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Iannone, Carol: Letters Opposing Nomination of (1991): Memorandum 02

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AC

United States Senate

MEMORANDUM

✓
Senator:

4/18

This is a very significant new letter from the president of the Guggenheim Foundation concerning Carol Iannone. ←

It provides some real grist for the mill - which we have lacked up til now.

ADC

*Who is Joel Conarise?
Is he a black writer, too?*

JOHN SIMON GUGGENHEIM MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

90 PARK AVENUE, NEW YORK, NY 10016 (212) 687-4470

9 April, 1991

Lynne V. Cheney
Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20506

Dear Lynne,

I read with interest the article in the Chronicle about opposition to having Carol Iannone join the National Council on the Humanities. Having recently encountered Ms. Iannone's prose for the first time, in an essay published in Commentary, I am surprised to learn that she is being considered for a position that presupposes "distinguished scholarship."

I enclose a copy of the essay, on the chance that you have not seen it. It seems to me that a "populist" board ought to be responsive to all sorts of literary achievement, and for that reason I think Ms. Iannone's appointment would be an embarrassment to you, to the NEH, and to all of us who care passionately about the humanities. She clearly views all African American writers the way the late Paul de Man viewed Jewish writers--as easily dismissed second-raters. Every African American who has recently won a major prize--Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Charles Johnson--is given the back of her hand (she is convinced that they were honored only because of their race) and yet she does not mention a single novelist published during the years in question who should have been selected instead.

Ms. Iannone states unambiguously that "black writers demanded and obtained the Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison's novel, Beloved." What arrogant, inflammatory nonsense! Are we to assume that Ms. Iannone was in the room with the Trustees of the Pulitzer Prizes when they accepted the fiction jury's nomination of Toni Morrison's glorious book? Is a perpetrator of such cheap gossip really the sort of scholar who should serve on the National Council on the Humanities? The fact that she is also utterly confused about what happened during the National Book

Lynne V. Cheney
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Award jury meetings is not really her fault--she had no way of knowing that Paul West and William Gass championed at least two of the nominated books. But her condescending attitude toward brilliant writers like Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson reveals the closed mind of a decidedly mediocre critic whose literary taste is at best questionable. That an individual who seemingly endorses high standards should herself fail to measure up to even the most minimal standards of objectivity and critical responsibility would be laughable were it not so sad. Surely there are many scholars far better qualified, both by achievement and sensibility, to join the Council.

I send very best personal wishes to you.

Most cordially yours,

Joel Conarroe

JC/pos
Enclosure

cc: Phyllis Franklin ✓
Stanley Katz
John Hammer

50/COMMENTARY MARCH 1991

kiss guns, I submit that when a military force loses one for every four on the other side, it has taken part in a military engagement.

One thing that is today curiously forgotten is that the Ninth U.S. Cavalry, which swung into action on the second day of fighting—coming to the relief of Custer's Seventh Cavalry under heavy Sioux attack—was a black regiment. The Ninth, based at Fort McKinney in Wyoming and under the command of General Guy Henry, was known as "Henry's Brunettes" and also, from its overcoats, as the "Buffaloes." On Christmas eve they were ordered out in the biting cold on a scouting mission to South Dakota's Black Hills. After fording a river through the ice, their uniforms frozen stiff, they dismounted at four in the morning on Christmas day. No Indians. At nine on the evening of the 29th, after 42 miles of fruitless scouting during the day, a courier brought word of fighting at Wounded Knee where, it was said, 5,000 Sioux were mustering to attack the Pine Ridge Agency. The troopers remounted, off again on a 50-mile forced march through a freezing gale. They rode

all night, reaching the Agency at dawn, but had to ride out again immediately to rescue their own wagon train, which had come under Sioux attack. One cavalryman was killed and several wounded.

Hardly had the Buffaloes returned from this engagement when word came that the Catholic Drexel Mission seven miles up the valley was now under attack. The Seventh Cavalry was ordered out and was soon hotly engaged, but two hours later a courier reported it was in danger of being overwhelmed, under withering fire from the Sioux who had secured a commanding position on the surrounding ridges. Once more, the Buffaloes were ordered to mount, this time to storm the Sioux emplacements on the heights, an assault they carried out with great success—in an account of the time, "rescuing their hard-pushed white comrades" and "saving the day." Any massacre of Indians was not recorded.

In the opinion of the military historian Cyrus Townsend Brady, writing in 1904, the Ninth had carried out one of the most prodigious rides in the history of the U.S. cavalry. Robert M. Utley, in his

The Last Days of the Sioux Nation (1963), writes:

These black troopers rode 100 miles without food or sleep to save the Seventh cavalrymen, who were slowly being crushed by the Sioux in the valley of the Catholic Mission. . . . [A]fter sweeping the ridges with carbine and pistol, [they] lifted the white troopers out of the pocket with such grace that after the battle was over the men of both regiments hugged one another on the field.

In the age of Jim Crow, this was a singular event between black and white military units.

The storming of the ridges by the black Ninth Cavalry must have been known to Dee Brown, since Utley's *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* is one of his two principal sources for the events he records in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. But, although ostensibly concerned with U.S. race relations, he chooses not to mention the fact—or anything else favorable to the United States—in his highly selective book. I cannot even speculate on the mental gyrations that hearing of General Henry's Buffaloes would produce in Kevin Costner.

Fiction

Literature by Quota

Carol Iannone

IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S novel *Ant-hills of the Savannah*, set in contemporary Nigeria, a disaffected government official sounds off before a university audience about his nation's multifarious post-colo-

CAROL IANNONE, whose review of William Styron's *Darkness Visible* appeared in our November 1990 issue, teaches writing and literature at NYU's Gallatin Division and is a consulting editor of *Academic Questions*.

onial corruptions. "Do you not," he thunders, "form tribal pressure groups to secure lower admission requirements instead of striving to equal or excel any student from anywhere? Yes, you prefer academic tariff walls behind which you can potter around in mediocrity. And you are asking me to agree to hand over my life to a democratic dictatorship of mediocrity? No way!"

It is a sad irony that the phrase

"democratic dictatorship of mediocrity" could almost describe not only a country like Nigeria struggling with its ancient multitribal structure but today's United States. Once the paradigm of a society based on the idea of individual merit, and a model for others aspiring to that estate, we have increasingly become subject to a tribalism of our own, and the concomitant assault on the ethic of excellence and merit has affected

not only the world of American politics but virtually every area of society, including, perhaps most astonishingly, literature and the arts.

IN LITERATURE, a signal of the new order of things was given a few years ago when three of our nation's most prestigious awards—the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the American Book Award—were bestowed upon Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983). Inasmuch as even positive reviewers had taken ample note of this novel's many stylistic and aesthetic flaws, the amazing honor accorded to it seemed less a recognition of literary achievement than some official act of reparation, in this case to the black woman in her capacity both as author and as literary character. Around the same time, another black woman novelist, Gloria Naylor, won a National Book Award and an American Book Award for an even less accomplished novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and in 1987, a group of black writers demanded and obtained the Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*.

Although some have pretended that adhering to the new order entails no diminution or abandonment of accepted literary standards, others have not been so sure. Thus, when the feminist contingent at the 1986 international PEN conference loudly protested the "underrepresentation" of women writers on the conference panels, and demanded greater statistical representation in the future both by sex and by race, such prominent authors as Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and Nadine Gordimer protested that (in Sontag's words) "literature is not an equal-opportunity employer." Still others, however, have been frank to put their political priorities first. Thus in 1984 the critic Irving Howe championed the writing of "minority subcultures: blacks, women, gays" even while admitting that such an "open culture" would "lead to a momentary decline or even, in some respects, a permanent decline in cultural standards" (although he felt this would not necessarily happen).

The most recent eruption of group politics into literature oc-

curred a few months ago in connection with the 1990 National Book Award (NBA). One member of the five-man jury, Paul West, openly expressed his dismay at the extent to which "ethnic concerns, ideology, and moral self-righteousness" had predominated over literary considerations in the jury deliberations. West, and William Gass, found themselves in opposition to the other three members, Terry McMillan, Philip Lopate, and the jury chairman Catharine Stimpson. A radical feminist who is also the newly elected president of the Modern Language Association, Stimpson claimed that the panel's decisions had been based solely on style and merit—peculiar words from one who in a recent magazine article ridiculed the demand for "objectivity and intellectual rigor" as a "lot of mishmash."

At any rate, the five finalists chosen for the National Book Award this year magically yielded the "rainbow coalition" that has always seemed to elude Jesse Jackson in his political campaigns: one black male, Charles Johnson (*Middle Passage*); one white female, Joyce Carol Oates (*Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*); one Philippine-born female living in the United States, Jessica Hagedorn (*Dogeaters*); one Spanish-born female raised in Latin America, Elena Castedo (*Paradise*); and one Spanish-born expatriate to New York City, Felipe Alfau (*Chromos*).

It is another sad irony that this unseemly spectacle should have been the backdrop against which Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage** was chosen from among the five finalists as the winner. For Johnson, as it happens, holds the profoundly heterodox belief that black artists should be allowed to write as individuals rather than as "spokesmen for the race." "I find it very difficult to swallow the idea that one individual, black or white, can speak for the experience of 30 million people," he asserts in an interview with the *Washington Post*. "Would anyone ask John Updike to be a spokesman for white America?" Like Ralph Ellison, the first black novelist to win the NBA (1953), Johnson especially resents

the demand that a black writer limit himself to ideological or "protest" novels. He concludes passionately, "All my life, that's what I've fought for, the absolute freedom for the black artist that we extend to the white artist."

The statement is admirable, even courageous, and it is only a pity that *Middle Passage* does not live up to it. Although in some ways a lively and enjoyable book, the novel falls short at least partly because it is a deliberate attempt to counter the plight-and-protest school of novel-writing. In place of the numbed, semi-literate, often brutal and inarticulate characters who people such novels, *Middle Passage* is narrated by Rutherford Calhoun, a newly freed slave who is also highly educated and intensely verbal. Upon his arrival in New Orleans, Calhoun falls in with thieves and gamblers and eventually stows away aboard a ship in order to escape from a forced marriage. Once aboard he discovers that the ship, allegorically named the *Republic*, is sailing to Africa to fetch a shipment of slaves, members of the mystical, magical Allmuseri tribe.

Far from being a marginal outsider, Calhoun freely identifies himself with the motley, restless, roaming, exploratory American spirit that the *Republic* embodies; indeed, *Middle Passage* as a whole gleefully embraces the expansive Western tradition, and teems with echoes of Homer, Coleridge, Melville, and Conrad. At the same time, Calhoun must confront the challenge presented by the Allmuseri in their symbolic role as the "Ur-tribe of humanity itself," a people in touch with "the unity of Being everywhere" and thus a countertype to the spirit of Western philosophical dualism.

TO DESCRIBE *Middle Passage* is to begin to suggest some of its shortcomings. As one otherwise admiring reviewer remarked, the characters "sound as if they're all double majors in classics and philosophy." What is more, these characters often seem less important than

* Atheneum, 209 pp., \$17.95.

the ideas or social types they all too obviously express or stand for. It does not take long to surmise, for example, that the reason the captain of the *Republic* is a dwarf is to suggest the stunted humanity implicit in the pure rationalism he represents, the reason he is a homosexual is to suggest its sterility, the reason a pederast to suggest etc., etc. Of course Johnson is hardly the first to deploy physical traits as marks of psychological or spiritual reality, but the reader of *Middle Passage* more often finds himself piecing together an intellectual puzzle than fathoming the depths of human feeling and behavior.

There are other problems, too. Johnson has fashioned a jocular tone for Rutherford Calhoun that is meant to convey his Whitmanesque nature, but the tone works against the tragic revelation that is attempted at the end of the plot. And the book's self-consciously anachronistic quality, which derives from Johnson's deliberate molding of a 19th-century tale to our current social and cultural dilemmas, sometimes produces inadvertently comic effects. Here is the *Republic's* captain denouncing, of all things, affirmative action:

I believe in *excellence*—an unfashionable thing these days, I know, what with headmasters giving illiterate Negroes degrees because they feel too guilty to fail them, then employers giving that same boy a place in the firm since he's got the degree in hand and saying no will bring a gang of Abolitionists down on their necks. . . . Eighty percent of the crews on other ships, damn near anywhere in America, are *incompetent*, and all because everyone's ready to lower standards of excellence to make up for slavery, or discrimination, and the problem . . . the *problem*, Mr. Calhoun, is, I say, that most of these minorities aren't ready for the titles of quartermaster or first mate precisely because discrimination denied them the training that makes for true excellence.

In short, although much in this novel is engaging, and though Johnson's larger ambitions are noble, it is hard to take his prize-winning book seriously as literature.

WHILE Charles Johnson is busy forging a new and more open image of black American life, Joyce Carol Oates, one of the four runners-up, works lugubriously to perfect and expand the dimensions of old-fashioned white liberal guilt. *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart** is set in a small, upstate New York town and relates the story of Iris Courtney, an unhappy and lonely adolescent, product of a broken home and an increasingly alcoholic mother. One day Iris is followed, taunted, and vaguely threatened by a strange, disgusting, subhuman youth. She seeks protection from a black classmate, Jinx Fairchild, who ends up in a fight with the other boy and accidentally kills him in the heat of the moment. Neither Jinx nor Iris goes to the police, and the murder is never traced to them, but thereafter Jinx's life, which to that point had seemed so hopeful—he was doing well in school, on the basketball court, with girls—goes rapidly downhill, as does that of his formerly decent and hardworking family. As for Iris, although she is haunted by the incident and feels guiltily loyal toward Jinx, she goes on to marry into a prominent, privileged, and gifted family.

Oates seems to want to insist on the ineradicable differences in white and black reality: given the same given—if anything, Jinx starts out with greater prospects than Iris—in the end the opportunities for a white person are much more plentiful, while for blacks the whole social structure is too fragile, too uncushioned, to survive the shock of untoward events. Oates's own attitudes in the novel are nothing if not conventional and nothing if not blatant: elaborately condescending toward blacks unable to understand or surmount the challenges of their own experience, flashily outraged that the life of a wondrous black boy should be wasted on account of a totally worthless sleazeball of a white. Moreover, unlike *Middle Passage*, which for all its faults exhibits liveliness and color, as a novel *Because It Is Bitter* is quite forgettable, its prose skillful enough but so runny that one can fully attend to the

narrative while thinking of other things.

STILL more "moral self-righteousness" (in Paul West's phrase) marks Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*,† a first novel. The story is partly told in flashback by an upper-class Filipino now living in the United States. Through her story and a number of subplots operating independently of her consciousness, the novel offers a presumed panorama of life under Marcos in the 50's, showing the corruption and vacuousness of the privileged classes, the malevolent operations of the military, the hideous poverty of the slums, and the difficulty of securing a decent life for those in between. A major subplot involves a poor young male prostitute whose wretched career must be abandoned when he witnesses the assassination of a liberal opposition leader and winds up joining a band of guerrillas. Presiding over all is the hypnotic spell of popular culture, from American films starring Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman to Filipino soap operas featuring the likes of Nestor Noralez and Lolita Luna. In general, despite some amusing business with aspects of popular culture, and a few felt characterizations, the disparate materials of *Dogeaters* are not very skillfully handled, certainly not skillfully enough to earn the distinction conferred upon it as an NBA finalist.

Class themes are also sounded in Elena Castedo's *Paradise*,** another first novel. A young Spanish family forced to flee Franco's Spain and then Hitler's Germany finds safety in a refugee ghetto in an unnamed Latin American country. But while the father, a political activist and labor organizer, lurches around trying to advance the fortunes of his family and of the working class generally, the mother moves with their two children to the opulent estate of an acquaintance where she aims to travel a rather different route to prosperity. The novel is narrated by one of the children, Solita, in a peppy, plucky, inquis-

* Dutton, 406 pp., \$19.95.

† Pantheon, 251 pp., \$19.95.

** Grove Weidenfeld, 328 pp., \$19.95.

itive voice that effectively renders her childhood world and her funny, painful growth to awareness, particularly at the hands of the three rather awesomely nasty daughters of the estate. Like Hagedorn, Castedo also scores political points, this time in portraying the social inequities of Latin America, but she does not allow them to overpower the whole. In this respect and others, *Paradise* is a more successful novel than *Dogeaters*, if still not quite at a level warranting nomination for a national prize.

FELIPE ALFAU'S *Chromos** is a special case, a book written in the 40's but not published until last year. Now eighty-eight and long retired from writing—his one other novel, *Locos: a Comedy of Gestures*, appeared in 1986 and was reprinted last year—Alfau is a curious figure. As a member of the insular Spanish community in New York City (sometimes called Peninsular Spanish to distinguish it from the

Hispanic), he had remained squarely outside of the mainstream of modern literature, much as Spain has always remained outside of mainstream Europe. Nevertheless, and building only on his Spanish literary forebears, Alfau (according to a recent interview) found his way to experimental postmodernism in the manner of Barth, Barthelme, and Pynchon.

Chromos is a virtual hall of mirrors, a novel within a novel within a novel. It is based upon the lives of a group of "Americaniards" living in New York City during the 30's, and is written in a kind of forced, formal, nonidiomatic "Iberian English." As reviewers have noted, the novel is in a large sense about failure: the failure of a transplanted Spaniard to render his experience in English, the failure to be both American and Spanish, the failure of art to transmute reality beyond the level of crude sentimentalities, or *chromos* (the Spanish word for calendar art), the failure

of love. To these, unfortunately, one might add still another failure, the failure to be terribly interesting. In the manner of many postmodern novels, *Chromos* is based upon an intriguing premise that never really quickens into life and sooner or later becomes tiresome.

THE fact that *Chromos*, a book that deserved publication as a literary curiosity and not much else, wound up being nominated for a National Book Award only serves to point up a final sad irony. The theme of this novel is the perennial need of human beings for the clarifying and transforming experience of art, of the imagination. That need remains as great as ever, but in literature as in other fields of cultural endeavor it has never been and never will be satisfied by sacrificing the demands of excellence to the "democratic dictatorship of mediocrity."

* Dalkey Archive, 348 pp., \$19.95.