INTRODUCTION: GENRE AS A MIDDLE-TERM

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These papers derive from a workshop held in Manchester during April 1990 under the title Texts in Action.¹ Our intention was to include consideration both of written texts and of text-like spoken discourses, and to focus upon performative aspects of narration and its reception both inside and outside the academy. In this way we hoped to make current concern with ‘writing culture’ speak directly to some of our immediate problems in ‘writing ethnography’. The changed title under which the papers are published reflects the productivity of the meeting. Genre, as a middle-term, emerged as the common feature of attempts to move conceptually either between written texts and spoken text-like discourses, or between anthropologists’ writings and the differently located discourses which anthropologists attempt to represent and communicate via their work. The remainder of this prefatory note will expand in three stages upon the notion of genre as a term intermediary between voice and text: first, by explaining the grounds on which the papers collected here have been ordered; secondly, by elaborating upon the uses of the term genre; and, thirdly, by returning in slightly more detail to the arguments of some of the papers.

The presentation of the papers in this volume needs no elaborate explanation. The first four papers (Barber, Dilley, Furniss, Allen) share a focus upon orality in African cultures. The following three (Gunner, Baxter, and Davies and Fardon), while still concerned with Africa, focus additionally upon the differing characteristics and problems of the projects of ethnography, biography and novel as broad

¹ We are indebted to Marilyn Strathern, Hector Blackhurst and Peter Crawford for the intellectual contributions they made to the workshop, and to Julia Gross for assistance that was both practical and intellectual. The Research Support Committee of the University of Manchester made the meeting viable with a financial contribution. Richard Fardon is always indebted to Catherine Davies, but particularly so in this case. Finally, we are grateful to the ladies of the Dover Street multilith room who, as always, did much more than their duty.
generic forms of Africanist writing. Preoccupation with genre in writings on Africa offers a bridge to the final five papers, which address genre outside an African context. The papers by Croll and Rapport analyse particular conventions of novels, travelogues and biographical writings—and the implicit comparisons they engineer—in writings on China, England and Canada. Stringer recounts necessary dilemmas which liturgical reformers face in altering the conventions of their particular devotional genre in response to what they take to be its contemporary social context. Hobart and Pinney offer perspectives on the performance of epics in Bali, and photography in India. The collection appears to move from preoccupation with voice and orality towards a more broadly conceived textuality. But this is rather a matter of focus: vocal, generic and textual elements are differently stressed in papers which must devote attention to the mutual implications of all three terms. This is particularly important because, as Pinney reminds us, readers experience orality via written claims. Speech is necessarily textualized in collections like this one.

Like every term with a history of use, the sense and range of genre is contested; it would be anomalous were it otherwise. The simplest complications in general usage are matters of range: genre labels ‘basic modes of literary art’ (lyric, narrative, dramatic) as well as broad categories of composition (poetry, drama, fiction), and various ‘minor’ genres or ‘subgenres’ (for fiction—the novel, short story, Mills and Boon romance, whodunnit, thriller, crime story etc.). Taken in a suitably specified sense, the general usages of genre can helpfully assist us to interrogate relations between, for instance, drama, ethnography, biography and the novel (e.g. Hobart, Croll, Gunner, Rapport, Baxter, Davies and Fardon). Beyond this, we need to work upon the idea of genre both ‘backwards’, towards its etymology, and ‘forwards’ into productive redefinitions and elaborations of the term that, if not new, are of contemporary pertinence. For anthropological purposes, the idea of genre needs both to be relativized and de-essentialized.

To begin by going backwards, Donna Haraway notes that gender and genre are related terms. Since her account covers European languages other than English (and many of the leading theorists of genre have not written in English), it may be wise to quote at length.

The root of the English, French, and Spanish words is the Latin verb, generare, to beget, and the Latin term gener-, race or kind. An obsolete English meaning of ‘to gender’ is ‘to copulate’ (Oxford English Dictionary). The substantives ‘Geschlecht’, ‘gender’, ‘genre’, and ‘género’ refer to the notion of sort, kind, and class. In English, ‘gender’ has been used in this ‘generic’ sense continuously since at least the fourteenth century. In French, German, Spanish, and English, words for ‘gender’ refer to

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grammatical and literary categories. The modern English and German words, 'gender' and 'Geschlecht', adhere closely to concepts of sex, sexuality, sexual difference, generation, engendering, and so on, while the French and Spanish seem not to carry those meanings as readily. Words close to 'gender' are implicated in concepts of kinship, race, biological taxonomy, language and nationality. The substantive 'Geschlecht' carries the meanings of sex, stock, race, and family, while the adjectival form 'geschlechtlich' means in English translation both sexual and generic. 'Gender' is at the heart of constructions of and classifications of systems of difference.3

Since genre is closely related to gender, it is understandable that one of its connotations should be generative: in addition to limitation by generic convention, genre implies a capacity to produce or engender effects. By further analogy with gender, it is predictable that genre has a tendency to become naturalized as an immutable 'system of difference', by virtue of the investments of emotional energy and symbolic capital that have been made in it. The roots of the term genre are helpful in alerting us to its proclivities and affiliations in use. Two later commentators develop the idea of genre in ways that are potentially productive for ethnography. Since the earlier writer has more radical implications, we begin anachronistically with the later.

Tzvetan Todorov begins his essay on 'The origin of genres'4 by noting the superficial appeal of a current view (his article was published in the 1970s) that genre is a characteristic of past literature. Nowadays it appears that all works interrogate the idea of literature without the mediation of genre. But immediately Todorov registers disquiet:

We know that every interpretation of history is based on the present, just as that of space starts with here, and that of other people with I. Nevertheless, when such an exceptional status – the culminating point of all history – is attributed to the I-here-now, one may wonder whether the egocentric illusion does not have something to do with it.5

In answer to his own disquiet he replies first that the breach of a genre convention is a negative demonstration of that convention's existence, and secondly that if the breach is successful a new exemplar is installed that 'exerts pressure' on subsequent works. Thus, the historicist answer to the question 'Where do genres come from?' is 'Quite simply from other genres'.6

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5 Ibid., 14.
6 Ibid., 15.
It is because genres exist as an institution that they function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors ... authors write in function of (which does not mean in agreement with) the existing generic system, and they may bear witness to this just as well within the text as outside it, or even, in a way, between the two – on the book cover ... readers read in function of the generic system, with which they are familiar thanks to criticism, schools, the book distribution system, or simply by hearsay ... 7

Todorov's assertions suggest that a flexibly construed generics might serve as a focus (but only one among others) for an anthropological poetics attuned both to the historical and local variations of its 'object', and to reflection upon ethnographic accounts of this 'object'. Two more suggestions can profitably be abstracted from Todorov's argument. The first is that genres are distinguished by discursive properties that either may be recognized in metadiscursive discourses (that is arguments having generic conventions as their explicit subject) or, alternatively, may only be instanced in the discourses themselves. (A third possibility, which he does not note, is a metadiscursive defence of genre boundaries where no difference in discursive practice is detectable; examples could be drawn from the exclusion of otherwise competent outsiders – for instance, non-anthropologists – from credentialized discourses – for instance, those authored by anthropologists.) Todorov's terms encourage simultaneous interest in unself-conscious generic reproduction and in local discourses which have genre maintenance (whether by extension, disruption or repair) as their subject.

Another of Todorov's propositions initiates a critique of the implications of some currently fashionable accounts of impediments to ethnographic writing. 8 Todorov notes that the relation between oral and written genres can only be known empirically. Some oral genres have close written counterparts, some have transformed counterparts, and some no counterparts at all. From this non-essentialist angle, ethnographers confront an array of problems in attempting to find appropriate literary genres to record oratures. Rather than a single

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7 Ibid., 19.
problem of incommensurability between the oral and the written, ethnographers must manage necessarily imperfect translations that are pulled in different directions by the many factors which weigh upon them. Here we can converge, albeit from a different perspective, with Stephen Tyler's critique of written accounts that attempt only to mirror an oral original. Following Walter Benjamin, translations might seek to reproduce the 'intention' (in his specialized sense) of the reference utterance. A word-by-word gloss might best achieve this for some purposes; but for others, a more free rendition could serve better. It may be appropriate to ask translators not for canonical versions, but for accounts of the translational alternatives they have considered, and why they have thought one amongst them to enact the reference utterance most appropriately for the task in hand.9 We might like to know if other tasks would have been served better by variant translations.

Mikhail Bakhtin, writing before Todorov, stressed how inclusive a term genre was: 'the reality of the genre and the reality accessible to the genre are organically related . . . genre is the aggregate of the means of collective orientation in reality'.10 Genre is realized in the dialogic engagement of particular people and particular utterances with one another (rather than in the timeless and placeless notion of Saussureian langue). Bakhtin accepts that speech genres are infinitely heterogenous (thanks to the ingenuity of human subjects), and that genres of writing and rhetoric have attracted far more attention than genres of everyday speech. Nonetheless, he proposes to retain all utterances within a single frame and particularly to study how everyday oral genres (which he calls simple genres) are absorbed and reworked in complex genres such as novels, scientific publications, commentary etc.11 It may be unwise to employ the evocative language of simplicity and complexity or to appeal to a collective orientation on a priori grounds. These objections apart, however, here is another approach offering to subsume the ethnographic projects of research and reportage under a common frame of interest, namely genre, and to do so with respect to particular utterances – which in the anthropologist’s case might apply as well to local (predominantly oral) utterance as to published (often metropolitan) utterance. Common to both considerations would be the recognition that ' . . . all real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing other


than the initial or preparatory stage of a response (in whatever form it may be actualized). This is what Bakhtin's translator terms the 'addressivity' of speech genres: that they are addressed to someone – a characteristic that is not essential to Bakhtin's definitions of words or sentences. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length . . . and a certain compositional structure; we foresee the end; that is, from the very beginning we have a sense of the speech as a whole, which is only later differentiated during the speech process. If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible.

This passage is the more exciting for anthropologists because their Bakhtinian generic expectations are so often lacking or wayward: fieldworkers initially lack good generic guesswork and have to learn how to predict the destination of an utterance from its opening words; neophyte anthropologists must learn generic conventions which make the corpus of ethnographic writings intelligible. In short, genre is a useful term in relation to speech and writing because it puts in question aspects of professionalized, anthropological practice. Unlike recent prognoses of ethnographic writing which treat all ethnography as instances of a single genre, attention to genre encourages the continuation of ethnographic work, but with greater sensitivity to local speech practice and a more nuanced reading of existing ethnography, within which sub-genres must be specified. Blanket accounts of 'ethnographic authority' or 'the possibility of translation', however useful as correctives to the optimism of naive realism, might usefully be deconstructed and made more pointed in this light.

The papers collected here draw upon notions of genre in different ways. A number of the contributors on Africa have collaborated on other projects and begun to arrive at a shared agenda for investigation. Their sense of the problems involved in the analysis of orature demands verbatim texts for analysis, close attention to the indigenous generics of oral performance, and a high-level of competence in African languages. Karin Barber's paper opens the volume with a particularly clear example of the treatment of thematic elements within generically distinct forms of Yoruba orature. The genres are not only

12 Ibid., 69.
13 Ibid., 79.
14 See the volume edited by Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias, Discourse and its disguises: the interpretation of African oral texts (Birmingham University African Studies Series, 1, 1989) which inaugurates a series based on workshops held at the Centre for West African Studies. A similar focus will inform the volume to be edited by Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner based on a conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1991 under the title 'Power, Marginality and Oral Literature'.

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constraints but also frameworks which allow different facets of thematic elements to emerge so they may be exploited by speakers on specific occasions. Roy Dilley’s paper complements this account with a view of the indigenous aesthetics of a single genre of Tukulor story-telling which concerns the origins of the weavers’ clans. He asks how Tukulor recognize a good story. Graham Furniss’s paper is a variation on similar themes, revealing how a Nigerian performer is able to incorporate apparently inappropriate materials (largely concerning food) to throw into relief and hence satirize the generic conventions of particular Islamic and military discourses. Tim Allen’s short account of the production of history on the Sudan/Uganda border takes us into the complex area of the generics of oral and written histories and their mutual effects. The mutual impingements of oral histories on written accounts, and of written histories on oral recollection, require of the ethnographer a constant attentiveness to the way in which versions of history become inextricably tangled in the continuing project of telling history.

Liz Gunner’s paper continues to address the textualization of oral sources through her discussion of testimonies recalling Isaiah Shembe, the South African prophet. What sort of biographical pact might allow her to write an account both of this life and of the saliences it has for those who remember it? Because contemporary memories are attached to Shembe’s travels, she suggests that metaphors of his movement can be shared as a narrative device by both his followers and his biographer. Paul Baxter contributes an overview of the history of the collection and publication of texts recorded by ethnographers. He reminds us of the importance attributed to such sources by Boas and Malinowski, and later by Evans-Pritchard. Although the collection of texts ceased to dominate anthropological interests during the period of the structural/functional paradigm, the practice continued in a subsidiary fashion. Contemporary interests might, therefore, be envisaged as a renewed dominance of a submerged theme. However, anthropologists’ understandings of such texts have changed markedly since Boas considered them (in terms Baxter quotes) as an ‘ultimate datum of reality’ and a revelation of the ‘intimate thoughts and sentiments of the native’. This paper could be read together with Chris Pinney’s as a history of anthropologists’ attitudes towards the status of the oral texts they have collected and an increasing wariness about the rhetorics of voice and authenticity.

Catherine Davies and Richard Fardon explore the distinctiveness of generic conventions in the depiction of West Africa in Africanist and Afro-Cuban literatures. They point out how, during the classic period of British ethnographic writing on West Africa, the West African monograph (usually European-authored) was held in contrastive relation with the African novel (whether written by Europeans or by Africans). Representations of Africa in Afro-Cuban writings developed outside this generic distinction for reasons that can be
explained by reference to political history. Their paper explores the consequences of the different conjunctions of genre in these cases.

In the final group of papers, Elisabeth Croll tackles issues of genre, authorization and textualization, in her consideration of the tropes of closure, access, and intimacy used in the accounts written by early women travellers in China. In her account the roots of gender and genre reconverge. Nigel Rapport addresses the senses in which the genres of ethnography and novel both entail comparison. He suggests that anthropologists’ and novelists’ comparisons are not so different as our acceptance of generic conventions might suggest. Moreover, anthropologists might learn from novelists how to compare without foreclosure. Martin Stringer’s paper takes a look at the expectations that liturgical reformers have of their own specialized genre and thus, in an entirely different context, returns us to the issues raised by Barber and Dilley about generic expectations and productivity.

Mark Hobart’s emendation of Bakhtin allows him to criticize essentialist readings of Balinese epic theatre. Like Furniss on Hausa, he is interested in the complexity of performance genres, their tendency to quote from elsewhere, to parody and to satirize. He emphasizes how the complexity and diversity of local exegeses of performance imply that ethnographers are ill-advised to assume that performances have a meaning, or that the meanings attributed to particular performances on specific occasions can be generalized outside the context of their utterance.

Chris Pinney closes the volume with an encompassing account of text – outside the particular text there is only another text. He suggests that anthropological texts can only represent or recycle cultural texts of the real. Texts, photographs and money are like ‘fetishes’, signs that signify themselves and through ‘lack of subordination to an original [are] both empty and overpowered’. The text, photograph or money tends to be construed in dichotomous terms in relation to voice, to a real photographic subject or to value. But like the English bank note that promises the bearer on demand the sum of five pounds, these terms stand only for themselves: in the case of money, another five pound note. Value is the effect of money, as anthropological discourses are the effects of anthropological texts.

This seems a suitably controversial note on which to close a collection, an introduction, and indeed a workshop designed to explore the activities of texts in anthropology. Many of the papers are reports on projects in progress, so this volume is a memoir of a brief collective respite, from which, the editors hope, participants returned refreshed and encouraged to think some more.