Contrastive rhetoric, like everything else in the United States, has lost its innocence. Once a benign method of teaching ESL students how to write effective academic English, its first proponents assumed a world of nation states, each country a home to its own unique coherence of culture, language, and rhetoric that was learned and practiced by all of its citizens. When many of those citizens came from around the world to study in U.S. institutions of higher learning, we discovered that they had brought their rhetoric along in their suitcases. So their teachers taught them to wear different clothes, to rely on different authorities, to arrange their ideas in a different way—our way. But we have recently borne witness to the resentment that follows from our easy assumption that doing it our way is the right way. Perhaps first understanding and then negotiating and collaborating with writers from other rhetorical worlds might be more effective than imposing our standards as absolutes. And perhaps we all, in one way or another, come from different rhetorical hometowns, bringing in our suitcases our own individual versions of literacy so different from the discourses we struggle to gain hearings in.

The essays in this collection are ordered—either by design or by default—so that they embody the discipline’s history, from text-based teaching methods aimed at turning foreigners into successful students in
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the United States to critiques of “contrastive rhetorical theory” that ask who gets to choose what clothes a writer wears and why. The editor of the volume, Clayann Panetta, says that her “aim is to breathe new life into contrastive rhetoric for rhetoric and composition instructors,” because “Unfortunately, contrastive rhetoric appears to be yet another composition theory that has not made its way into mainstream teaching.” Her own contribution, “Understanding Cultural Differences in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom: Contrastive Rhetoric as Answer to ESL Dilemmas,” however, is very slight, and after revisiting the old reductive tradition of contrastive rhetoric that equates rhetoric with organization, she argues that “making writing conventions explicit” is good for both native and nonnative writers who learn that “their native rhetoric is not wrong, just ineffective for American readers.” Thus, the final answer to the ESL dilemma seems to be to do it our way.

Anne Bliss’ “Rhetorical Structures for Multilingual and Multicultural Students” continues in the rhetoric-equals-arrangement mode, as she explains what she calls the chronological, psychological, and rhetorical ordering required of academic prose in English. She cheerfully concludes that “with careful instruction and plenty of practice, students can learn to understand and purposefully make the transition from the logic and rhetorical structures of their home languages and cultures to those of academic English and culture, and back again.” If this seems too simple, it probably is. Such a confident belief that someone from Beijing can write like a Chinese today and then with just a few doses of contrastive rhetoric redesign his brain and write like an American tomorrow is surely part of our old innocence.

The contributors to the early chapters of this volume would do well to reread Helen Fox’s important work, Listening to the World (NCTE, 1994) and to recall her complex and sensitive conclusion: “Are we ready to imagine knowledge differently? Are we willing to spend time learning the details of vastly different cultural contexts? Are we persistent enough to listen to the gaps and silences until we hear, in the distance, the voices of thousand-year-old intellectual traditions? . . . If we believe we are ready for such a profound rethinking of the goals and purposes of the university, if we are ready to listen to the world, ‘higher education’ will never be the same” (136). And as teachers we will no longer rest easily as all-knowing task masters for rhetorical conversions, knowing we are responsible for the learning we perpetuate.

In her thoughtful essay, “Contrastive Rhetoric and Resistance to Writing,” Jan Corbett explains that the switch from one way of writing to
another is not simple and never easy, that rhetoric is not (just) about forms. Critical of the prescriptive pedagogy of earlier practices, she explores her perception that contrastive rhetorics are “sometimes competing rhetorics” that can cause resistance, repressed conflicts, suppressed conflicts, and sometimes overt conflicts. She has experienced them all, and her discussion of classroom dynamics is indeed insightful. She concludes that the right response to competing rhetorics is to adapt and teach a “mestizo discourse” that allows contradictions and ambivalence and to turn students themselves into discourse analysts and contrastive rhetoricians. Following Fox’s lead, Corbett realizes that contrastive—and competing—rhetorics may well occur within the same language and culture, between race and class, home and school. This of course must be where contrastive rhetoric takes us if it is to be viable—not back to diagrams of paragraphs and to stereotypes of national character, but toward a pedagogy that teaches students to mediate among competing rhetorics and conflicting ideologies.

The centerpiece of the collection and the beginning of the “redefining” promised by its title is Kristin Woolever’s fine article that challenges us to rethink the entire contrastive rhetorical enterprise. Her “Doing Global Business in the Information Age” assumes the inevitability of the global information age, an assumption that may well give us pause in the days ahead. Woolever outlines three strategies in international communication: globalization, “a power play where a dominant culture imposes its mores and expectations on the less powerful cultures”; localization, which entails “researching the culture of a target market and designing products and communication strategies to appeal directly to that audience”; and collaboration, whereby teams of multicultural and multilingual members work together “to contribute to the design and bring the best of each culture to the project from the start.” She offers a powerful critique of the superficial and stereotypic additions to current business and technical writing texts in the name of contrastive rhetoric, and she concludes with a “Call for Pedagogical Reform.” We must, she argues, stop privileging the teaching of form and begin teaching strategies: “We should focus on technical communication as a method of inquiry and as a means of negotiating among many possibilities rather than as a course in learning standard forms and a specific skill set.” Her careful analysis of the many sites where misunderstandings occur should be required reading for ESL and business and technical writing teachers—and for every member of the State Department.
That the differences between rhetorics might be negotiable or even desirable is the theme informing the essays in the remainder of the collection. Thus, Ulla Connor offers “Contrastive Rhetoric Redefined,” in which she considers postmodern definitions of culture, literacy, and critical pedagogy. She concludes, in effect, that perhaps it is time to think more about the rhetoric and less about the contrastive, and that it is time to recognize the “fluidity of culture” and even to accept “minority Englishes.” We also hear from Dené Scoggins and learn the story of her world literature courses in which ESL students and native English speakers use hypertext to become rhetorical bricoleurs (a perfectly good French word that she credits to Derrida). In “Contrastive Rhetoric and the Possibility of Feminism,” Laura Micciche pushes contrastive rhetoric up the abstraction ladder by renaming it contrastive rhetoric theory (CRT) and expanding it via feminism to become “a sociocultural rhetoric of difference.” By attending to “teaching as a politics of representation” that requires studying the teacher’s as well as the student’s identity, by seeing “pedagogical scholarship as a form of cultural work,” and by asking what values and truths are being asserted, we can examine the extent to which CRT reinforces rather than questions differences. That may be a lot for a Monday morning, but Micciche’s insistence on reemphasizing the rhetoric in CRT is in tune with the general redefinition, and her attention to feminist theory at last introduces gender into contrastive rhetoric.

Two other rhetorical towns are mapped—right here in our own country—by Juanita Comfort in “African-American Women’s Rhetorics and the Culture of Eurocentric Scholarly Discourse” and by Mark McBeth in “The Queen’s English: A Queery into Contrastive Rhetoric.” Comfort studied a group of African American women, coming back to school for graduate degrees, who discovered the conflict between the rhetoric of their lives and the rhetoric of academic discourse. They found out, like the rest of us, that discipline is a verb, enforcing an elaborate and tacit set of rules about what we can write and how. At the end of her article, Comfort concedes that “the competing cultural discourses that challenged my study participants must be negotiated by graduate-student writers everywhere,” but perhaps she should also consider some of the benefits of disciplinary communities. Entering into one does mean learning another discourse mode—that’s called education—and there are some compelling reasons for joining, among them communally established meanings, discoveries and data to learn from and build upon, and a select group of readers dedicated to understanding what we have to say.
The other new neighborhood we are introduced to is New York City’s gay community. McBeth outlines the characteristics of what he calls gaylect, “a viable rhetorical universe” that “relies on shared lexical, paralinguistic, intonational, and other linguistic usages that differ from dominant speech patterns” and that enables gay males to establish self-identity and offer resistance to “heteronormative situations.” McBeth offers a variety of lively textual examples and asks us to pay attention to gay and lesbian language, “not as a means to identify and ridicule their lispy sibilance or husky butchness but as a way to figure out how one community makes meaning in the world.” Learning about the language of “Gays and Lesbians, people of other races, creeds, and classes, second-language students, underprepared students—all the people whose habits, linguistic and otherwise, perplex us,” he concludes, can lead us beyond myths and stereotypes to new sources of resolution.

Thus, in these pages we take an important journey from being teachers in the ESL classroom, enforcing patterns of arrangement, to remaking ourselves as learners attuned to hearing the voices of the world. If these scholars succeed in making rhetoric the more important term in contrastive rhetoric—rhetoric in all the richness of its theory and practice—then perhaps it is time as well to change contrastive to comparative and to move beyond our emphasis on differences to a more balanced approach that allows for the possibility of similarities. Students of comparative literature, after all, study a variety of literatures, never suggesting that all should be contrasted with one. After understanding the many sources for our differences, we might also learn what we carry in common in our rhetorical suitcases.

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Reviewed by Lynda Walsh, University of Texas at Austin

_Electric Rhetoric_ appeared in 1999 amidst active debate in the academy over the function and value of electronic screens in the writing classroom; the controversy has only intensified since as our initial enthusiasm over the computer’s ability to deliver interactivity, equality, independence,