clifford Geertz did. He went to Bali to study the Balinese culture as an observer.

As in the earlier example, this excerpt borrows the language of the prompt, but this time, it reappropriates that language as it imitates it. Accordingly, the reader meets Geertz on the essay’s terms, after the student has provided a context for why Geertz would have done what he did. Basic as it might be, the question that begins the essay performs the transaction I described earlier, in which the student recontextualizes the question the prompt asks of him and asks it of his readers as if this is the question *he* desires to ask.

In the next example, the student begins her essay by describing underground hip-hop music and the function it serves for its listeners, and then poses the question: “Is music created from culture, or is culture created from music?” The second paragraph begins to compare hip-hop to symphonies:

On a different note, a symphonic band concert creates a congregation of different status people uniting to listen to a type of music they all enjoy. “Erving Goffman has called *this* a type of ‘focused gathering’—a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow” (Geertz 405). This type of “focused gathering” is an example of music created from culture.

By posing the question, “Is music created from culture, or is culture created from music?” the student invents an opportunity for her essay based in the opportunity presented in the prompt. This is the question the *student* is asking. In this excerpt, the student does not rely on the prompt’s authority to justify the claim that “a symphonic band concert creates a congregation of different status people uniting to listen to a type of music they all enjoy.” Instead, she appropriates the authority the prompt grants her to

assert this claim. Only in the context of her authority does Geertz then figure into the essay. The student uses the quotation from Geertz to make it appear as though Geertz's description of a "focused gathering" was meant to define her focused gathering, the symphonic band concert. The determiner "this" no longer modifies the cockfight as Geertz meant it to; instead, it refers back to the concert. In a way, this move creates the impression that the student found Geertz rather than having been assigned to use Geertz, thereby deftly managing the relation between imitation and invention that is expected when students take up the prompt in their essays. The above examples indicate how the transaction between imitation and invention is differentiated, learned, and reproduced as part of genre knowledge—in this case, knowledge of assignment prompts and student essays, and their uptake profiles.⁵

The next case allows us to examine how uptake can be a site of intervention when it exceeds a genre's normalized relation between imitation and invention. I will briefly outline the case of Rigoberta Menchú and the book *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, which both won her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 and generated a controversy that would play itself out in the popular press and within academic circles to this day. After providing some context for the book and controversy, I will examine both from the perspective of genre and uptake.

First published in 1983 and then translated from Spanish into English in 1984, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* narrates the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú, as told by Menchú to anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, who transcribed, edited, and published Menchú's testimony. In the book, Menchú, then twenty-three years old, recounts her struggle as a Mayan peasant growing up in war-torn Guatemala, including her community's traditions and the destruction of the Quiche-Maya way of life; the horrific working conditions on the country's coffee plantations, which led to the death of two of her brothers; the kidnapping, torture, and murder of her mother and another brother; her father's battles with oppressive Ladino landlords; the death of her father when Guatemalan security forces set fire to the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City, which her father and other activists had occupied to protest human rights abuses; and the peasants' attempts at resistance by joining forces with guerrilla movements. The power of Menchú's *testimonio* drew the world's attention to the suffering of the indigenous peoples in Guatemala and won her acclaim as a human rights advocate. The book became an international best seller as well as required reading in many university courses, and, in 1992, won Menchú the Nobel

Peace Prize. More significantly, by bringing international attention to the suffering of indigenous Guatemalans, Menchú's book helped pressure the Guatemalan government to sign a peace agreement with the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union in 1996.

I, Rigoberta Menchú fulfills the genre conventions of a testimonio, in which a witness is moved (by conditions of war, repression, struggle, subalternity) to narrate his or her testimony, often to an interlocutor who records that testimony (Beverley 32). The act of testimony, of bearing witness to the events the narrator recounts, is one of the defining features of the genre, which emerged in the 1960s and developed in close relation to movements of national liberation and revolutionary activism, especially in Latin America—in fact, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was first published by Cuba's Casa de las Américas, which began awarding a prize for testimonios in 1970 (Beverley 31–32). Indeed as John Beverley has defined it, testimonio is a representation and form of subaltern agency that brings an alternative voice and politics into the public sphere and its dominant genres (19). In the voice it gave to Menchú and the solidarity it brought to the resistance movement in Guatemala, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* fulfilled the genre's function.

In 1999, anthropologist David Stoll published *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, which argued that Menchú could not have been an eyewitness to some of what she recounts having seen, especially the torture and killing of her brother along with twenty-three guerrillas, and that some of what she describes either did not actually happen the way she claims or has been exaggerated for effect. For example, Stoll questioned Menchú's claims about her lack of education and disputed her version of the conflict over land ownership and the relationship between the indigenous Indians and the guerrilla movement, which Stoll claims Menchú framed in ways that supported her revolutionary agenda. Stoll is careful to note that the human rights violations Menchú describes did occur: "that a dictatorship massacred thousands of indigenous peasants, that the victims included half of [Menchú's] immediate family, that she fled to Mexico to save her life, and that she joined a revolutionary movement to liberate her country" (viii). Nonetheless, some of these events did not happen in the versions she tells them and not always to her or her family, leading Stoll to describe Menchú's testimony as "mythic inflation" (232). Since Stoll's findings, Menchú has conceded that in some instances, she grafted other people's experiences into her own (Beverley 109 n. 24).

When a *New York Times* reporter verified (and, Menchú supporters argue, simplified) Stoll's research, the findings ignited a controversy that

was played out academically and publicly. The resulting controversy saw some critics calling the book a “piece of communist propaganda” and Menchú a liar.⁶ Some called for the removal of the book from college courses (Operation Remove Rigoberta), and bemoaned it as an example of the problems with political correctness and postmodernism, while others, like David Horowitz, called it a “monstrous hoax,” “a destructive little book,” and “one of the greatest hoaxes of the 20th century.” At the same time, political and academic supporters hailed the book for its literary strength, for its ability to give voice to the voiceless, and for its ability to create change in the world (see Arias; Beverley).

How can we account for the passion and ferocity of these critiques and the responses to them (for example, see the rebuttals of Arias; Beverley; Eakin; Robin)? On one level, one could argue that Menchú’s testimonio pushed the notion of “witness” beyond its genre-expected uptake profile. If *I, Rigoberta Menchú* were a novel, for example, it would not be an issue whether or not Menchú actually witnessed the events she narrates. In pushing the boundaries of uptake beyond those expected of a testimonio, however, Menchú seems to have challenged that genre’s relationship between imitation and invention, imitating the genre’s form of individual witnessing but reappropriating or reinventing it, perhaps excessively, as collective witnessing. In this way, she could be said to have intervened in the relationship between imitation and invention in a way that resisted the genre’s normalized uptake, granted her power to speak, challenged the dominant social order, and brought on charges of deception.

But by many scholarly accounts, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* does not, in fact, exceed its genre that much. Scholars such as Beverley and Carey-Webb, for example, point out that testimonios often offer one’s experiences as representative of collective memory and identity, thus displacing the “master subject” of modernist narrative and stressing “the personal as reflective of a larger collective” (Beverley 34–35, 64; Carey-Webb 6–7). In fact, Menchú announces this at the very beginning of her narrative:

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am 23 years old. This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book, and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people. It’s hard for me to remember everything that has happened to me in my life. . . . The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people. (1)

If *I, Rigoberta Menchú* did not exceed its genre (both in terms of its notion of witness and in its political agenda), then we need to look, not at how Menchú *took up* the genre, but rather at how her book was *taken up* by readers, especially in the United States, where it had such resonance. I argue that the book achieved the circulation and attention it did, and had the impact it did, in part, because it was generally read as an autobiography, a genre that holds powerful cultural capital in North America. (References to it as autobiography, especially among opponents like Horowitz, abound to this day.)⁷ Autobiographies not only hail a certain readership; they also fulfill certain desires for life-writing and the assumptions embedded in and elicited by these desires. These include a view of self as unambiguous, coherent, and interiorized subject; an understanding of memory and experience as individual and private; and a juridical understanding of testimony as something accorded to an “eyewitness.” In fact, John Beverley has argued that, as the expression of public achievement and bourgeois notions of self, autobiography affirms social order and one’s place in it, a trajectory quite different from testimonio’s political project of reappropriating the power to define reality and enact social change (40–41).

In being taken up and figured as autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* hailed a readership expecting these desires to be fulfilled, a readership that re-presented Menchú’s testimony in a form of dominance that it was seeking to dismantle.⁸ At the same time, however, in being taken up as autobiography, it may have gained a readership and an influence it would not otherwise have had, and in so doing, challenged the very assumptions about subjectivity and testimony that had granted it circulation and attention in the first place. (Throughout her testimonio, Menchú describes how her community used cultural forms of power such as the Spanish language or the Bible against those who imposed these forms on them.) This recontextualization of uptake from one genre to another, I argue, in part helps to explain the assault that some readers felt when they learned that Menchú had elided or misrepresented her narrative, because it reconstituted the relationship between imitation and invention from one expected in testimonio to one expected in autobiography. But such reconstituting of the expected transaction between imitation and invention is also what allowed *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to intervene the way it did.

The two examples I have presented reveal that uptake is a site of both invention and intervention, a site of transformation guided by genre knowledge. When students take up the writing prompt as their essay, they

are negotiating a complex, normalized transaction between imitation and invention. Likewise, when *I, Rigoberta Menchú* intervenes in normalized uptakes (in how it is taken up), it enables a form of resistance. Imitation always involves an uptake, a learned (and genred) recognition of opportunity that informs what we take up, why, and how. By making these choice points, these points of transformation, analytically visible to students, we enable them to participate more critically and effectively as readers and writers, because it is within uptake that the opportunity for in(ter)vention abounds.

Notes

1. Rebecca Moore Howard makes an important distinction between plagiarism as fraud (submitting a purchased paper as one's own, for example) and plagiarism as misuse of sources. While the former involves much more clearly issues of intellectual integrity, and can be legislated, the latter strikes me as having much more to do with issues of disciplinary knowledge, and must be addressed within various spheres of activity.

2. I offer a more in-depth analysis of the writing prompt–student essay relationship and other classroom genres in chapter 5 of *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*.

3. Yates and Orlikowski's work on the function of *chronos* and *kairos* in communicative interaction describes how, within communities, related genres choreograph interactions among participants and activities chronologically (by way of measurable, quantifiable, "objective" time) and kairotically (by way of constructing a sense of timeliness and opportunity in specific situations).

4. This prompt was assigned to students in a first-year composition course at the University of Washington in 2002. I have reprinted it with permission of the instructor.

5. I am grateful to John Webster, my colleague at the University of Washington, for suggesting "uptake profile" to describe a genre's normalized horizon of expectation.

6. For more on the controversy from various perspectives, see Arias.

7. In *Scandals and Scoundrels*, for example, Ron Robin refers to *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as autobiography. This question of naming, I argue, is not merely a semantic difference, as the genre we use to identify the text informs how we take it up.

8. It is important to acknowledge the role that Menchú's interlocutor and editor, Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, played in how *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was taken up. In transcribing Menchú's testimony, Burgos-Debray reordered the transcripts to render them in consumable form. As she explains to David Stoll: "Rigoberta's narrative was anything but chronological. It had to be put in order. . . . I had to reorder a lot to give the text a thread, to give it a sense of a life, to make it a story, so that it could reach the general public" (Stoll 185). As an intermediary between Menchú's testimony and how it would appear in published form, Burgos-Debray thus contributed to how and why metropolitan readers would take it up as many of them did. In part, one could argue that readers took up *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in ways that Burgos-Debray initially took it up.

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