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Note: Maxine Hairston was honored as Rhetorician of the Year at the Young Rhetoricians Conference in summer of 1991. Throughout 1990-91, she had been deeply involved in a controversy over changing the required writing course at UT-Austin into a course in critical literacy, focusing on issues of race, class, and gender. Maxine regarded the proposed new syllabus as inappropriately engaged in identity politics. I introduced my colleague and co-author to the conference participants in Monterey, California, with the following (somewhat edited) remarks.

Maxine has asked me to be brief, so I will be--though she also knows that I often have a hard time not turning a five-page chapter into a fifty-page one. "Do we really need to say all that?" No, probably not, but on my topic today, I could go on at much greater length.

Four or five weeks ago at a televised discussion of multiculturalism in which Maxine was a participant, a young political activist wrapped in self-righteousness rose to suggest that Maxine was questioning the tenets of critical

literacy only because she was "buying into the power structure, which you must buy into in order to survive."

Maxine, who suffers fools pretty well, couldn't resist a smile.

What the youthful zealot did not realize, could not realize was that, for perhaps the first time in her life, she was looking at the real thing--a genuine political activist, an academic who had established her professional reputation precisely by *not* buying into the system. Maxine had made a career of taking non-traditional paths when they were still, at best, just traces through difficult and uncharted territory.

Maxine was a feminist before there were Women's Studies programs on campuses and women's groups and hiring mandates--when it cost you something in salary and collegial regard to suggest that women's voices ought to be heard more often. But what really troubled some men in her English department was that this particular woman was not only teaching freshman composition, but suggesting--in public places, no less--that composition itself was an honorable, necessary, and scholarly discipline. *This* at a time when teaching writing had about as much prestige in English departments as running a ditto machine--and was thought to require less training. Put the two together,

her early feminism and her academic defense of composition, and you can appreciate why Maxine can hardly be accused of buying into the system.

In fact, Maxine is one of the five or six people in the United States responsible for refashioning not only composition studies but the image of the people in the field. She repudiated the notion that teaching writing was the labor of drudges, declaring that other academics wouldn't respect us until we learned to respect ourselves.

In a series of important articles, she charted the dimensions of our new scholarly paradigm. She wrote influential textbooks to bring a new pedagogy into daily use. And in what may be her most powerful work, a speech delivered in Minneapolis to the Conference of College Composition and Communication, she declared our professional independence. The very title of this 4C's Chair's Address--certainly the most memorable of our time--conveys the daring and good sense that have characterized Maxine's life and work: "Breaking Our Bonds and Affirming Our Connections." That address--which, by the way, almost certainly cost her an endowed professorship at the University of Texas--sent more than a few mandarins the message that the faculty in the basement teaching half the

courses in a department and generating half the revenue didn't intend to remain silent forever.

Buying into the system? Hardly.

Maxine was not born into an academic family or, to use the current phrase, into privilege. Her route into the academy was not smooth either. She was a rural wife on a real Texas ranch, the kind where you sometimes had to bring the calves into the kitchen when the weather got too cold. She raised two children, then pursued her Ph.D, got it; began teaching in a department that assured her she wouldn't be tenured, got tenure; directed the UT writing programs, was told she didn't have a prayer to make full professor, became a full professor--always against the grain, always against everyone's notion of what was conventional, wise, prudent, or likely.

Such achievements sound stirring in the retelling, but they can be far from pleasant in the living. What I have learned from Maxine and a few--very few--like her is that true visionaries don't come with halos or ribbons that say "I'm right." They are just people willing to take a principled stand without pausing to check which way the wind is blowing. They often pay a price, but rarely surrender their integrity. They are people you can count on and trust.

I think what galled Maxine's critics in her English Department most was that, on those occasions when they journeyed into the hinterlands to read a paper at a conference or convention, inevitably someone would ask them about Maxine Hairston. They discovered, slowly and much to their chagrin, that *that* woman who taught composition had become the best-known person in a department of almost a hundred scholars.

Yet that's what happens when you awaken half the people in a profession to the importance of the work they do, when you encourage them to challenge a power structure that badly needs to be changed, when you in fact give them the confidence to assume power. I sincerely hope this Rhetorician of the Year Award will be regarded as a professional *thanks* to a person who has made us all better teachers, scholars, and citizens of the academy.