re:verb Episode 24: re:blurb - Genre

Introductory Bit

Calvin: Hi everyone, welcome to Re:Verb. I'm Calvin Pollak.

Alex: And I'm Alex Helberg.

Calvin: On today's re:blurb, we introduce, explain, and instantiate the concept of genre in rhetorical studies. To help us analyze the recent genre controversy over Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" and its many remixes, later in the show we'll be joined by Martha Sue Karnes, a PhD student in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at The University of Texas at Austin.

Alex: So Calvin, conventionally on our re:blurb episodes, we like to start off with a kind of sketch or skit related to the concept we're introducing.

Calvin: That's right, Alex. That tends to be a nice, light way to start things off, and it allows us to be creative and comedic instead of just dry, expository, and intellectual.

Alex: I agree! But, you know, right now, it seems to me that none of this is very funny. Something's a little off.

Calvin: How bout this… what if instead of *doing* a bit this time, we just *explain the fact that we conventionally start off each re:blurb episode with a bit*? Wouldn't that be *hilarious*? People love metajokes -- they're like regular jokes, but smarter!

Alex: Nah, let's not do that. Feels a little hack.

Calvin: Too late.

Literature Review Section

Alex starts:
"Genre" is likely a term that you've heard before in day-to-day conversation. It's typically deployed to reference different styles of books, films, music, and other cultural forms. In this usage, it's a term that we often take for granted. A genre can be so easy to identify in everyday life that it seems in significant - you just know it when you see or hear it. You hear a song come on your radio, and you can probably easily identify what genre it belongs to just by listening to a few seconds of it. So, why are genres so important to understanding communication, politics, and popular culture? One way to answer that question is to trace the evolution of the concept through rhetorical scholarship and practice across the ages.

Throughout the history of rhetoric, both the definition of the term "genre" and the ways that we classify what counts as a genre have developed significantly. In Greek antiquity, participation in

the various arenas of democratic life (or, the *demos*) required training in one or more of three classical rhetorical genres.

There was the *forensic* genre, practiced by speakers in courts of law, where strategic presentations of facts about a past event were used in order to adjudicate people's guilt or innocence. This often involved using the heuristic of *stasis* theory to help invent arguments, which you can learn more about in our re:blurb on the topic back in Episode 12.

By contrast, the *deliberative* genre involved speakers bringing forth arguments advocating some future action, often in political contexts and situations, such as a politician making a persuasive speech about a policy to an audience of other politicians who needed to be won over. This genre is inextricably linked with models of democracy, and even to this day there are numerous ways to deliberate about policy, depending on the kind of audience constituted by a particular deliberative body, the values of the communities affected by its policies, and the material constraints of the rhetorical situation.

Finally, the *epideictic* genre - also known as the "praise and blame" speech - often served both evaluative and commemorative functions for a community or audience. It is most often associated with memorializing a person or an event, as in the case of eulogies delivered at funerals or other kinds of memorial ceremonies, such as for great war victories or infamous tragedies. Epideictic also includes speeches that attempt to constitute a communal identity among listeners, such as many types of presidential and even more local base-rallying campaign rhetoric. Epideictic borrows elements from deliberative and forensic rhetoric in that it considers events and actions from the past as well as possible future outcomes, but it still remains rooted in arguing for a particular vision of the *present* moment and the audience's place within it.

What we can see from these classical rhetorical genres is that each one emerges from a *social practice* of the society in which it is taking place. In other words, these genres are vehicles for critical social dynamics that uphold a society, from making and enforcing laws to helping forge group identities and communal solidarity. These are, of course, primarily genres that are associated with a Western rhetorical tradition and societies which were influenced by it - thus, they are not universally "effective" or even necessary genres to the maintenance of a society. A number of transnational and comparative rhetorical studies (which we'll cite in the show notes) delineate how diverse arrays of rhetorical practices and genres are used for other effects in different communities across the globe. But the key take-away here is this: by and large, genres are used to accomplish a social action, to get things done in the world that we regularly need to get done.

This point was underscored by Carolyn Miller in her landmark 1984 essay in the Quarterly Journal of Speech, "Genre as Social Action." Rather than reducing our conception of genre to a mere consideration of abstract rules and formal features - in other words, groups of texts that look or sound similar to one another - Miller argues that we need to look to the recurring *situations* that give rise to the "rules" in the first place, as well as what following those rules

allows those texts to “do” in the world. What kinds of actions are they used to perform in response to certain types of situations?

This way of thinking about genre expands the term’s definition beyond the classical boundaries of the forensic, deliberative, and epideictic. According to Miller, a genre is formed when recurring, typified situations give rise to responses that bear similar characteristics. In this way, we can identify genres in most of the activities that we do in daily life, from something as simple as making a grocery list (personally, I write items down in the order that best represents how I move through the grocery store), arrays of interpersonal genres, such as making an apology to a friend or loved one, or more complex mediated genres, like recording a podcast. In any case, genre as a concept helps us understand the methods we’ve developed for inventing rhetorical texts that help us take action in response to familiar situations.

Building off of Miller’s work, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin worked to extend the conception of genre from a sociocognitive perspective. They examined how genres operate as a type of “situated cognition” - as they write, “[o]ur knowledge of genres is derived from and embedded in our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life . . . which continues to develop as we participate in the activities of the culture.” Additionally, this view of genre calls attention to how genres are best considered in terms of how they function in communities of practice, because, as they claim, “[g]enre conventions signal a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology.” This critical insight helps us think about and analyze how genres develop out of specific community practices and situated, insider knowledges. It can explain how, for example, scholarly journal articles between the humanities and the sciences tend to look drastically different as a result of distinctive scholarly practices that shape how the knowledge circulated in journal articles is used by other scholars in their respective fields.

In addition to their focus on genre performances being situated in discrete discourse communities, Berkenkotter and Huckin underscore a further crucial element of genre, which they refer to as “dynamism.” While they acknowledge the fact that, as Miller and others pointed out previously, genres are “typified” responses to situations, there still inheres the potential for change, variation, and flexibility in how genres can look, or how they can perform actions in the world. In the authors’ words, “[a]s the world changes, both in material conditions and in collective and individual perceptions of it, the types [of genres] produced by typification must themselves undergo constant incremental change.” This insight usefully illustrates how genres are not completely static, unchanging, formulaic sets of rules - rather, they “are always sites of contention between stability and change . . . in response to the sociocognitive needs of individual users.”

Calvin starts:
Of course, any conversation about the fixity and flexibility of “rules” for how to write and perform genres is incomplete without a consideration of politics and power dynamics. This aspect of genre is addressed in detail in Vijay K. Bhatia’s 1997 article “The Power and Politics of Genre.” Using a variety of case studies from academic publishing to international legislation, Bhatia

exposes the ways in which surface-level genre conventions, such as citation practices and linguistic framing strategies, can teach us a great deal about the power dynamics involved in producing texts according to the norms of particular genres.

Now, this could arguably be a natural aspect of nearly any genre. However, what is of primary interest to Bhatia is instances in which powerful people in communities of practice use their political clout to both determine and protect the rules and norms for contributing new, innovative knowledge transmitted through a particular genre. Here, Bhatia invokes the concept of "gate-keeping" to help explain the ways that people with certain amounts of power over a community have the ability to act as arbiters for what is *allowable* within the confines of a genre, and, by proxy, which kinds of practices or performances are deemed *un*fit or *un*allowable.

For example, if I tried to submit a free-verse, imagistic poem to a scientific journal, it would almost certainly be swiftly rejected. I could try and make an argument that my poem lends some interesting insights to the scientific study of a particular field, but because it does not contain the formal elements of a scientific journal article - for example, it lacks a reproducible experimental methodology, a reporting of data or results, and a discussion of the implications of the findings - it is not in any way useful to other scientists reading the journal. It does not help advance the knowledge of the specific field of people reading it, and thus would be incompatible with the motives and norms of the community. In this case, one could make an argument that the gate-keeping practices of this scientific journal are functioning in a useful way.

However, there are other contexts in which gate-keeping acts as a way to consolidate the power of particular insiders to the overt exclusion of other voices and knowledges. Bhatia illustrates just such a case through the example of "World Englishes," the widely-observed phenomenon of the English language spreading as a kind of lingua franca to different parts of the world that were not primarily English-speaking before. In the context of many genres, Bhatia points out, the "rules" for how to perform English discourse in transnational contexts are still either directly handed down from, or at least strongly shaped by, the conventions of more wealthy and powerful countries where English is prevalently spoken, such as the U.S. and the U.K. What this amounts to, writes Bhatia, is a "fail[ure] to acknowledge the sources of variations, especially those of marginality and exclusion, giving the impression that there is, or should be, no variation in the way genres are constructed, interpreted, or used." In other words, certain types of gate-keeping, if practiced in an uncritical or unjustified way, can result in the constricting of genre conventions, and an opposition to changing them.

Introduction to the Artifact / Controversy & Interview

As a case in point of this genre gate-keeping phenomenon, we're going to examine the popular explosion and subsequent controversy surrounding Lil Nas X's breakout hit song, "Old Town Road." For a pop song, "Old Town Road" has an incredibly distinctive musical composition. It begins with harmonizing banjo plucks that gradually become more complex as Lil Nas's vocals crescendo into the first hook. The opening lines, "I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road/

I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more" invoke both the linguistic voice and archetypal image of a lone cowboy.

Then, the verse drops with a minimal yet driving trap beat and bouncing bass line accompanying the now-famous line: "I got the horses in the back…" The song proceeds in a similar stylistic fashion, with minimally-autotuned lyrics conjuring images that recur in country songs juxtaposed with common references in trap songs: for instance, Lil Nas sings about his preference for "riding on a horse" as opposed to "whip[ping a] Porsche," "riding on a tractor" with "lean in [his] bladder", all while wearing a "cowboy hat from Gucci" and Wrangler jeans simultaneously. Arguably, the lyrics and instrumental combine to create a genre-bending effect: by borrowing from both country and trap genre conventions, Lil Nas X forges a strange hybrid of the two styles.

Another strange aspect of "Old Town Road" was its hypermediated, multi-genre path to global smash hit status. After being self-released by Lil Nas X in December of 2018, the song gained viral popularity as the soundtrack for a series of video memes on the social media platform TikTok, which then quickly made their way to YouTube. Another YouTube video that popularized the full hook-and-verse iteration of the song used as its visual element gameplay footage from the Western-noir videogame Red Dead Redemption 2. That video currently boasts just over 77 million views as of this recording.

Since the track was originally self-produced by Lil Nas X and not released by an official record label, radio DJs were forced to rip recordings of the song from YouTube in order to play them on the radio, per the demands of their audiences. In a matter of days, "Old Town Road" rose through the ranks of the Billboard Hot 100, the Hot Country Songs, and the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs charts simultaneously. As of this recording, it has enjoyed a solid 15 weeks at the top of the Hot 100 chart, and is widely considered one of the standard-bearers for crossover success in the contemporary U.S. music industry.

However, just weeks after the song's meteoric rise to popularity, controversy arose when "Old Town Road" was unceremoniously removed from the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart. Following a great deal of online public outcry, Billboard issued a statement to Rolling Stone addressing the decision: "...upon further review, it was determined that 'Old Town Road' by Lil Nas X does not currently merit inclusion on Billboard's country charts. When determining genres, a few factors are examined, but first and foremost is musical composition. While 'Old Town Road' incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version."

In response to this decision, country music superstar Billy Ray Cyrus collaborated on a remix of the song with Lil Nas X, in which he added vocals to the song's hook as well as an additional verse in keeping with the lyrical style of the two previous verses. Prior to its release, Cyrus posted a tweet directed at Lil Nas X: ".@LilNasX Been watching everything going on with OTR. When I got thrown off the charts, Waylon Jennings said to me 'Take this as a compliment' means you're doing something great! Only Outlaws are outlawed. Welcome to the club!"

To help us further analyze the genre and style of this song as well as the ensuing controversy over Billboard's decision, we're joined by Martha Sue Karnes, a PhD student in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at The University of Texas at Austin. This summer, Martha is teaching a course called "The Rhetoric of Rap."

Martha, thank you so much for being with us!

[The following interview transcript was generated using Otter.ai software with minimal edits - we apologize for any typographical errors or inconsistencies between the transcription and the actual audio!]

Martha:
Thank you for having me. I'm very excited.

Alex:
So I just want to pose a question to the room, in our general opinion is Old Town road, a country song?

Calvin:
I think it's not a country song. And my argument for that is not normative. It's purely descriptive. Like, I just think that descriptively given where country is right now, as a genre does not fit in with either the formal features of a typical country song, or the lyrical content, ideological content, like the kinds of people who are listening to it, it's just not. It's not a cultural form that fits with like, the hegemonic country genre. In 2019,

Alex:
interesting, so if you had to reclassify it, if you if, if we were to put this in a genre box, what would you what would you label this as

Calvin:
I would just label it as rap or pop? Pop rap?

Alex:
Interesting.

Martha:
Okay. I mean, I still I think it's rap, too. I think it's country and rap. But I do I see your point. And I don't know what the like, I don't know where country music is in 2019?

Calvin:
Yeah, well, no, I should, I should clarify that that's entirely judging from like flipping through radio stations in the car, and the kind of stuff I hear, as well as I mean, I think we can talk about the move that billboard made to strip this from the country charts, what might have been motivating,

that, I think speaks to like the norms of the country genre right now. And that this, this song is not in keeping with those norms.

Martha:
So like, what What about it doesn't keep with the norms? What do you think? I guess I'm wondering,

Calvin:
I guess, the instrumental, the lyrics, and even like the performative, social identity of the artists, while Lil Nas X acts like he is not performing the identity of a country star, he's performing the identity of a pop star, or a rap star or even, like just a social media star.

Alex:
That's kind of fascinating to think about that. I mean, because you know, one of the things that, you know, I think, probably comes along with genre, if we take that sort of Birkenkotter and Huckin definition, that talk about, you know, that there's norms, epistemology, ideology, and all these things wrapped up in genre, I'm sure that identity probably plays a role somewhere in there as well. And so if we try to think about, you know, genres as kind of, you know, performing a certain identity, right, or an identity of a certain community, you know, is performing a country identity just about, you know, I mean, well, this was, this is kind of interesting, too, because it was cited in the billboard, their statement that they made to Rolling Stone, while the song contains cowboy imagery and other things like that in its lyrics, it's primarily the musical composition that they use to determine what kind of genre box to put something in. And so, so to their mind, you know, the, the sort of social identity of the of the person making the music is doesn't matter quite isn't quite as important as the musical composition, which I think is kind of a fascinating, like, that's a I mean, that seems like an arbitrary distinction, though, right? Like, because, of course, identity is important.

Calvin:
I think it's really important to talk about the extent to which race is part of the decision that billboard made. Yeah, and a lot of people read that decision as racially coded. There was a New York Times article. This was right after the remix, the first remix came out with Billy Ray, and the headline was, Lil NAS X added Billy Ray Cyrus to Old Town road is it country enough for billboard now? And they're like multiple, you know, people in in country music like in the institution of country music, who were kind of like calling out the decision by Billboard as racially motivated. Shane Morris, a former record label executive in Nashville, said, they said there were compositional problems, because they didn't know how to justify it any other way without sounding completely racist. Charles Hughes, the director of the Lynne & Henry Turley Memphis Center at Rhodes College, said black artists have been influential in country a long, long way back, but country has rewarded white artists that have taken advantage of those influences without giving black artists the same opportunities. So to what extent Martha Do you think like this is primarily racial and not about compositional features?

Martha:

Yeah, I, I think it kind of goes with that whole identity thing you were saying? And of course, race is a part of identity. Right. I think I think bringing up the composition. The compositional piece was probably the easiest way because it does have that Trap Beat is the easiest way to be like, Nope, this isn't country because he will Claus isn't performing a country identity in like the traditional or whatever sense of the term. But he he does kind of like it all his performances he's wearing like this blinged out like cowboy gear. He posted, he posted a picture of himself. This was probably a while ago without a cowboy hat and was like, Oh, my record label, let me took the take the hat off for for one picture that he like, put it back on. It was like, I had to put it back on. So he, I think he's performing some sort of maybe like, like a social media like cowboy identity or something.

Calvin:
Yeah. And it seems like to a large extent, he's parodying the identity of a country star. Yeah.

Martha:
And I like probably the identity of like a rap star too, right? I think he's, I think he's parodying the idea of like, a star in general, which like becoming a star in the way that he has, right?

Alex:
No, I think you're totally spot on. And I think that actually leads us very nicely into this other question about, you know, what if we use something like Carolyn Miller's definition of genre to look at something like Old Town Road, which is, what kind of social action is this genre performing? Right? So if we follow it from, you know, kind of the social actions that we're pointing out here is that this is kind of like a parody. It's almost like, you know, a different performance of all of these identities. That's not quite country. It's not quite like a rapper, like a pop star identity. But he's doing this parody song, and he's getting like, massively famous off of it. So I mean, what does that tell us about you know, like, I mean, maybe this is a new genre entirely. This is just something that's like a social media hype genre, or something like that, where you're sort of playing the tropes of all of these genres off of one another to create this sort of crazy viral sensation.

Calvin:
Yeah, no, I was just gonna say I think it's, it's really important to talk about the multimedia aspect of this, where it's not even enough to talk about like, the genre of the song, you have to talk about the genre of his tweets, and as well as like these weird animated videos he's made for all of the remixes, or at least his team has made, right. Yeah. And, and so all of that, I think, goes into the genre of what he's creating. And I think that makes it distinct from country as well, because that's not something that's at least as far as I know, like very common and country.

Martha:
Yeah, I would agree. But with the rate that he like, he posts these new like, animated videos or like, not like a video but just like an animated short or something. He posts them at such a speed I like I don't know if that's common in any sort of genre, like I would say it's a thing we'd probably see more in rapper pop or something. Even even going a step farther, he'll do like

basically like VINELink third tech tackling or whatever, like 20, like, not 22nd but like 10 second clips of his songs with like, various things like the one that stands out in my mind. It's his song like family, and he like put it to the intro to The Suite Life of Zack and Cody. And it's really funny, because that song sounds like could be the theme for that show. And he'll do that all the time. If you go through his Twitter feed, it's it's all that sort of stuff with with a video he just released the area 51 One, it's, it's with further remix. And it's like, it shows them storming area 51. I just like I want to know like, how who does this? How do they do this so fast?

Calvin:
Right. And, and there was an earlier version of that video, too. That was because this is the remix that has Billy Ray again, like Billy Ray's part repeated, as well as Young Thug and Mason Ramsey. And there was an earlier there was an earlier version of this video that was a bunch of like emoji faces, representing them singing their verses, right, right in area 51 version of it just to kind of like follow the meme of the day. Right? Yeah. So this is something that's like constantly evolving, multimedia wise and like inter generically in a way that's not really traceable to the formal genre features of hip hop or country. But I agree with you that if it's closer to one, it's probably hip hop, because there are a lot of rap artists who like really prolifically put out new stuff,

Alex:
not to bring this back to sort of like, “oh, man, the internet's changed everything.” But like, it seems like something that could only be born out of the age that we live in now because you know, It's something that shucks all of the kind of like the all of the formal traditions that would place it into one or another genre category. And it kind of does like blend a little bit it borrows a little bit from one genre mixes in a little bit from another. But ultimately, like, at the end of the day, this is just somebody who's incredibly savvy with his, with his content production really sort of seems like he knows what he's doing and can you know, I mean, he's written this, the success of Old Town road has been, you know, 15 weeks at the top of the hot 100. Now, so I mean, clearly whatever he's doing, it's working. Yeah,

Martha:
I do think it's, his success is in large part to how savvy he is on social media with what he's doing. I mean, he, I don't know if he's, I retweeted this that Peppa Pig album slaps and then like Nick Jr. tweeted back at him like, and he like, tweeted, Dolly Parton. Like, let's get Dolly Parton on the old town road remix, and Dolly Parton tweeted back. So maybe that's kind of happen.

Calvin:
That literally might happen.

Alex:
By the time we release this episode, that might already be a thing, so

Martha:
that's gonna be old news. Yeah.

Calvin:
Old Town news.

Martha:
They're gonna be like, Why didn't they talk about the Dolly Parton remix? I was on vacation a couple of weeks ago and his family. They were we're at the beach. This family was um, Heather radio playing. And I swear I heard Old Town road like six times in one hour. And like, it's not a long song. So it's not. It's not that much. But you're like, oh my gosh, like, that's so much. Yeah, and I none of these people. I feel like we're the sort of people that are following long as x on Twitter or something. So it was like a family like they're young kids and kids love Old Town road. So I'm sure that's what I was played so much. But I was like, just like, amazed by how much I heard it. And that one hour.

Calvin:
It's huge with everyone like down to like, you know, elementary school kids. Like there was that amazing video? Yeah, of him performing at an elementary school. And almost every kid knew every word. Yeah. So I don't I don't know what accounts for that. But it does seem like this. This is just kind of the soundtrack of now. Right?

Martha:
And kids. I've worked with kids. In the past before grad school. I worked with kindergarteners and they just like they love rap anyway, like, they always want to listen to rap. I don't that's a whole nother thing.

Calvin:
Where does Lil Nas X go from here? Does he continue just making remixes of Old Town road? Can he ever get out of the shadow of this song? And also what genre do we see him working in going forward?

Martha:
That is such a good question. Does he ever escape Old Town road? I don't know, cuz he like he makes fun of all the remixes. He like parodies himself. He's like gonna do another remix but like what what point does that get home you know? I do enjoy his his EP Seven, basically every all of the songs kind of do the like genre blending thing like it's rock-rap, rock-pop, that sort of thing. Panini is really good, Rodeo's really good, these are all things all songs none of them in my opinion. None of them have the none of them have that same like "wow" factor. I don't know. I don't know where he goes next. I don't… what does life after Old Town road look like?

Several Speakers:
Who knows. It's a question for us all. Really very existential. Yeah,

Calvin:

Well, because we're living in like, you know, hell world where like nothing, nothing ever changes but it's also constantly changing.

Alex:
Yeah, yeah, Old Town road is the only constant that we have in our life right now. It's the only thing the only stability any of us have. Sorry, that was too real.

Calvin:
No, no, I think I think that's actually a great note to leave to leave it on. Martha Any final thoughts?

Martha:
It was fun to be here had a blast talking about-- I love Lil Nax X and I could talk about him forever.

Calvin:
Right. Well, we'll have to have you back whenever is next number one hit comes out the next remix. Remix. Another one of these for every remix. Yeah. Oh man until the end of time. So would you like to plug your Twitter or anything right?

Martha:
Yes, Twitter at underscore Martha Sue.

Calvin:
Great. Well, thank you so much for being with us. Enjoy the next remix of Old Town Road.

Martha:
I hope we all do.

Alex (Credits):
Our show today was produced and edited by Alex Helberg and Calvin Pollak. re:verb's co-producers at large are Caitlin Rossi, Colleen Storm Sophie Wodzak, and Ryan Mitchell. Our Graphic Design Manager is Kari Van Nortwick, and our social media manager is Lizzie Donaldson. You can subscribe to re:verb and leave us a review on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Android or wherever you listen to podcasts. Check out our website at WWW dot reverbcast dot com. You can also like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter where our handle is at reverb cast. That's R E V E R B, underscore C A S T. Thanks for tuning in!