

Documents of Dissent: Hairston's "Breaking Our Bonds" in Context

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About halfway through "Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections," her 1985 CCCC Chair's Address, Maxine Hairston faces a Rubicon moment. Describing the imbalanced relationship in college English departments between teachers of writing and a ruling class of literary scholars and critics she has compared, just a few paragraphs earlier, to the bureaucrats of Imperial China, Maxine coolly observes: "In addressing the mandarins, we are not in a rhetorical situation." She then reminds her audience of the conditions Lloyd Bitzer had set down for one: "there has to be an *exigence* that can be modified by discourse, and there has to be an *audience* of persons who are capable of being influenced by that discourse."

Maxine was always attuned to the circumstances of writing teachers across the country, specifically acknowledging in her speech the work of

instructors she had met “in places like Parsons, Kansas, or McAllen, Texas, or Montgomery County, Maryland” (273) But there can be little doubt, either, that when she finally calls upon her professional colleagues in rhetoric and composition to consider separating from departments of English, she is drawing upon experiences with her home department at the University of Texas at Austin: “Fighting the literature faculty often makes you feel like you have invaded China. You can mount an all-out assault and think you are making an impression, but when the smoke clears, nothing has changed. The mandarins are untouched” (273).

More than thirty years later, memories of the exigence that created “Breaking Our Bonds” grow fainter in Austin, but they are preserved in voluminous documents produced in and around the Department of English between 1979 and 1986. In the space available here, I can’t usefully recount the whole struggle to which Maxine alludes, but the very shape and genres of the texts produced in those years clarify the contexts of Hairston’s address and the caliber of its achievement.

An abstract of the period might focus on James Kinneavy’s ambitious but ultimately doomed effort to restructure the composition courses at the University of Texas—but a headline from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published just a month after Maxine’s address is more succinct: “50 Lecturers Lose Their Jobs in a Dispute over How—and If—Writing Can be Taught.” Kinneavy had proposed a curriculum reform to guarantee students at UT Austin training in writing throughout their undergraduate careers. At its core was a formidable upper-division course, English 346K: Writing Across the Disciplines, that would replace a required second-semester lower-division writing class. On May 28, 1981, after several years of deliberation, the university officially approved the new program.

But as this new initiative ground toward implementation, senior literature faculty in English pondered its implications. Innovative writing courses, most far removed from the literary canon, would have to be created, supervised, evaluated, and—most worrying of all—staffed. Because graduate students could not teach these upper-division offerings, many more adjuncts would be needed at a time when university rules gave instructors with full-time appointments voting rights in a department. Teaching mostly composition courses, these adjuncts would, it was feared, inevitably align with the rhetoric program, and the English department’s center of gravity might shift.

The navel of the state had been touched.

The ensuing clash over curriculum, governance, and the status of “temporary” faculty would lead to the cancellation of the WAC initiative. Indeed, when the smoke cleared, the rhetoric program was, once again, safely in the hands of faculty trained in literature, while those who sided with Kinneavy—Maxine included—found themselves consigned to internal exile.

Predictably, the earliest documents I reviewed for this piece (1979–81) are routine secretarial minutes reporting discussions from departmental or University Senate meetings as collegial as one would hope from academic bodies engaged in rethinking a university curriculum. After all, discourse theorist James Kinneavy enjoyed wide respect among his literary colleagues—especially since his proposal promised cuts of 20–25 percent in the total number of writing classes to be offered. And in many ways, the years leading up to Maxine’s speech were heady times for rhetoric faculty at Texas. The English department had unanimously endorsed a graduate concentration in rhetoric and, in quick sequence, hired Lester Faigley, Steve Witte, and Greg Myers. English faculty even created a Departmental Senate in 1981 specifically to lend voice in governance to graduate students and adjuncts not previously represented at faculty meetings or on the Executive Committee.

Yet there were early doubts about the Kinneavy reforms. For instance, Charles Rossman, a professor of British literature, framed his dissent in a two-page, single-spaced psychomachia distributed to a course committee working on the new program. In the piece (c. 1980), God—presciently threatening to build a “Department of Rhetoric and Composition”—spars with a far more likeable Satan, a champion of literary study who echoes *Gorgias* in declaring “[Y]ou have converted a concern with the forms and strategies of writing into a subject matter.”

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Rolling out in pilot sections in 1981–83, the E 346K courses soon were putting pressure on institutional resources. Documents from those years grow more impromptu and harried, as administrators wrestle with prerequisites, test scores, exemptions, credit transfers, all of which point to one conclusion: the full writing reform will be *far* more massive than anyone had envisioned. On October 9, 1982, the famously irascible linguist James Sledd weighs in on the matter, siding with neither the literature faculty nor writing program administrators. Directing four pages of questions to the president of the university, Sledd describes the new English program and revised admissions requirements as “gross mistakes” designed “to make U.T. Austin still more nearly a preserve for affluent and exploitative Anglos.” By December 7, his complaint to the University Council has grown to nineteen pages (single-spaced), arguing that the underlying goal of English faculty is to eliminate freshman composition entirely. A floodgate opens. Over the next several years, the minutes of both the Department of English and the University Council (later rechristened as the Faculty Senate) record appreciably more heated debates about every dimension of the new writing program—and the motives of those favoring or opposing it.

Before long, minutes and conventional departmental meetings aren’t enough. Professors, lecturers, and graduate students—now acting individually or in groups—compose statements and schemes of their own. Faculty mailboxes become a preferred venue for debate, a sort of paper intranet, stripped of the courtesies of face-to-face encounters. Any matter relating to the writing program (almost the department’s only concern) is parsed and analyzed. When the employment status of the adjunct lecturers becomes a focal point in 1983–84—chiefly due to a move to deny them voting rights by reducing them to three-quarter time—a paper war ensues, paralleling acrimonious meetings of the regular faculty as a whole and the separate Departmental Senate. A five-person committee of that senate prepares a document on the status of lecturers; several lecturers offer alternative proposals of their own, one with “have patience” in its title; Kinneavy distributes two detailed items, one of them captioned “Lecturers: Victims of Both Systems.”

Metadiscourse about department meetings proliferates: for instance, a faculty member distributes a lengthy ditto to annotate the details of a motion he’s already offered verbally; a graduate student in the Departmental Senate, rather than speak at a meeting certain to “be dominated by emo-

tional speaking and lobbying,” circulates a printed rationale for his views. Civilities are disappearing, and the department knows it. The minutes from a departmental meeting of April 19, 1984, include this telling passage:

Hairston commented that a change of culture had taken place in the department over the years with a rise of new classes (an elite professoriate and slave laborers). She asserted that the current situation at UT and other schools across the nation constitutes a threat to the profession as a whole, that it weakens the professoriate, that it is sexist, and that it harms both undergraduate and graduate students in the Department.

A colleague calls her remarks “undocumented” and “counterproductive.”

After long months of escalating and embarrassing wrangling, the dean of Liberal Arts, Robert D. King, reacts to the turmoil in the English department by placing it in receivership. On September 14, 1984, he writes to its new chair, W. O. S. Sutherland, that “in accordance with common University policy, departmental authority is vested solely in the Chairman and the Executive Committee.” Three days later, members of the rhetoric interest group compose a narrowly circulated document summarizing what the English department and Sutherland in particular are doing to diminish the teaching of writing. While the purpose of the informal memo is not specified, its final lines raise two possibilities:

Establishing a Center for Writing Within the Department?
Splitting off into a Department of Language and Rhetoric?

Other materials from the period suggest that Dean King *was*, in fact, exploring the logistics of creating a separate unit for writing in fall 1984. Maxine and I discuss that option regularly, but James Kinneavy expresses no enthusiasm for it.

Early in 1985, a group appointed by Sutherland to move the department out of receivership offers a governance blueprint that, by its own admission, enhances the authority of the chair and tenured faculty and eliminates the troublesome Faculty Senate. James Sledd describes the “scheme” as “organized indecency.” Then, on February 15, 1985, Sutherland announces to the department what is already being reported in the student newspaper: that the E 346K course requirement has been suspended—pending a departmental review. In his memo, Sutherland acknowledges that “the dean has recommended a Division of Composition,” but Sutherland

dismisses the option: “it seems irresponsible in the next difficult budget year to establish a new and costly administrative entity.” However, with E 346K cancelled for fall 1985 (never to return), that budget will be lighter by the salary of fifty-three lecturers to be axed after the spring term. So the WAC course is peremptorily gone, all but a handful of lecturers will soon depart, and, a committee made up of (with one exception) professors of literature will restructure the entire composition program. As Maxine will observe in Minneapolis just a few weeks later, “for the literary establishment, the issue is power.” Mandarins untouched, indeed.

The gloves come off in early March at the next meeting of the Faculty Senate, with Kinneavy submitting for the record a document entitled “The Decomposition of English,” describing the writing program as being “systematically dismantled”; Professor Sutherland acknowledges at the meeting that, between factions in the English department, “there is very little kind of conversation back and forth.” Predictably, the controversy explodes into the public arena, with significant coverage in the student paper the *Daily Texan*, the *Austin American-Statesman*, and eventually the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Combat by letters-to-the-editor intensifies, especially after E 346K proponents James Kinneavy and lecturer James Skaggs publish guest columns in the *Daily Texan* on February 20, 1985. Literary scholars respond immediately, one objecting that “rhetoricians . . . from the days of Socrates on down have never been much concerned with the truth.” When another faculty member’s reply to Kinneavy and Skaggs is not published, he shares his dittoed opinions directly with colleagues via the faculty mailboxes. The date is March 4, and the author is, once again, Charles Rossman, the professor who, four years earlier, had imagined God and Satan squabbling over composition programs. His arguments against rhetoric are familiar, but there is a fascinating new detail: Rossman accuses Kinneavy and Skaggs of “depicting their opponents in the department as a cabal of self-serving mandarins who inexplicably stand in their way.” Neither Kinneavy nor Skaggs uses the term *mandarin* in his column. But the word is clearly in circulation. By this point, I’ve seen a draft of Maxine’s speech, and others may have as well.

This, then, is the atmosphere Maxine breathed as she prepared for her CCCC address, delivered on March 21, 1985. Discourse in Austin may have

been copious and fervent that spring term, but there hadn't been a rhetorical situation or persuadable audiences in the Department of English for many semesters. A closed fist of administrative fiat has displaced an open hand that, five years earlier, had welcomed a program designed, perhaps too ambitiously, to improve writing instruction. So with "Breaking Our Bonds," Maxine takes an idea always on the periphery of the debate and moves it toward the center, the option she calls "the best one"—separation. How could she not?

Texts produced throughout the lengthy the E 346K/lecturer controversy—only a very few of which I've discussed here—were usually sincere, often long-winded, and occasionally clever. But only "Breaking Our Bonds" transcends its time. As chair of the CCCC, Maxine seizes a rhetorical opportunity for which her experiences in Austin had prepared her well. With a national audience of colleagues willing to be persuaded, Hairston gives powerful expression to "a problem of ineluctable exigence and thereby defines the matter of separation for a full generation of writing teachers—and the independent writing programs *some* would build."

Works Cited

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