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A Play on Occlusion: Uptake of Letters to the University President

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ABSTRACT

Occlusion is most commonly presented as an aspect of certain genres: occluded genres. Here, occlusion is proposed as a property of the processes by which genres are taken up. While routine use of genres creates expectations around when the genre's uptake is commonly occluded, such expected practice can be subverted by deliberate disclosure. Occlusion and disclosure in the process of genre uptake thus become argumentative and powerful moves in communicative interaction. In three case studies, I analyze processes of occlusion in relationship to the genre of the letter to the university president.

About Occluded Genres

In analyzing academic work we need to contend with genre. Academic and political moves and positions feed not only on practiced exchanges between genres, but also on the play of disclosing and obscuring some of those genres and the work they do.[1] Genred moves in academic and political exchanges constitute a play on occlusion: there are many genre scenes behind the scenes. In presenting three recent cases of university politics in North America, my project develops the concept of occlusion and analyzes the genre of the letter to the university president. What role does occlusion have in the uptake and use of these letters? My analysis reveals the pragmatic uses of the genre and the complexity of its uptake—how participants react not always in direct response to these letters, but also through choices of occlusion and disclosure. First, I survey relevant theorization of occlusion in order to, second, sharpen and revise our conception of occlusion by linking it to uptake. Third, I present my three cases, discussing in detail how users of these letters employ occlusion in argumentative ways. Fourth, the uptake in those cases highlights the importance of genre function—heightened through occlusion—over the particular form or detailed style with which these letters, as a genre, are written.

Writing in academia comes in many forms. Like other bureaucratic systems, universities do things with texts. In the spirit of Anthony Giddens's concept of structuration, rhetorical genre theory holds that university participants act with texts and texts act on

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university participants (Berkenkotter and Huckin). Texts were there before any of us individually entered the system; the system is sustained across time and space by its texts. Only a few of these texts are very public. Among those, most are quietly public, not reaching many readers, but sometimes some of them cause uproar or scandal and reach surprising levels of publicity. Research publications are intended to be very public, and they are also criticized for not being public enough. The majority of the text genres produced in daily academic work, however, are hidden from general view. These hidden genres can be tied to operations so mundane that no public interest is assumed. They can also be kept secret in attempts to curtail their discussion outside the immediate context in which they are most relevant. Many of these genres are, of course, hidden because privacy, legislation, and confidentiality rules demand that they are.

The internal genres veiled behind public visibility have been theorized as occluded genres. John M. Swales has proposed this concept in relation to genres that "support the research publication process but are not, themselves, part of the research record" ("Occluded Genres" 46). Inside academic offices, they are genres that perform essential roles in "administrative and evaluative functioning of the research worlds" (Swales, *Research Genres* 18). Research that has followed Swales's coinage has generally focused on genres that lie within the purview of this early definition. Such research has discussed letters of recommendation (Precht; Bruland); peer review reports and correspondence with editors (Swales, *Research Genres*); reports for retention, promotion, and tenure (Hyon; Alexander); and the MBA thought essay (Loudermilk).

Moving outside the category of occluded genres that support academic knowledge-making, the concept has been taken to the analysis of teacher identity in the study of pedagogical genres such as syllabi, teaching statements, and assignment prompts. Stephen Neaderhiser's work on occluded genres in teaching conceives of occlusion as a concept that is not directly linked to the genre itself: occlusion is "not so categorical a distinction"; genres like the syllabus can be public in one situation, such as inside the classroom, but occluded in others, such as in administrative reviews (Neaderhiser 2). He links occlusion to the idea of routine genres—genres that are not considered complex enough to warrant rhetorical attention and are thus "hidden in plain sight" (Neaderhiser 2). Neaderhiser expands the use of Swales's definition in two important ways. First, he does not limit the definition to genres that support the process of research publication and aid in construction of research identities; instead, Neaderhiser stretches it toward the process of teaching and the construction of teacher identities. Second, he changes the concept from a modifier of very particular genres and from modifying these genres in a stable and fixed way to a characteristic that can shift by situation and use of genres. Through that step, we gain the concept of occlusion. Occlusion, detached not only from particular genres, but also from the concept of genre itself, thus becomes more interesting to observe in detail.

Given affordances of digital copying and social media publishing, unexpected disclosure has become more frequent, and samples of genres that are not typically seen in public sometimes reach wide circulation. I propose that we think of occlusion as the property of these processes of circulation rather than the property of genres. As the property of processes, we can focus on occlusion as an aspect that is not given with each genre but that is produced, consolidated, and also challenged through a genre's

circulation. Genre users can assert or request particular measures of occlusion for exemplars of the genre. Genre users can take measures to increase or decrease the degree of occlusion for samples of the genre, for instance by tightening or loosening rules for their circulation and storage. Explicit teaching of how to write a typically occluded genre (for example, the peer review report, the reference letter, the tenure dossier) and analysis of how these genres are written and used are processes of lessening their occlusion. When teaching academic genres, writing studies specialists like to use the word "demystify"—it describes a desire to change degrees of occlusion. Occlusion and demystification are the property of processes of writing, circulating, and using genres.

Here, I attend to samples of a genre which—partially and deliberately—have been made public. The genre I investigate is the genre of letters to the university president, those messages that are sent unsolicited, usually by individual authors, to high-ranking members of university administrations. A range of recipients can be copied into the letter; the letter writer can make the letter partially or fully public, or leave no public trace of it at all. While some of these letters can become open letters, these can be distinguished from petitions that circulate the text ahead of submission in order to gather a number of signatories. Open letters that are sent to university presidents with multiple signatories can be considered part of the genre. The cases I discuss here occurred in Canada and the U.S. between 2019 and 2020. I will cover events at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver (UBC), Portland State University (PSU), and Michigan State University (MSU). Except for the latter case, the letters discussed are not publicly accessible and I do not analyze the details of their form. Rather, I argue that we can recognize functions of a genre when we trace how it is taken up, even if we cannot analyze its particular forms because its samples have been occluded from view.

Occlusion and Uptake

In writing studies, there is a rich literature contrasting writing as a product to writing as a process. Research has discussed some processes of writing in use—the roles of writing in collaborations, writing as a form of distributed cognition across time and participants, genres as part of large activity systems, and writing as mediated multimodal activity. When we want to look more closely at particular moments of genre use between participants in activity systems, I suggest we mobilize the concept of uptake (Freadman, "Anyone For Tennis?"; Freadman, "Uptake"; Freadman, "The Traps"; Thieme, "Uptake and Genre"). Thinking in terms of uptake helps us see occlusion as moments in multimodal activity within genre systems; it allows us to recognize occlusion (and its counter, disclosure) as an active part of the processes and activities in which written and spoken genres are used and produced.

Most of the research on occluded genres so far has presupposed the occlusion of those genres. Swales's definition provides a particular direction, and other researchers have used it to focus their attention on analysis of particular genres they identify as occluded. We have paid less attention to how that occlusion is achieved, maintained, challenged. Those who produce a text can try to take some influence over how occluded their text will be—they can request a certain confidence, they can ask for limits to circulation, and they can choose from different paths to publicity. However, whether those

attempts are successful depends on those to whom the genres are addressed, or on the decisions of those who are not addressed but who nevertheless take it up. Control over levels of occlusion lies in the uptake of the text by others. This control can appear to be very routine or quite extraordinary. Either way, uptake follows its own purposes.

Letters to the university president are, in Swales's term, an occluded genre (though, as we will see, some of them are conceived as open letters). They are most often produced and used away from public view. We do not have existing ways to notice or trace their number, content, or impact. How they are taken up is generally as obscured as whether they are taken up at all. However, there are moments when part of that uptake involves commentary on some of their effects and even reveals aspects of their content. These revelations are in the hands of the letter holders—which can be the recipient administration, the writer, the person whose work is being defended, or other parties copied into a chain of communication. As scholars who study public and academic discourse, we are at these genre users' mercy in our knowledge of the existence of such letters and the effects they have in the processes in which they are used. In other words, we can only study such letters in instances where they have been taken up in an unoccluded way.

The Jenn Smith Case, University of British Columbia

For the past number of years, the University of British Columbia in Vancouver has had a Free Speech Club, a non-official student group organized to test the boundaries of what is accepted to be said on campus (Rogers). The club's activities have focused on inviting speakers, some of whom are well known for their racist, sexist, homophobic, or anti-trans speech. Many reactionary figures can be found among the club's invitees—including Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, Stefan Molyneux, Lauren Southern, and Andy Ngo—though due to risk of protests and associated security costs, only the first two of the above managed to present. Another group has splintered from the Free Speech Club, called itself Students for Freedom of Expression, invited speakers such as Ricardo Duchesne, Frances Widdowson, and Meghan Murphy, and developed its own space for racist and anti-Semitic discussion both online and off (Vescera). Without a doubt, many letters have been written to the university administration in advance of events organized by both groups. The university administration does not usually comment on what kinds of letters they received and from whom, how they responded, or in what way these letters guided their decisions.

There is one recent case where reporting on the basis of a Freedom of Information request gives us an insight into internal use of some of these letters. Jenn Smith is a critic of curricular resources on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) that have been introduced to British Columbia schools following the 2016 amendment to include gender identity or expression among protected grounds in the BC Human Rights Code. Through 2019, Jenn Smith toured parts of British Columbia with a series of talks that opposed SOGI resources (Takeuchi). On June 23, 2019, that tour brought Smith to the Vancouver campus, invited by the Canadian Christian Lobby, a group that has no association with the university. In addition to the fact that Smith's talk was identified by critics as a case of "anti-transgender hate speech," there was the fact that Smith had

collaborated with members of the Soldiers of Odin—a far-right organization and hate group—at a previous event on Vancouver Island (UBC Students Against Bigotry; Vikander and Seucharan). Neither of these facts, along with public and private calls to stop the event, moved the administration to cancel the booking.

More than seven months after Jenn Smith's talk was held, reporting on documents obtained via a Freedom of Information request revealed some details about the uptake of the letters that had been sent to the president ("Internal Emails"). In advance of the event, the university's president informed the chair of the board of governors that the provost and vice president "feels strongly that this is an academic freedom issue" and that "about half of individuals weighing in on this event have asked that the event occur" ("Internal Emails"). That information then was relayed by the board chair to the university's faculty association: "[T]here have been communications received by UBC that are opposed to the event proceeding, as well as an almost equal number in favour," and the board chair emphasized that the administration sees the event as protected under both academic freedom and freedom of expression ("Internal Emails").

Of the 31 emails to the provost and vice president, as obtained by PressProgress, 27 criticize the event and only four support it. According to PressProgress, nine letters mentioned the speaker's connections to Soldiers of Odin, and 15 expressed concern about the safety of LGBTQ students, staff, and faculty. The vice president reiterated to PressProgress that the administration "received communication both in support and against the university's decision" and that these were received "through a variety of channels, including personal contact and via e-mail, letters and phone calls" ("Internal Emails"). Without engaging in too much speculation, there seem to be differences in what the provost and vice president and what PressProgress can consider as letters to the university president sent in favour of or against the Jenn Smith event.

Rhetorical genre scholars like Janet Giltrow and Anne Freadman remind us that uptake includes meta-genre (Giltrow, "Meta-Genre"; Freadman, "Uptake"). The meta-generic level of uptake contains moments where, for instance, someone asks: "Is this just an informative email or is it a legal threat?" Meta-generic discussion enables genre users to touch base about genre. Freadman notes: "No genre can do more than predict the kind of uptake that would make it happy" ("The Traps" 17). Meta-generic questions and discussions extend possibilities for genre users to assert control over how genres are received. Occlusion limits those possibilities, limits meta-generic discussion. Occlusion thereby leaves most control over how a text is perceived as genre in the hands of those who take it up by occluding.

Occlusion is an ongoing process, as the case of these letters makes evident. Through several steps of internal reporting, only a vague (and perhaps not entirely correct) reference is made about them—that about half the letters are in favour of the event going ahead. As the provost and vice-president forwards information to the president, to the chair of the board of governors, and to the leadership of the faculty association, vague information about the letters is repeated without the content of the letters being revealed. The discussion reported on by PressProgress makes clear that a decision to let the event go ahead is being defended, rather than made, at this point in the discussion. The particular content of the letters is not given a role in that defense—what were their

objections against or arguments in support of the event, did they speak to the concept of academic freedom?

Letters to the university president have an effect in this discussion, but it is not an effect the letters themselves can control. Beyond the president's office, their effect is not attached to what in detail they were arguing, what points for consideration they brought into the decision-making process, or what evidence they presented. The effect they had lay in their occlusion. As recipient, the president's office had control over the use of these letters, a control asserted by only revealing a calculation of halves. In relaying a not entirely correct—or at least not transparent—calculation, occlusion is applied to all levels: the existence of some dissenting letters, the general arguments of the letters, and their detailed content are all occluded. The potential power of these letters lies in their uptake, and what that uptake occludes and reveals. In this case, it occluded even that which it claimed to partially reveal.

The Peter Boghossian Case, Portland State University

Whereas the previous case illustrates practices of uptake—and, through uptake, occlusion—on the part of the letters' addressee, my next two cases focus on practices of uptake and occlusion by the person about whom letters are sent to the university administration. Throughout 2017 and 2018, Peter Boghossian was engaged, with James Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose, in a project of submitting several bogus manuscripts to interdisciplinary journals specializing in gender, sexuality, queer, cultural, and critical race studies. When their project was uncovered by journalists, the team had published four research articles (all were later retracted), had three more accepted but not yet published, and had been asked to revise and resubmit four more; altogether, the team wrote and submitted 21 manuscripts to various research journals (in later documentation that number is given as 20). In the wake of the news scoop, the team members spoke openly about creating false identities for several of their author pseudonyms and manufacturing imaginary data for some of their manuscripts. In the online magazine article describing their project, the team uses the term "grievance studies" for an array of disciplinary fields and subfields, and proclaims corruption in humanities and social science research based on what they perceive as widespread "political, moral, and ideological biases" (Pluckrose et al.).

Throughout this project, Boghossian was the only of the three authors employed by a university and thereby subject to research ethics guidelines. Following the reveal of the hoax, a collective of 12 faculty members and one PhD student at Boghossian's institution, Portland State University, published an open letter in the student newspaper. The letter emphasizes the lack of serious scholarship and intellectual value in the "grievance studies" project and points out that the 20 or 21 manuscripts—some of which went through several stages in the peer review process—relied on the "effort and goodwill of at least 40 reviewers and at least 20 editors," a "drain on valuable unpaid time of real scholars" (PSU Pro-Educational Editorial Collective). The letter highlights that given its lack of intellectual honesty—"wasting colleagues' time and goodwill," as well as involving "completely falsified data"—Boghossian's involvement in the project constitutes fraud and academic dishonesty (PSU Pro-Educational Editorial Collective). According

to the collective, the manuscripts were not designed to critique, educate, or contribute in a scholarly way. Instead, their purpose was to "humiliate entire fields," thereby bringing "negative publicity" to Boghossian's institution and jeopardizing the reputation of its students "as their degrees in the process may become devalued" (PSU Pro-Educational Editorial Collective).

Soon after the project was revealed, Boghossian's university administration opened an investigation into research misconduct, examining the falsifying or fabricating of data focusing on one paper in particular: "Expressions of Concern: Human Reaction to Rape Culture and Queer Performativity at Urban Dog Parks in Portland, Oregon." Boghossian was instructed to turn over all research material and to show if he had received approval from the university's ethics review board. The investigating committee concluded that the article contained knowingly fabricated data and thereby constituted research misconduct. In addition, the entire project fell under the definition of research with human subjects due to its interaction with journal editors and reviewers, and so would have required approval by the university's ethics review board. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that a day after it became public that Portland State University was investigating, Boghossian's website declared that "more than 100 scholars had written letters defending Boghossian" (Mangan, "Proceedings Start").

The letters to the university president which Boghossian posted in his defense on his website and Twitter account have since been taken down. According to links in online magazine articles, these letters were by authors like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Jonathan Haidt, Jordan Peterson, Steven Pinker, Michael Shermer, and Alan Sokal (Varney; Soave). In its reporting on the letters, *Pacific Standard* calls these "many of the world's most prominent (mostly male) academics" while noting that Boghossian's publicist also provided the magazine with other letters that were not made public and whose authors were not publicly named (McWilliams). Boghossian's emphasis on these particular authors—from among over 100, as he says—invites Michel Foucault's concept of the author function into my discussion of uptake and occlusion. Each of the letters chosen for publication points to its author as a "figure who is outside and precedes" the genre sample in question (Foucault 115). Their names are more than "simply an element of speech" and are instead functional in that they serve "as a means of classification," in this case into the category of public intellectual (Foucault 123). The author as function is "a variable that accompanies only certain texts," and even though Foucault excluded private letters from this category, we can see that Boghossian desires to highlight author function in relation to these particular letters as he publicizes them (Foucault 127).

In a situation where Boghossian needed to explain his past actions to the investigating committee, he attempted to defend himself in public view through presentation of select letters. It was under his control to decide which letters to reveal, and he chose them less for how relevant their arguments in his defense were and more for how clearly the letter authors' names were publicly recognized. What range of letters the university administration received and how the letters were taken up in the process of the investigation is hidden from public view. The university did not comment at all on these letters, safeguarding the work of the investigating committee through a well-established practice of occlusion. We might guess that the letters played little to no role in

the committee's deliberation and decision, especially not if the vice president did not inform committee members of the letters. Through uptake by Boghossian—who is not the letters' main addressee—a select few letters to the university president, those written by authors with much name recognition, became an argumentative tool in a different process. Away from the university's investigation, Boghossian played with occlusion—or, rather, its opposite, disclosure—to a public audience as a way of asserting some of his own control. At the end of the investigation, Boghossian's university asserted that he had violated the rights of human research subjects, and that, before conducting or participating in projects with human participants again, he needed to complete requisite training (Mangan, "Portland State Says").

The Stephen Hsu Case, Michigan State University

My third case also involves a university professor who, in response to serious allegations, published a selection of letters in an even clearer attempt to influence a review process. Until June 2020, Stephen Hsu was senior vice president for research and innovation at Michigan State University. His resignation that month had been preceded by an open letter and petition organized by the university's Graduate Employees Union. The open letter asserted that Hsu's views did not accord with the university's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion ("Fire Stephen Hsu"). A linked Twitter thread provided evidence of Hsu's beliefs in innate biological differences between human populations, cognitive differences between races, podcast appearances with white supremacist Stefan Molyneux and Holocaust denier Ron Unz, advocacy for eugenic selection of embryos, and claims in favour of breeding humans for higher IQ rates (Michigan State GEU). The untenability of someone with beliefs, statements, and actions like Hsu's in a position with such power over research funding and the careers of a diverse body of faculty and students was highlighted with strong evidence in a series of six blog posts by historian John Jackson, published in the same time period as the petition was collecting signatures from inside and outside the university ("Stephen Hsu and Ronald Unz"; "Stephen Hsu and the Ethical Responsibility of Scientists"; "Stephen Hsu and Academic Freedom"; "Stephen Hsu and Guilt by Association"; "Stephen Hsu and the Upside-Down World"; "Stephen Hsu"). The arguments in the petition and blog posts asked for Hsu to resign or be fired from only his role as vice president. After his resignation from that position, Hsu retained his tenured post as professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy.

A counter-petition emerged soon after, emphasizing "principles of academic freedom, scientific integrity, and fair play," claiming that the allegations against Hsu were "baseless," "unequivocally false," and full of "innuendo and rumor to outright lies" (*Petition Letter for Stephen Hsu*). The counter-petition declared that there was "zero concrete evidence" that Hsu acted in an unfair manner as vice president, that he should remain in office lest the university was seen to "capitulate to rumor and character assassination," a charge that might do "permanent damage to the university" and undermine core values of free inquiry (*Petition Letter for Stephen Hsu*). Along with the counter-petition, 11 letters were published on the petition website with the note that there were

many other letters whose authors "do not want their identities or letters made public" (*Letters of Support*).

In the hands of their main addressee, the letters are a fully occluded genre and as such their effects are uncertain to almost everyone else. Were the letters' arguments considered at all? Did the status of the letter writer, the prestige of their affiliation, or the recognition of their name matter in the decision-making process? Was it the volume of the letters that swayed? Among my three cases, Hsu, as the person holding an office right next to the university president, had the highest chances of knowing how the letters sent about him would or would not matter. As a vice president who held this position for eight years, he was the person to whom many such letters had previously been addressed; he must have had deep experience in how this genre functioned within his university.

The counter-petition and posted letters, both endorsed and advertised by Hsu on his blog, direct discussion away from the issues that form the demand for his removal ("Twitter Attacks")—in the Twitter thread by the Graduate Employees Union, they were highlighted as capitalized categories: racism, eugenics, sexism, and conflict of interest. Not acknowledging that the petition came from members of his own university, Hsu decried the accusations as "nasty Twitter attacks" by "Twitter mobs"; not responding to the fact that the petition targeted not his role as researcher but as administrator, Hsu claimed it wanted to "suppress scientific work" and imperil scientific inquiry ("Twitter Attacks"). In his blog posts, Hsu side-stepped the fact that the petition calling for his removal was organized by graduate students at his own university and had signatures of about 500 of the faculty and graduate students under his administrative portfolio (Guzman; "Letter June 11 2020"). The petition was an expression of lack of confidence in his leadership. Rather than take the issue up with his university members, Hsu publicly asserted his extraordinary sense of rightness and confidence, and he exclusively directed such assertions toward an audience other than those who questioned his leadership of their university.

Hsu further discussed the publicly posted letters on his blog, where he stated: "Several are deep, detailed scholarly documents," and claimed, they "firmly rebut the false accusations of the mob" ("Support Freedom"). John Jackson, a faculty member at Hsu's university, did not agree that the letters effectively addressed what Hsu was accused of: "Only two letters mentioned Hsu's support for Ron Unz and his promotion of Unz's Holocaust denial website, making me suspect that some letters were written with incomplete information" ("Stephen Hsu and Academic Freedom"). Hsu did not respond to any of Jackson's detailed blog posts. Instead, he pointed out that his personal friend and close collaborator, Corey Washington, wrote a letter of "over 5,000 words," and James Lee, also a collaborator, defended him in a letter of "over 3,000 words"; Hsu instructed his blog audience: "Sign the support petition. Email the president: presidentstanley@msu.edu" ("Support Freedom").

Already in one of the positions of highest power at his university, Hsu tried to recruit more letters to defend him rather than engage in the evidence brought forward by those who expressed their lack of confidence in his leadership. In the case of the members of the Graduate Employees Union, these were graduate students who risked much in organizing the petition. They were met with further abuse of the power to which they were speaking. Hsu's public disclosure of some of these letters, along with his request for more of them to be written in his defense, is a powerful move meant to serve Hsu's

personal purposes. Speaking as vice president, he does not direct his response to his university members, rather, he uses select disclosure of letters to the university president in order to turn away from his constituents' concerns and toward a public audience, attempting to rally that public in his favour.

Occlusion and Disclosure as Process and Power Move

In some ways, letters to the university president are a genre with the potential to democratize. Contact information for university presidents is freely available. Anyone with internet access can address a letter to any university president in order to express their agreement or disagreement on a pertinent issue. Letters to the university president are a genre for speaking to a seat of power. They can be used for practices of souveillance—for making university administrations feel the presence of those watching from below. In the first case discussed here, that potential of speaking to the university administration from below is present in the request to protect LGBTQ members of the community. Boghossian and Hsu attempt to influence a seat of power higher than them as well, but they do so on behalf of themselves, from their own positions of influence, and in attempts to control accountability processes that addressed allegations of misconduct brought against them. While, on the surface, letters to the president have democratic potential, in practice their power unfolds in how they are taken up, how agency is granted to some letters more than others, and who is being attributed (Miller, "What Can Automation Tell Us About Agency?"). Occlusion and disclosure are used within structures of power. They are not neutral processes. These letters are used for argumentative purposes within relations marked by different access to power. Those argumentative purposes go beyond what the letters themselves argue. Acts of disclosure and occlusion exhibit features of audience design in that they attempt to position different audience groups for particular actions (Thieme, "Constitutive Rhetoric").

I have highlighted the concept of occlusion as part of processes of uptake rather than a property of genres themselves. Occlusion accrues as a property of genres through recurrent processes of uptake that produce and enforce occlusion. In each instance of genre use, and thereby in each instance of uptake, participants can play with occlusion. In moments when aspects of the genre are made available in wider circles of publicity than they otherwise would, uptake can highlight the function of the genre (as in the Jenn Smith case), it can highlight the function of the author (as in the Boghossian case), and it can highlight both (as in the Hsu case). The letter to the president is a genre that circulates mostly among established members of the academy. The recipients of the genre are in high-ranking administrative positions, and it seems that senders often hold prestigious posts as well—or, at least that is the case for those senders whose letters are used for playing with occlusion in the latter two case studies.

Function, Uptake, and Occlusion

My analysis of uptake of letters to the university president stresses the importance of genre function when attending to genred interactions. Function in genre theory is a broad and flexible term. It arrives from the shared sense of exigence in Lloyd Bitzer's

rhetorical situation (Bitzer), develops into Carolyn Miller's genre as social action ("Genre as Social Action"), and transforms into genre function in Anis Bawarshi's work ("The Genre Function"; *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*). In these conceptions, there is a social situation in which generic expression accomplishes work for its users. Through genre's function, we enact social relations and identities—a university student becomes a student by enacting the many genres, written and spoken, that are associated with that role. A physicist becomes a physicist in like fashion. A professor becomes a professor. With the recognition of genre function, interest in formal and stylistic elements of genres continues but takes a subsumed role. My analysis demonstrates that even when not having access to form, it is possible to trace function through uptake—I did not see the letters sent about Jenn Smith; I lost access to the letters about Boghossian when he deleted them from his website and Twitter timeline; and I did not formally analyze the letters Hsu made publicly available.

Writing studies scholar Paul Prior urges us to see production, reception, and circulation of a genre neither as separate stages nor as separate from face-to-face activity. They are, he says, "co-present dimensions of discourse with multiple and changing configurations over time" (Prior 22). The result is to see writing as neither frozen in time nor as a product that is no longer an activity. In the history of rhetorical genre theory, there is ongoing play between the specificity of language analysis and the generality of institutional processes in the attempt to grasp written genres as activity or process rather than product. In other words, rhetorical genre studies has the capacity to move between different levels of analysis. This mobility contributes to its continued attractiveness, as several genre theorists have noted (Auken; Miller, "Genre: Permanence and Change"; Bazerman). Mobility between levels of analysis is also a necessity given that the details of form alone do not tell us about a genre, nor are they always available as in the cases above. Pragmatic function and practices of textual cooperation can speak to us about role and effects of a genre (Devitt; Giltrow, "Form Alone"). I suggest this is where the concept of uptake is highly useful. As Freadman makes clear, recognition of genre-scripted roles, relations, and effects relies on how a genre is taken up by others ("Uptake"). In turn, we can observe uptakes of and between genres in order to understand how a genre's function is negotiated, confirmed, or challenged, brought into the open or pushed behind the scenes. I have captured some of these negotiations by further developing the concept of occlusion.

As we encounter plays on occlusion and powerful moves to occlude or disclose, we can ask: Who is occluding or disclosing, when, for what argumentative purposes, and toward which audiences? Occlusion can be a routine result of recurring practice, and most of the time it is. But there will also be rhetorical situations where genre users break out of routine practice, such as Hsu did by publicly asking for more letters to be written on his behalf. We should study more closely these perceptions of what is routine or extraordinary occlusion, and how they change with changing situations and affordances. There is agency and power to occlusion, and that agency and power are revealed more clearly in uses of occlusion that contrast against routine genre expectations. As digital tools and social media platforms make it ever more possible to distribute samples of genres, ethical dimensions of occlusion and disclosure are highlighted and deserve more attention from scholars in genre, writing, and discourse studies. In

none of the cases studied here was the revealing managed directly by the authors of those letters, it was in the hands of those who had received them either because they were their addressee or because they were the person defended in front of the addressee. The options for what to reveal of an otherwise occluded genre are many—choices include how vaguely or clearly to reference or summarize samples of the genre, which of its particular details to reveal if any, and to which audiences engaged in which conversations to direct this play on occlusion and disclosure. We have more research ahead.

Note

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Notes on Contributor

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