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Humanities panel nominee fails the 'distinguished service'

By Wayne Booth

The Tribune's editorial recommending the appointment of Professor Carol Lanonne to the National Humanities Council and attacking the Modern Language Association for opposing her appointment goes wildly astray. As a past president of the MLA I might perhaps be expected to come to the defense of my organization. But my point is not to defend MLA. Rather it is to express the need for a closer look at the facts about Lanonne's nomination.

The only evidence offered to support it, aside from the claim that the Modern Language Association is opposing her for purely political motives, is that she is "outspoken." That's not exactly the criterion I thought that the Tribune would consider in itself adequate, and it is certainly not the criterion stated in the original legislation establishing the Endowment and the council: Nominees for the council should, the law states, "have established records of distinguished service and scholarship or creativity." Surely the crux about any appointment should not be whether a given opponent of it can be suspected of political bias but on whether the nominee has established, like all previous nominees to the council, a distinguished record of some

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kind, scholarly or creative.

When one looks at Carol Lanonne's actual record, one finds that unlike the other two current nominees (who are equally "conservative"), and unlike the other present and past members of the council, she has no "distinguished" record whatever, only about 30 articles and short reviews, none in scholarly journals.

The Tribune editorial expresses a curious contempt for that word "scholarly," mocking work that is published in "obscure publications produced solely for scholars." I share the wish that more scholars would make their work more widely accessible, but the NEH was founded in part to ensure the highest quality of a kind of writing that cannot, by its nature, earn a very broad audience and thus support itself commercially. But even if we accepted the Tribune's curious denigration of scholarship, should we not ask, in the light of the law: Does Professor Lanonne show herself to be "distinguished," in her own kind of publication or any other—distinguished, that is, by any other standard than "outspokenness"?

I've recently read through a half dozen of her pieces—and I have no temptation to read any more. Once you get the pitch—something like "all non-traditional views of art are undermining the Republic"—you can predict what she'll say about any work she reviews. Though some of her attacks are in my view justified, as a group they are monotonous and frequently distorted skirmishes in what she herself calls

a "war of words." In one camp a beleaguered minority of right-thinking faith, in the other a savage pack of truth and light: feminist and bi critics; and indeed all writers, may not embrace her special set of val

Lanonne thus divides up the wh poles, presenting a choice between transcendence, between suffering; determinism and personal will, be individual identity" (Commentary. Most of us will of course share at values (does anyone really prefer: But I can find no evidence that k addressed any question in the wa; admire address questions: with th and objectivity that she finds lack

Such scholars, if their work is o challenging, often find it cited by: though not usually in popular jou for the record of citations of lano scholarly or non-scholarly journal has been mentioned a total of eig; with the hundreds of citations for nominees to the council. One can more scholarship were less esoteri were a nomination for a national the Tribune favor appointing som to gain the attention and approva

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