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10-1-2006

Review [of *Writing Across Borders*]

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Published version. *Composition Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2006): 144-147. [Publisher Link](#). © 2006  
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***Writing Across Borders***, directed by Wayne Robertson. Oregon State University Center for Writing and Learning and Writing Intensive Curriculum Program, 2005. <http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/wab>

Reviewed by Beth Godbee and Kate Vieira, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The film *Writing Across Borders* comes at an opportune time. The current debates about U.S. language policy, along with the increasing linguistic diversity of our classrooms, call for increased attention to second (or third!) language writing. Both in our writing center and graduate colloquium series at UW-Madison, we have used this film to reflect on our conferencing with multilingual writers and to rethink our responsibilities to students in an age of increased globalization. The film and accompanying website, written and directed by Wayne Robertson and produced by the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum and Center for Writing and Learning, draw from interviews with international students and ESL faculty conducted over a three-year period. Robertson articulates the goal as to “address some of the most significant challenges international students face when writing for American colleges and universities.” In addressing these challenges, the film and website do the important work of raising consciousness about second-language writing and writers. The film’s straightforward presentation, inclusion of student voices, practical suggestions, and multimodal format make it accessible to a wide audience. The website complements the film with discussion questions and potential answers, film clips, and a full transcript, which could be used for tutor training, faculty development, or discussions “across borders.” In our colloquium meeting, for instance, those who work in the ESL program joined those of us in composition and rhetoric to share experiences and questions. Because of the interactive and visual format, and the film’s short running time at thirty minutes, *Writing Across Borders* lends itself to such engagement—from professional development to interdepartmental discussions.

In the introduction, Robertson reports that there are now over 600,000 international students (1 in 20) on college and university campuses. Many experience frustration not only from writing in a non-native language but also from different cultural and educational expectations. Despite the certainty that instructors will work with international students, Robertson worries, “very little is done to prepare teachers.” He asks how culture shapes our rhetorical expectations,

how we might develop fair assessment practices, and how we can better support international student writers.

Following the rationale and questions from the introduction, Robertson provides a visual literature review in part 1, “Examining Cultural Differences in Writing.” The camera spans journal articles and book covers, tracing contrastive rhetoric to Robert Kaplan and the rhetorical tradition to Plato, Aristotle, Francis Bacon, and more recently, Edward Said. Then Robertson turns to findings based on his interviews with international students who describe their own rhetorical traditions. For example, a Japanese student discusses the four-part essay format she learned in school; a Columbian student says that he finds the directness of American writing to be rude and instead suggests that writers need time to establish relationships with their readers; and a Chinese student relates her surprise at American academic citation practices, because in China, writers may build on what others say, as most things are shared. These interviews address a range of rhetorical differences: both at the sentence-level and with more global issues of content, argument, and the roles of readers and writers.

In part 2, “Assessing International Students’ Writing,” Robertson shifts from interviews with students to interviews with ESL specialists to address how teachers might better support student writers. In what might be the single most helpful take-away point of the film, Tony Silva proposes that just as international students might speak with an accent, so might their writing be accented. Instructors, therefore, should become less distracted by inconsequential errors such as missing articles or mistaken prepositions. Similarly, Deborah Healy reminds us that treating all students the same is not the same as treating everyone fairly. When teachers mark down for errors or cover student texts with corrections, then students become frustrated, discouraged, and may stop taking risks. These reminders cannot be overstated and are especially useful for the general audience Robertson has in mind.

The final section, part 3, “Developing Strategies that Work for International Students,” draws on interviews with both students and instructors to suggest a range of strategies for working with international students. These approaches include giving more time for in-class writing, allowing take-home exams, and asking fewer questions that require immediate feedback. Instructors can meet with students in one-on-one conferences to ask what comments students find most helpful and to tailor responses accordingly. Further, instructors should think through the cultural assumptions embedded in their assignments, such as knowledge of Jay Leno or comfort with critiquing the government. Where the film ends, the website continues with additional discussion questions and extended examples from Robertson’s interviews that together serve as a guide for using the film in professional development.

Despite the complementary formats of the film and website, some viewers might wish that the *Writing Across Borders* project had made even better use of the interactive potential of these media. For example, the film’s organization

follows a traditional article format with the familiar sections of rationale, research questions, literature review, findings, and recommendations embedded in its three parts. While this structure often works well in print articles, it does not necessarily match digital production, where viewers expect to be engaged in a story with motion and dialogue more than a montage of still photographs with voice-over narration. To this end, future films might consider including classroom or tutorial scenes. Likewise, the current website provides content that would appear in a print discussion guide, but we would have liked more dynamic web elements such as blogs, chat rooms, video feeds, sample student writing, links to other sites, or scenarios for role-playing. We imagine that a more interactive film and a more dynamic website would have extended our use of and learning from the overall project.

Our use of *Writing Across Borders* might also have benefited from more complicated—and more political—discussions of the roles of teachers, students, and writing in the globalized composition classroom. For example, the valuable suggestions offered in the film seem tailored to monolingual American English instructors, so teachers and tutors who themselves speak English as a second language might not see themselves represented. Similarly, those of us who see American academic writing as a site of contested discourse might find that the film essentializes it in a way that does not reflect our own pedagogies or the debates in our field. In other words, in its welcome exploration of cultural and rhetorical differences, *Writing Across Borders* paints a simplified picture of the ways “We” write and the ways “They” write—a distinction we would like to have seen problematized.

In fact, scholars have long called for complicating categories of bilingualism (e.g., Valdes) and static notions of contrastive rhetoric (e.g., Matsuda), as well as for taking a global, political, and historical view of language teaching (Canagarajah) and linguistic diversity (Smitherman)—developments that Robertson’s film only fleetingly, if at all, acknowledges, perhaps because its visual literature review focuses predominantly on the Western, male tradition. The biggest drawback, in our view, of omitting these perspectives is that many writers get left out of the analysis. In particular, the film does not address the needs of our students who are not “international,” but for whom “standard” English is not a first language. While Robertson limits the project’s scope to international students, the assumed dichotomy between native and foreign fails to recognize the ways—gendered, raced, classed—many of us are included and excluded from full national citizenship. As one participant in our discussion pointed out, the film does not call into question the implied “norm” of the native English speaker. Might there be a way, she wondered, to sensitize “mainstream” students to the “accents” and rhetorical traditions of others? How might we not only accept “accented” writing, but work to de-center the dominant mode? Is there anyone, after all, for whom any kind of academic writing comes naturally? We would suggest raising such questions in a presentation of the film to put it in a more critical context.

That said, *Writing Across Borders* very successfully meets the call for what researchers of writing seem to argue for across the board: attention to second-language writing not just as the purview of specialists, but as a necessity for all teachers. The film thus broadens Bruce and Rafoth's (2004) important work on helping ESL writers in the context of a writing center. It speaks not only to tutors, but to teachers across the disciplines. In fact, many colloquium participants openly wondered if the film could be required "reading" for all faculty and instructors. The film may be purchased for \$12.50 through the website.

Madison, WI

*The Eloquence of Mary Astell*, by Christine Mason Sutherland. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005. 202 pp.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Tasker, Georgia State University

The writings of Mary Astell present a unique but, until recently, largely forgotten intellectual female voice of late-seventeenth-century England—a voice significant to the European Enlightenment not only for its female perspective but for connecting seventeenth-century French rhetorical theory with the emerging philosophical and rhetorical developments of eighteenth-century Britain. In *The Eloquence of Mary Astell*, Christina Mason Sutherland resuscitates Astell's contributions to rhetoric and shows how Astell's writings both extend and challenge the ideas of Descartes, Locke, and many other male philosophers and thinkers of her period and earlier. Sutherland's book offers a thorough analysis of the rhetorical situation represented in each of Astell's published works, which include *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part I* (1694), *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (1695), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part II* (1697), *The Christian Religion* (1705), *Some Reflections on Marriage* (1706), and four political pamphlets (three published in 1704 and one in 1709).

Sutherland's study combines historical, rhetorical and literary feminist recovery scholarship to integrate Astell's work into the context of mainstream (masculine) western rhetoric and philosophy in the late seventeenth century. Foregrounding Astell's distinct female Christian Neo-Platonist position within the cultural and intellectual climate of her period, Sutherland presents Astell's ideas in relationship to Cartesian and Lockean empiricism, Platonism, Protestantism, Augustinian Christianity, and early eighteenth-century British politics. With numerous close readings of primary passages and detailed discussions on fine points of philosophy, *The Eloquence of Mary Astell* will be best appreciated by readers who have a deep interest in historical rhetoric and some knowledge of Enlightenment philosophy, or by readers who have the desire to learn about these things.