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## Iannone, Carol: Letters Opposing Nomination of (1991): Editorial 01

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Washington Post editorial 5/20/91

## *Dispute in the Humanities*

**C**AROL IANNONE is a faculty member at New York University who has made a reputation as a slash-and-burn critic less of literature than of certain aspects of modern literary scholarship and criticism. A particular target has been feminist criticism. She has written that what used to be a feminist insurgency in college English faculties has become an "ascendancy" with an essentially political or social agenda such that a fundamental gulf exists between "feminist critics and those who care about protecting the conditions necessary for creating and appreciating great literature."

In similar fashion she has recently complained that what she regards as inferior books have been given undeserved national awards for political reasons, including simply that their authors were black. She gave as one example Alice Walker's 1983 novel "The Color Purple," writing that "inasmuch as even positive critics took ample note of [its] many stylistic and aesthetic flaws," the honors bestowed upon it "seemed less a recognition of literary achievement than some official act of reparation."

Now Carol Iannone has been nominated by the Bush administration to a seat on the National Council on the Humanities. The nomination has turned out to be as much an act of provocation as her work. The Modern Language Association, the professional association of college teachers of English and other modern languages, and several other academic and literary groups have asked the Senate to vote it down. They say that their objections have to do not with the nominee's politics or views of their profession but with her record of scholarly achievement, which they call too thin. Much of her work has been journalistic (particularly in the magazine *Commentary*) rather than scholarly. "Dr. Iannone's record is not

without merit; it is simply without distinction," the MLA's executive director has said.

Other critics, however, have said her views are indeed an issue; at least one has branded her racist. Defenders say meanwhile that the MLA's position is elitist and a smoke screen for an effort to enforce the academy's current sense of political correctness while exacting political revenge. The fight over political correctness is serious. There is indeed (as all too often) an element of lock step and intolerance in the academic world. But this is a nomination that has been raised to a level of symbolic importance it does not deserve.

It's foolish to pretend that Miss Iannone's (political) views on the politicization of her profession aren't central to this dispute. It is mainly those views for which she is known and on the basis of which she was nominated. They may not be to everybody's liking and may on many points be wrong, but they are well within the zone of what is or ought to be permissible discourse; it greatly distorts the debate to call them or her racist (and her supporters—this is how far it has come—point in her defense to other occasions on which she has praised the works of black authors).

The humanities council is advisory only. Its 26 members (not all scholars) meet four times a year, mainly to pass on the more than 2,000 grants made annually by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The council rarely challenges the prior recommendations of outside review panels or the NEH staff, and in any case it is the NEH chairman who has the final say. Miss Iannone is altogether qualified to serve, and nothing she has written disqualifies her. The Senate is being asked to decide something more than her qualifications, and it should decline.