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In Practice

Tom F. Wright's *Transatlantic Rhetoric* as an American Studies Teaching Resource

I first read Tom F. Wright's *Transatlantic Rhetoric: Speeches from the American Revolution to the Suffragettes* in late summer 2020,[1] while drafting the syllabus for a new undergraduate rhetoric course in my university's Writing major. I proposed "Writing across Cultural Differences" several years ago and had been waiting eagerly to teach it, only to find myself delivering the inaugural version over Zoom during the coronavirus pandemic. As I write this essay in December 2020, I am in the midst of syllabus-building email exchanges with a now-frequent teaching partner (Victorian literature specialist Linda Hughes), as we prepare to offer a graduate seminar in nineteenth-century transatlantic literature for the fourth time. (Our first foray into collaborative transatlanticism was in 2010.) While we plan for the upcoming class (also – sigh – being taught over Zoom), I am rereading Wright's book, this time focussed more on the "transatlantic" side of his title. A generative resource for my teaching in both these classes, *Transatlantic Rhetoric* enacts a global brand of American studies, modeling content and methodologies crucial to the field today. To illustrate, I will revisit some ways in which Wright's anthology is informing my pedagogy in this challenging COVID-shaped year.

INFORMING A CULTURAL RHETORICS COURSE

Although cultural rhetoric has been striving to define itself as a distinct field,[2] for me its work fits easily under a broad American studies umbrella. So I

[1] Tom Wright, *Transatlantic Rhetoric: Speeches from the American Revolution to the Suffragettes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). References are given parenthetically in the text.

[2] Phil Bratta and Malea Powell, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Entering the Cultural Rhetorics Conversations," *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* (2016),

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approached my construction of "Writing across Cultural Differences" in those terms. I envisioned four distinct projects for students to *do*, sequenced to move their engagement with rhetoric as an enterprise of cultural intervention from a personal to an expansive social context by immersing them in American studies-oriented inquiry strategies. Project One asked them to narrate a personal experience when they had encountered and somehow navigated cultural differences. Project Two charged students with creating a stand-alone visual narrative of five images presenting a social-justice-related argument, and then to explicate their composing process. For Project Three, students made an analysis of a social site's rhetorical design, especially as related to issues of power, inclusion, and exclusion. Project Four was a collaborative presentation analyzing a performance text portraying cultural differences in action. For their final "exam," students assembled a mini-portfolio with three elements: a creative, expressive piece linked to course themes, a short rhetorical analysis of a self-selected new reading, and a self-assessment. My reading of *Transatlantic Rhetoric* had a guiding impact on several of these projects and on a number of in-class learning activities designed to help students succeed with their writing. Let me share some examples.

One of the most compelling and illuminating features of Wright's book on first reading it in summer 2020 was its front-of-book collection of illustrations of speech occasions important to transatlantic history and culture. Skimming through images such as an engraving depicting an 1840s Exeter Hall anti-slavery meeting and a 1916 photo of Emma Goldman addressing a labor meeting, I could see how each illustration conveyed a visual argument about the rhetoric of that moment. And finding them clustered together in the anthology, I could also see a cumulative, multipronged thesis about the impact of re-presenting such oral occasions visually within print records. To picture oral performance, the assembled images demonstrated, underscores what Wright dubs "the richness of public language" (12) and the intertextual power of nineteenth-century print's documentation of oral rhetoric through image along with words. That is, Wright's collected images of public speech occasions underscored how textual records can foster community building and thereby enhance what Michel de Certeau has dubbed "the practice of everyday life."[3] With these realizations taking on special exigence as I prepared

at http://enculturation.net/entering-the-cultural-rhetorics-conversations; Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson, "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics," *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* (2014), at www.enculturation.net/our-story-begins-here.

[3] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

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to teach a whole course over Zoom rather than in person, I decided that, though my pre-pandemic plan of having a major assignment entail students' creating a collaborative in-person performance had to be scuttled, I could replace it with their designing a visual-rhetoric composition and, later in the term, analyzing a prerecorded performance in terms consistent with Wright's model of rhetoric as social force.

To scaffold this work, I planned in-class activities to heighten my students' abilities for "reading" visual images' performative elements. My own close reading of the illustrations in Wright's text helped me identify particular approaches to visual-rhetoric analysis my students could carry out on a set of graphic narratives (the novels *Illegal* and *They Called Us Enemy*, alongside the John Lewis memoir *March*) prior to creating their own argument through images. In addition, by setting a number of Wright's chosen illustrations in dialogue with actual speeches in his anthology and using those connections to try to "re-experience" the original occasions for the speeches, I was guided into my selection of a few video performance texts where oral rhetoric's original power in its original moment of delivery to a particular audience could be indirectly accessed through the video record by later audiences. Specifically, for instance, I used my thinking through of these intertextual connections in Wright's text to plan discussion questions for class sessions where we analyzed Gabrielle Giffords's pro-gun-control speech to a US Congressional committee and Mary Fisher's 1992 "Whisper of Aids" speech to a US Republican Party convention. With those interpretive exercises as a bridge between the assignment to "write an image argument" and the collaborative performance analysis, I was able to reconfigure my earlier course plan from "perform together in person" to learning exercises and projects that my students could still carry out in pandemic mode, over Zoom. Indeed, considering Wright's invitation to his anthology readers to immerse themselves in activist rhetorical spaces of the past as a way of also locating themselves within social power relations today (12–13), we made the Zoom "speech space" itself one of our ongoing objects of analysis throughout the course. And students' end-of-course assessments showed that they had successfully woven together those conceptual connections at a level beyond simply doing the assigned tasks.

GUIDING A TRANSATLANTIC SEMINAR'S SYLLABUS

Besides influencing my recent teaching of a rhetoric course, Wright's book is now informing preparations for a class on nineteenth-century transatlanticism that I will be teaching in spring 2020. For instance, Wright's introduction points to his text's "juxtapositions" as a pedagogical strategy "offer[ing] a way of tracing the evolution of public language, expressive vocabularies" and "literary, sacred, political, progressive and conservative styles of

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thought" interacting through performative cultural practices (2). Building on that point, Linda Hughes and I will launch our course this spring with two weeks of textual juxtapositions illustrating such transatlantic interactivity. In Week One, students will read both Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and the anonymous 1808 novel *The Woman of Colour*. Though both texts have made prior separate appearances in our class, connecting them this year will open up new comparative possibilities both thematic and linguistic, while revealing transatlantic currents as multidirectional and geographically extending beyond a US–UK pattern of exchange. Week Two's pairing of Charles Dickens and Frederick Douglass will echo Wright's call to acknowledge the centrality of transatlantic oratory and its complementary relationship with print; both Dickens and Douglass, our students will learn, used lecture performances across the Atlantic from their respective home nations to bolster their careers and gain access to social influence.

Midway through the course, Linda Hughes and I have always had our students do a deep dive into current theories and methodologies in transatlantic studies, first spending one week reading recent scholarship on directions in the field, then following those discussions with a writing assignment wherein students apply one scholar's concepts to analysis of a specific primary text. (We prepare students for his project by integrating secondary scholarship into our earlier weeks' assignments, generally through essays devoted to a week's primary text readings.) This year, one of the "theory/methodologies" readings will be Wright's introduction to *Transatlantic Rhetoric*. We anticipate students will be able to draw connections between earlier syllabus readings and several tenets of his anthology overview. These include nineteenth-century transatlantic culture's complementary interactivity between orality and print, versus faulty assumptions about print surpassing oral performance in this period (5), the impact of New Historicist and New Media Studies approaches on views of performance's centrality in daily life (8), and recognition of how oral performances linked to major social issues could play a role in shifting power relations and foster transatlantic networking (10). Additionally, we expect that our students will productively extend Wright's advice to read his anthology's individual entries "as both *speeches* and *texts*"; to take an "imaginative leap, re-entering the rhetorical situation in all its vivid performative dimensions"; and to see how, in revisiting those occasions through the mediation of print, "the journey of publication" must be taken into account (12, emphasis in original). This emphasis in Wright's method will certainly aid their interpretations of the oral performance pieces on our syllabus, but it will also aid their ability to critique other forms of textual mediation, such as Susanna Strickland and Thomas Pringle's management of Mary Prince's narrative, or the filtered rhetoric of a book review assessing an

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immigrant's experiences as reported in a memoir like Mary Antin's. In addition, we think these points can inform students' selection of a primary text to add to our anthology's companion website and their preparation of interpretive headnotes.[4]

SHAPING CANONS AND CONTEXTS

My engagement with *Transatlantic Rhetoric* has also involved a different domain of teaching than the single course or classroom. I am in the final stages of coediting *Transatlantic Anglophone Literature, 1776–1920* with Linda Hughes and Andrew Taylor (of Edinburgh University) and two associate editors, Heidi Hakimi-Hood and Adam Nemmers. Because Wright is one of the members of our advisory board, his research had direct impact on our text selection for that collection. Students and faculty who use our anthology will find there a number of speeches, several recommended by Wright. Thus his anthology's focus on oral rhetoric has left its mark on ours, hopefully contributing together to an expanded canon of transatlantic studies beyond more familiar genres in literary study.

At a conceptual level, Hughes, Taylor and I chose the themes for our own ten sections well before Wright's book appeared. But in reading his text, I see several complementary relationships between his six thematic clusters and ours that could encourage cross-anthology connections in syllabi in the future. Our "Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism," for instance, is similar to his "Nationalism and Independence." His "Slavery and Race" connects productively with our "Abolition and Aftermath." His "Faith, Culture, and Society" resonates with both our "Religion and Secularism" and our "Arts, Aesthetics, and Entertainment." Thus, although future readers of *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures* (which draws from a broader range of genres) will not find many duplications in individual speeches, teachers utilizing both collections will see complementary voices representing American studies' commitment to diversity and inclusivity (Frances Harper and Emmeline Pankhurst appearing along with familiar figures like William Wilberforce and Theodore Roosevelt, for instance). Also, both anthologies foreground Indigenous leaders' interventions in transatlantic politics and thereby affirm American studies' increasing insistence on confronting settler colonialism and honoring the persistence of Native and First Nations authorship in our pedagogy. Overall, too, since both anthologies organize their presentation of primary materials through a combination of thematic clusters and chronology,

[4] See examples continually being added at https://teachingtransatlanticism.tcu.edu/sample-page/books/digital-anthology.

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they together demonstrate benefits of blending historical context with exploration of recurring social issues across time and space. In geographic terms, both texts push for a transatlantic American studies with a more transnational reach than in earlier stages too often framed on a US-to-UK axis. For instance, both anthologies show that empire building in the long nineteenth century necessitates extending the field's purview to include the southern as well as the northern hemisphere, and to take hybrid regions like the Caribbean into account.

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