

State-Funded Fiction: Minimalism, National Memory, and the Return to Realism in the Post-Postmodern Age

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Writing on the 40th anniversary of the National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship Program, Bobbie Ann Mason was characteristically self-effacing. Discussing her first novel, the best-seller *In Country* (1987), which she wrote with the aid of a government grant, Mason explains:

I wanted to do something that would be rich and lasting, but I never expected it to have such popular appeal and tangible social effect. Yet [*In Country*] was a surprising commercial success, and it has affected the lives of many people. The NEA grant helped me write the novel, which I did for my own artistic reasons. I report these unexpected benefits that *In Country* brought to the community—from the classroom to the veterans' group to the economy to the morale of my own hometown—because I think they are significant in reminding people that what may look like self-indulgence in its beginnings can turn out to have long-reaching, positive effects on the culture. (*NEA Literature* 30)

Mason is referring to the afterlife of *In Country* in US culture. The novel, which uses a teenage girl's coming-of-age story to explore the effects of the Vietnam War, proved quite popular: a “surprising commercial success,” it was adapted for a movie featuring A-list actors, and it encouraged Mason, with the help of the National

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Endowment for the Arts (the NEA), to launch writing programs for returning veterans. All positive developments, of course, but Mason's choice to highlight them so that these public benefits surpass her "own artistic reasons" for writing the novel raises several questions for the literary historian: Why is Mason wary that "artistic reasons" may appear self-indulgent? And why might the NEA commission her to testify about the "social effect" of her art, and its "popular appeal," rather than its aesthetic innovations? What may we infer about the standards for state-funded fiction, such as the novel that Mason produced, from this brief, occasional essay?¹

These questions, and Mason's remarks in the above passage, nicely sum up the changing expectations for writers publishing in the era of state patronage, a moment in which "social effect" and "popular appeal" became crucial factors in achieving a version of artistic success. Starting in 1967, the federal government began supporting writers through the NEA Literature Fellowship Program, an institution that has remained almost entirely invisible for American literary historians. This absence, however, should not be all that surprising. As an agency founded during the cultural Cold War, the NEA had a vested interest in remaining invisible to avoid even the slightest basis for a comparison with the censorious and propagandistic Soviet Union. Likewise, artists interested in preserving the appearance of autonomy have been ambivalent about receiving state support, although in recent years, some of them have been vocal supporters of federal funding for the arts. Nonetheless, the NEA was, and continues to be, an important form of institutional support for US writers, funding them at early stages of their careers, and, like university teaching positions, freeing them from dependence on an unstable, mostly unrewarding literary marketplace.²

But artistic autonomy is never without limits, and neither is the NEA's freedom to fund whatever art it happens to admire. Historically, changes in the executive branch and in Congress have influenced the NEA Literature Program, which has at times been charged with preserving the most exciting, innovative examples of US writing, and at other times been warned away from supporting inaccessible, difficult, or controversial art. This essay tracks changes in the NEA's agenda from the 1970s to the 1980s in order to understand how and why the agency went from funding formally dense, politically dissident literature—the kind of literature unlikely to find success in the literary marketplace—to funding formally conventional, thematically populist, fundamentally integrative fiction that would appeal to the average reader and achieve commercial success.³ Put simply, in the 1980s, state sponsorship stops operating in opposition to the market and begins working in tandem with it. I contend that this perhaps unsurprising shift in Reagan-era federal arts policy also

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helps to explain the resurgence of the realist novel that we see toward the end of the twentieth century.⁴ Rather than just an overlooked historical context, the NEA Literature Program is an influential institution that, in mediating between literary production and consumption, also illumines some of the most notable aesthetic evolutions in postwar literary history.

Minimalism, the literary movement with which Mason was associated, serves as my central case study and, arguably, represents the very hinge in the transition from high postmodernism to the new literary realism in late twentieth-century American fiction. In what follows, I propose a symbiotic relationship between the NEA and the formal and thematic interests of writers associated with this movement to explain why minimalism had such a strong presence on the literary scene. In the early 1980s, the NEA needed to present itself as a democratic, even populist organization, but one that nevertheless promoted cutting edge artistic trends.⁵ At the same time, a group of American writers—including Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, and Mason herself—were, for “[their] own artistic reasons,” experimenting with writing in terse, unadorned prose, the kind of language that, some argued, reflected the national trauma of the recent Vietnam War. The NEA, in danger of being defunded as an agency irrelevant to American life, was intent on encouraging fiction that combined what Mason called “popular appeal” with aesthetic merit, and the new minimalist fiction fit both criteria. During the 1980s, the NEA rewarded these writers again and again with two-year fellowships; such consistent state support suggests that the NEA played an integral role in advancing this trend in US letters, in the post-Vietnam War era, a role that critics both past and present have not grasped.⁶

The minimalist fiction that won the approval of NEA administrators who were invested in supporting artistic excellence regardless of its commercial appeal also dovetailed with the ideology of the Reagan era, which championed the market and advanced a vision of the nation as a culturally and politically unified social body. Minimalist fiction written in the wake of the Vietnam War suggested that national unity might be restored following the nation’s most polarizing war. By examining Mason’s *In Country* as well as other products of the state patronage program, I show how this fiction both portrays and performs the “social effects” of accessible, representational art that earned state approval. Moreover, this appreciation for the common reader continues to direct federal arts policy as well as the work of some prominent contemporary novelists, who aim for a broad reading audience while still meeting the standards of high art. The story of reinvigorated realism, like the story of the NEA, therefore begins with this tension between high and low, between elitism

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and populism, a tension structuring much of the conversation about art and culture since the end of World War II.

1. “Populism and Elitism”: The NEA and the Politics of State Patronage

Clement Greenberg identified realist or representational art with populism, in the most problematic sense, in his 1939 *Partisan Review* essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch.” With the “falling away of aristocratic patronage,” Greenberg contends, artists found themselves subject to the forces of the market (146). The only way to avoid becoming complicit with capitalism was to turn inward and abandon society—as well as the representation of society—altogether. “It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at ‘abstract’ or ‘non-objective’ art,” writes Greenberg, “Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself” (146). But the audience for such avant-garde art—the wealthy elites—seemed to be shrinking, and kitsch, “popular, commercial art and literature,” designed for profit, was becoming dominant (148). This association of representational art with kitsch would endure for much of the postwar period.

According to Greenberg’s argument, the arrival of state patronage in the US might benefit the avant-garde artist, who would no longer have to cater to the tastes of the marketplace. But it was not immediately clear what kind of art the state should be funding: should it support the avant-garde in order to “keep culture *moving*,” as Greenberg put it (143)? Or should it repay taxpayer dollars by funding art that would entertain the common consumer? These were live questions in 1965, the year the government established a direct patronage program. In the decade prior, the federal government had been most invested in supporting high art in order to compete with Soviet cultural production. During this period of cultural Cold-Warfare, the US government offered artists financial assistance and sponsored traveling arts exhibitions. This work was largely accomplished through the efforts of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), an organization that received CIA funding and, as Frances Stonor Saunders has shown, was strongly influenced by CIA officials.⁷ Although the relationship between the CCF and the CIA was not revealed until 1966, suspicion mounted during the early 1960s, and the government began to develop alternative and complementary models of arts patronage. Rather than focusing on sending arts exhibitions abroad, the US sought to develop a robust domestic arts program. The shift from a foreign audience to a domestic one

produced a concomitant shift in the kind of art the state would fund: whereas the government had once supported modernist art, such as Abstract Expressionism, in an effort to win European audiences, it now needed to find art that appealed to a US public less enamored of virtuosic displays of formal complexity. John F. Kennedy began the process by appointing editor and arts administrator August Heckscher to the position of Special Consultant and by commissioning a study of the government's involvement in the arts in March 1962. In findings released in June 1963, Heckscher proposed that the government increase its role as patron of the arts by acquiring more art for national museums, commissioning public buildings and posters, and sponsoring events such as concerts and exhibitions. Other suggestions included adjustments to tax law and changes to education policy. Taken together, these changes would fulfill the promise of Kennedy's inauguration, a day that, in Heckscher's words, "was understandably hailed as signaling a new partnership in national life [. . . and that] marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of art and government" (8).

Lyndon B. Johnson continued Kennedy's plans by appointing artists—like Paul Engle, Ralph Ellison, Sidney Poitier, and Duke Ellington—and arts administrators to the National Council on the Arts and charging them with developing recommendations for how to improve state patronage for the arts. The Council outlined two new federal agencies, the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities (the NEA and the NEH), which were approved by Congress and launched on September 29, 1965. Public-Law 89-209 established the agencies and stipulated that each endowment would receive, upon Congressional approval, five million dollars over three fiscal years. It also outlined the kinds of projects that the endowments would foster: the NEA would fund projects ranging from theatrical productions to the creation of public art, while the NEH would support the work of individual scholars or scholarly institutions (Taylor and Barresi 40). Signing the bill, Johnson praised the excellence of US artists and ended on a populist note: "The arts and humanities belong to the people, for it is, after all, the people who created them" (Taylor and Barresi 40). Johnson may have smoothly integrated expert opinion and popular taste in his public remarks, but in later years, these forces would often come into conflict.

During the first decade of the NEA's existence, however, it was thought that the expertise of art-world elites could be used to improve the average citizen's aesthetic sensibilities. The NEA Literature Program sought to achieve this objective by improving arts education through various initiatives and by supporting the kind of avant-garde fiction that did not often find a wide audience. The first director of the Literature Program, the poet Carolyn Kizer, stressed

the importance of educating the public so that consumers could appreciate difficult art. In her projection for 1970, Kizer argued, “The Federal Government could support every writer, every artist, every publication in the country worthy of assistance, and we still have not come to grips with the basic problem: the American as arts consumer. . . . The basic answer lies, I believe, in an observation I have made many times during my three years with the Endowment: In Art, all roads lead to education” (“Literary Programs”). To address this problem, Kizer organized education programs, including one that placed poets in the public schools.

Tackling the second objective demanded subtler approaches. Under Kizer, the NEA showed support for avant-garde literature by funding the little magazines, literary periodicals that ran short pieces by unknown writers. For poets especially, the little magazines were among the few forums in which they could publish experimental—or, as one reviewer described it, “noncommercial”—work (Dempsey). One of the NEA’s first initiatives, an anthology of American literature edited by George Plimpton and Peter Arduy, was designed, in part, to support the little magazines; the anthology drew largely from these marginal publications and paid both the writer and the magazine for the rights to republish selected work. Published in 1968, *The American Literary Anthology* featured the work of 48 short story writers, poets, and critics, including W. H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, and Denise Levertov as well as some relatively unknown writers. The presence of controversial writers like Ginsberg and Jones “reassured” critics like David Dempsey, who was wary of censorship and the potential for interfering with artistic freedom. By publishing dissenting artists, the NEA could then demonstrate its support for unpopular viewpoints. In these early years, the agency was more concerned with funding oppositional writers to highlight its liberal tolerance (in contrast to Soviet Union’s programmatic and propagandistic cultural production) than it was worried about pandering to the tastes of the American reading public.

This same prioritizing of the inscrutable, the difficult, and the dissident carried over into the Literature Program’s Fellowship initiative. Starting in 1967, the NEA bestowed grants on individual writers based on the “artistic excellence” of their reviewed work (Stoll 4). Panels of experts, usually writers themselves, judged submissions and selected winners. Until 1974, the year the NEA Literature Fellowships changed to an open-submission system, a grant applicant had to be nominated by an “established writer,” someone who served as a member of an oversight committee (6). (This selection structure may also explain why formally innovative fiction had a stronger foothold in the NEA’s early years.) The inaugural group of grant recipients included William Gaddis (who won a second grant in 1974) and

Tillie Olsen, two authors of formally complex fiction. Over the course of the next dozen or so years, the NEA awarded grants to such avant-garde, countercultural, and experimental writers as John Ashbery (1969), Richard Brautigan (1969), Charles Bukowski (1973), Peter Orlovsky (1979), Grace Paley (1967), Ishmael Reed (1975), and Aram Saroyan (1979) (“Creative Writing Fellows”). Support for such challenging writers was not without a few public-relations pitfalls—the inclusion of Saroyan’s seven-letter poem “light” in the aforementioned anthology drew some scrutiny from members of Congress, who worried about the letters to dollars ratio—but overall, the agency flourished during the 1970s. In fact, this decade saw the largest period of growth for the NEA, thanks largely to the efforts of Chairwoman Nancy Hanks, an astute politician who formed a crucial alliance with President Nixon, who was not initially friendly to the arts (Zeigler 26–27, 51). Hanks’s savvy handling of Congressional oversight allowed the NEA Literature Program to continue to fund the kind of innovative and interesting work that its experts selected.

This changed with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1981, when the perceived division between art-world elites, who determined what projects received state funding, and the average US citizen consuming this state-funded art, threatened the agency’s very existence. While campaigning for the presidency in 1980, Reagan promised to “end as soon as possible the politicization of the National Council on the Arts so conspicuous during the Carter–Mondale administration” (qtd. in Zeigler 45–46), an accusation of favoritism designed to underscore the supposed distance between arts administrators and the populace. In the year leading up to the election, op-ed columnists in *Publisher’s Weekly*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* advanced the “charge that a ‘closed circle’ of acquaintances runs the Endowment through overlapping appointments to panels and committees” and suggested that the problem was not only that “stale ideas recycle like so much dead air,” but also that this public institution was becoming increasingly divorced both from the writers it backed and the citizenry it served (qtd. in Bauerlein and Grantham 81). That same year, Eric Baizer published *Literaturegate* (1980), a pamphlet that “advocate[d] that poets and writers control federal funding of literature and that grants politics be ended.” Allying himself with conservative columnist James Kilpatrick, who “might be surprised to find a number of sympathizers on the left,” Baizer suggested that the NEA Literature Program be ended and that writers do their part to hasten its demise: “Ask questions. You have right to know how your money is being spent to fund literature. . . . Use your abilities as writer or editor to publish informed criticisms of the NEA. They are sensitive to public

opinion. You CAN make a difference.” As Baizer’s conflation of “rights” and “money” suggests, this grassroots organizing effort from the writers on the left dovetailed with free-market ideology promoted by economists on the right. As a result, Reagan, in challenging the NEA, could win favor with both camps.

Once elected, Reagan reversed his campaign promise to increase NEA funding and instead threatened to eviscerate the program (Zeigler 45–46). In February, David Stockman, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, proposed a 50% cut to the NEA’s budget for fiscal year 1982 and suggested that funds for 1981 be cut in half during the middle of the fiscal year (Zeigler 46–47). Thanks to the recommendation of a Reagan-appointed task force headed by Charlton Heston, the 1982 budget was only reduced by 10%, but it was clear that the period of growth the NEA enjoyed during the 1970s was over. Even Heston warned: “To say that the NEA should be preoccupied with subsidizing the leading edge of the arts is, I think, a highly suspect position. The leading edge of creativity in any field is always thin, sharp, and liable to get nicked” (qtd. in Zeigler 61).

Thus, by the 1980s, the prevailing attitude—both in Congress and in the culture at large—was that the market, not the government, should dictate the terms of artistic success. Those who supported popular taste over critical judgment argued that their position was more democratic than that of the NEA, which relied on the verdict of the few over the votes of the many. Ben Wattenberg’s 1984 op-ed in the *Washington Post* exemplifies this line of thinking. In “Participatory Democracy in the Book Business,” Wattenberg, a speechwriter for Johnson and later a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, argued that any increase in book sales was a good thing, no matter the quality of the books being produced, and that the government should “Let the people decide” what kind of books should be published. In this conceptualization of the book “business,” Wattenberg suggests that “the people” essentially vote with their dollars and that market-driven outcomes represent the purest expression of popular will. Objecting to what she considered the false binary of this argument, Mary MacArthur, then associate director of the Literature Program, contended in an internal memo to agency chairman Frank Hodsoll, “it’s not a struggle between ‘populism and elitism.’ Why must the choice be between books that will sell to the masses and books that will sell to the few. . . . Someone once said, alas I’ve forgotten who, that arguments over the ‘ivory tower’ versus ‘the arena’ are a waste of time. They tend to pit art against people—and to assume that the world of ideas is somehow separate from reality.” Despite MacArthur’s reasoned protests, the Literature Program, facing budget cuts and besieged by critics on

both the right and the left, felt pressure to subsidize fiction that would be popular with a large audience without reneging on its promise to judge on artistic merit alone. What was needed was a new kind of fiction, something accessible to the average reader but that would also “keep culture *moving*.”

2. The Minimalist Movement and the Compromise Aesthetic

Fortunately for the NEA, just this kind of fiction was developing right around the time that the agency came under siege. “A new fiction seems to be emerging from America,” declared *Granta* editor Bill Buford in 1983, “and it is a fiction of a peculiar and haunting kind” (4). Buford had detected the resurgence of the American short story, but this renaissance was taking a strange form. These were “unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music” (4). *Granta* devoted two special issues to the “curious, dirty realism” practiced by writers like Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Mary Robison. In his introduction to the first of the two issues, Buford describes how these stories are “remarkably unlike what American fiction is usually understood to be” (4). He continues:

It is not heroic or grand: the epic ambitions of Norman Mailer or Saul Bellow seem, in contrast, inflated, strange, even false. It is not self-consciously experimental like so much of the writing—variously described as “postmodern,” “postcontemporary” or “deconstructionist”—that was published in the sixties and seventies. The work of John Barth, William Gaddis or Thomas Pynchon seem [*sic*] pretentious in comparison. . . . It makes the more traditional realistic novels of, say, Updike or Styron seem ornate, even baroque in comparison. (4)

The writers Buford was discussing were not producing big, ambitious, formally innovative novels, nor were they writing the “traditionally realistic” novels of the nineteenth century. These writers traded on absence and opacity in a way that differentiated their work from more familiar models of literary realism. As described by Buford, the new fiction, first called “dirty realism” and later minimalism, was unpretentious—essentially antielitist—while still signaling new aesthetic developments. It straddled the line between high and low, appearing at one moment the first, at another the second.

This new minimalism differed significantly from the fiction that was first characterized by the term. Prior to 1980, literary minimalism referred to an aesthetic of omission, reduction, or simplicity, as modeled by revered writers like Samuel Beckett and Ernest Hemingway. These modernist writers were eventually installed in the literary canon; readers would have to go to school in order to understand that kind of fiction. By contrast, the minimalism of the 1980s—what we might call “populist minimalism”—appeared to be formally uncomplicated and supposedly required no tutelage to be understood. In its opposition to modernist difficulty, populist minimalism proved less popular with reviewers and cultural gatekeepers schooled in modernist aesthetics. In a thorough critique of minimalist writers including Beattie, Carver, and Amy Hempel, novelist Madison Bell described the “polite nihilism” (65) and “dimestore determinism” (67) of this fiction and faulted these story writers for failing to “[rise] above the trivial” (66). John Barth was more generous in an essay for the *New York Times*, where he defined minimalism as

the flowering of the (North) American short story (in particular the kind of terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction associated in the last 5 to 10 years with such excellent writers as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison and Tobias Wolff, and both praised and damned under such labels as “K-Mart realism,” “hick chic,” “Diet-Pepsi minimalism” and “post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early Hemingwayism).”

A capacious definition, to be sure, but then it was an eclectic, if racially homogeneous, group: Beattie, a *New Yorker* darling, was representing the cool couplings of contemporary urbanites and ex-urbanites; Carver, heavily edited by Gordon Lish, was redefining the value of radical omission; and Mason, who received critical acclaim for her first collection of short stories, *Shiloh* (1982), was a leading figure of the renaissance in regionalist fiction. Many of the authors associated with the movement met with moderate critical and commercial success (Beattie, for instance, graced the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*), but minimalism is now more noted by literary historians for the heated controversy it generated in newspapers and literary magazines, where defenders and proponents of the movement exchanged salvos throughout the 1980s. These spirited discussions ensured that by the mid-1980s, minimalism referred to a specific cadre of American writers, mostly writers of short fiction, who rendered domestic life in simple, succinct, crafted prose. Thus “minimalism” referred to both form and content, or, more accurately,

to a relationship between form and content: plain style dictated by quotidian subject matter. In contradistinction to nineteenth-century realism, this writing did not make explicit reference to the structural forces impinging on characters' fates, but typically left those public taxonomies implicit.

Most importantly, minimalism represented a compromise aesthetic: just enough artistic edge to counterbalance its accessibility and popularity. In making this compromise, minimalism was a movement that could justify government expenditure on the arts in tough economic times. It was representational art that was nonetheless formally innovative and even, as Mark McGurl has argued, resolutely self-reflexive (276). At once simple and stylized, highly crafted and colloquial, minimalism married quotidian content with skillful literary technique in a way that appealed to readers, select reviewers, and bureaucrats alike. Half of the writers Barth listed received grants from the NEA Literature Program: Barthelme (1979), Carver (1980), Ford (1980, 1986), Mason (1983), and Wolff (1985) ("Creative Writing Fellows"). When we consider that grants are awarded to just 2–5% of applicants, the fact that so many minimalist writers received awards during this decade seems all the more remarkable (Stoll 6). It would be too much to say that state funding *caused* or *inspired* this literary movement; that would be to misunderstand the relationship between aesthetic production and the institutions supporting it. Instead, I submit that the predominance of minimalism at this historical moment was overdetermined.

3. Back in the World: Minimalism and the Memory of Vietnam

The upshot of this mutually sustaining alliance between the NEA's newfound interest in funding accessible but aesthetically innovative fiction and the development of a new form of realism was a broad, inclusive vision of the reading public, one consonant with the populist sentiments pervading the post-Vietnam era. According to Michael Federici, the Vietnam War, which pitted groups of US citizens against the government until "[p]opular pressure generated by the media and antiwar protestors significantly altered US foreign policy," contributed to the resurgence of populist rhetoric within American politics (103). The most successful politicians were ones like Reagan, who claimed to speak with and for the people. In this climate, the challenge for arts administrators and the artists they supported was to demonstrate how art could construct an inclusive vision of "the people," one that would shore up the bonds between

citizens who were on opposing sides of the decade's political controversies.

One of these controversies was the war itself, which, in the 1980s, was being increasingly memorialized. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, publishers like Avon and Ballantine began publishing war narratives, PBS released a miniseries on the war, and two court cases pitted veterans against the manufacturers of Agent Orange. Such developments provide the cultural context for the reception of some of the best-known literary accounts of the war, including Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (1974), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978), three disorienting representations of the war that altered traditional narrative forms—journalistic and novelistic—to reflect the chaotic absurdity of life at the front. Pynchon and Stone, and later, Cormac McCarthy also wrote critically about US military imperialism in this alienating, allegorical mode well into the 1980s. Though these narratives suggested different ways in which the realist novel might be adapted or reshaped, and constitute a post-Vietnam literary tradition in their own right, by the early 1980s, this kind of work (by these authors at least) was not typically receiving federal funding.⁸ Instead, the NEA favored the work of minimalist authors writing about the war: Ford, Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips, and, of course, Mason. Whereas some have suggested that minimalism registers, in aesthetic form, the “trauma” of Vietnam, I propose a different relation between minimalism and Vietnam, one that reads state-supported minimalism as a means of restoring collective identity, not simply as an expression of personal psychological trauma (Barth).

The minimalist war narratives examined below accomplish this restoration in novels that imagine or attract broad audiences for memorial art. Within the span of a single year, three minimalist writers, all winners of grants from the NEA, produced best-selling or prize-winning accounts of Vietnam's aftermath. In 1984, Phillips, winner of NEA grants in 1978 and 1984, published *Machine Dreams*, a multigenerational novel that concludes with the disappearance of a son in the jungles of Southeast Asia. That same year, Wolff, himself a Vietnam veteran, published his novella *The Barracks Thief* (winner of a PEN/Faulkner award), which tells a story about basic training during the final year of the war. And in the following year, Mason published *In Country*, the novel that most powerfully exemplifies the argument I'm advancing here. All three of these novels might be categorized as bildungsromane and as national allegories: two fictional forms that connect personal struggle to national crisis and that identify literature's role in mending both. In the case of these post-Vietnam narratives, both families and nations are healed through engagement with works of art, narrative or sculptural. These memorial artworks

offer rapprochement between modernism and populism, suggesting that a compromise aesthetic might reassemble a disaffected reading public and reunify a divided nation.

For Phillips, literary realism bridges the experiential and psychological disjunctions between those US citizens who served in Vietnam and those who did not. Like Mason's *In Country*, Phillips's *Machine Dreams* features a scrappy tomboy who must cope with the loss of a male relative in Vietnam. In Phillips's novel, that character is Danner, and the lost relative is her younger brother, Billy. When Billy ships out, Danner returns to their hometown and begins socializing with her brother's friends. Later, following Billy's disappearance, she mimics her brother by dropping out of college. Danner blames the military for her brother's absence, and the novel ends with her words and her rage.

However, the novel's brief detour to the front suggests a way of mitigating the angry responses of those left at home. Billy's letters from Fort Knox, Fort Dix, and eventually South Vietnam deliver snapshots of military life with little differentiation in style or tone between these letters and the rest of the novel. Yet what the letters lack in stylistic distinction, they make up for in information, filled as they are with details about temperature, explosives, and landing patterns. Details of combat and sensory perceptions are recorded with remarkable precision. In this way, the letters exhibit the experience of war for those who did not fight, a translation performed quite literally: Billy provides definitions of almost every idiomatic military usage. In the first letter, he explains, "I share a hooch (square shack made out of plywood & ammo boxes, sandbagged walls) with him and two other gunners" (288), and in the third clarifies the term "daisy-cutters," or "500 lbs of bomb that goes off at the treeline and knocks everything down so the choppers can land" (290). Taken together, the letters tell us what warfare looked like, sounded like, even smelled like; the implicit suggestion is that these details are enough to help us know what it *felt* like. The social value of mimetic writing, we might say, resides in the cultivation of empathic reading.

The utility or even the possibility of empathy seems less certain in Wolff's *The Barracks Thief*, which, like *Machine Dreams*, is a hybrid of a bildungsroman and a family saga: the novella tracks the disparate effects of Vietnam on two generations of men in the Bishop family. The father, Guy, loses his job in 1965 when Boeing brings in younger men to build the many planes needed for fighting in North Vietnam. Guy's son, Philip, enlists in the Marines and is sent to Fort Bragg, where he feels alienated instead of engaged. "Most of the men in my company had served together in Vietnam," he explains, "Like the Marines I'd known in Bremerton, they had no use for outsiders. I was an outsider to them" (26). Wolff reverses the rhetoric

that usually characterizes war narratives; here, the soldier is the outsider, not the enemy nor the conscientious objector. This inversion of insider/outsider rhetoric is fitting, for the story never leaves the military base. Indeed, Wolff keeps the narrative focus securely on the home front, militarized as it may be. The drama of Vietnam happens largely offstage, and the petty melodramas that stand in for the war experience—a nearby but nonthreatening forest fire, a close encounter with the cops, a wallet stolen by one soldier from a fellow member of the company—all seem anticlimactic, even irrelevant.

One of the few allusions to Vietnam occurs after a special formation during which the barracks thief is accused, humiliated, and punished. As the men conduct target practice, Philip thinks to himself:

For the men who'd been in Vietnam, the whole thing must have been a little close to home, and it was a discouraging business for those of us who hadn't. It was discouraging for me, anyway, to find I had no taste for the sound of bullets passing over my head. And it gave me pause to see what bad shots those recruits were. After all, they belonged to the same army I belonged to. (90)

At this moment, with the bullets passing overhead, the war comes home, or at least “close to home.” It is also at this moment that the divide Philip notices earlier in the story, between those who served in Vietnam and those who did not, is bridged thanks to shared discomfort and discouragement. We might read this final scene in Fort Bragg as allegorizing the reunified US, glancing at governmental error (“what bad shots those recruits were”) while hinting at the complicity of all US citizens (“they belonged to the same army I belonged to”). In Wolff’s account, the nation might be able to come back together following a divisive war, but it can only do so under the sign of failure and under the path of stray bullets.

Both Phillips and Wolff look to heal a wounded nation by rendering the alienation of a US soldier reintegrated into society, sometimes in narrative memory and sometimes in the narrative present. Neither author, however, has been as publicly forthcoming about the integrative function and social value of fiction as Mason, with whose words this essay began. For Mason, fiction that performs this kind of therapeutic work must be written in an accessible style. Though she has rejected the “minimalist” label in essays and interviews, she acknowledges that she tries to “approximate language that’s very blunt and Anglo-Saxon” and that her “style comes out of a way of hearing people talk” (“Quiet Rebellions” 32). This is a stylistic choice fraught with social, even expressly political meaning. Open about her desire to produce accessible fiction, Mason laments that the

people for whom and about whom she writes feel so distant from literature and art. “I find it odd that I’m writing for an audience that is particularly well educated,” she says, “I’m sorry the general public can’t read what I write. I think they are capable of it, but they don’t have access to it. People don’t know they can go to a library and read. I think they feel a class inhibition. . . . A factory worker is not going to go to the opera. It’s just unthinkable” (“Quiet Rebellions” 30). Such remarks, which suggest an unbridgeable gap between high art and the lives of working-class citizens, reflect Mason’s ambivalence about appealing to an educated audience and imply a desire to span this gap with narrative art that has mass appeal as well as aesthetic value, particularly in fiction that aims to bridge other intranational divisions.

Mason arguably realized this desire through *In Country*, a novel written with the support of a two-year grant from the NEA. *In Country* is the story of Samantha Hughes, a recent high school graduate living in the fictional small town of Hopewell, Kentucky with her uncle Emmet, a Vietnam veteran with great culinary skill and a penchant for cross-dressing. Both bildungsroman and narrative of national healing, *In Country* explores the repercussions of the Vietnam War through the frame of Sam’s quest to understand her father, who died in battle before she was born. Her investigation involves sorting through her father’s relics (letters, photographs, journal entries), informally interviewing Vietnam veterans, researching the effects of Agent Orange, watching *M*A*S*H* nightly, and, in a fit of frustration, camping out at Cawood’s Pond in an effort to relate to her father’s experience in the jungle of Southeast Asia. Although she knows that “They probably didn’t have these trees over there,” Sam nonetheless imagines herself in her father’s shoes: “What did the jungle do to them?” she wonders, “Humping the boonies. Here I am, she thought. In country” (210).

Of course, the country in which Sam finds herself is the US, and the double meaning of the novel’s title becomes clear when Sam’s figurative journey—from adolescence to adulthood, from ignorance to knowledge—becomes a literal one. This is the journey that produces our first vision of national cohesion. Sam, Uncle Emmet, and Sam’s grandmother take off on a road trip to Washington, D.C., determined to find Sam’s father’s name on the newly erected Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The novel opens on the road, on I-64, with Sam at the wheel: “Sam wasn’t experienced at city driving, but the interstate is easy. She could glide like this all the way across America” (3). On the interstate, Sam finds herself away from home for the first time and yet, paradoxically, more at home than she expected. Later, when the family rests at the Holiday Inn, Sam sits “watching the traffic—an endless river of it” and reflects. “Everything in America is going on here on

the road,” she thinks, enjoying the “feeling of strangeness” at “a cross-roads: the interstate with traffic headed east and west, and the state road with the north–south traffic. She’s in limbo, stationed right in the center of this enormous amount of energy. The whine of the diesel trucks is like the background on a rock song” (17). Here Mason draws a map of America with deliberate vagueness: the cardinal directions stand in for states, borders blur into endless roadways, and the language itself—“everything,” “strangeness” “going on”—is overly general and vague. The scene is set to industrial noise that sounds like a “rock song,” the kind of popular music disseminated across the country on the national airwaves.

For a writer invested in the particularities of regional culture, Mason’s vision of the US is surprisingly monolithic. But when viewed from the highway, the country looks perfectly uniform, and unified: “Exxon, Chevron, and Sunoco loom up, big faces on stilts. There’s a Country Kitchen, a McDonald’s, and a Stuckey’s. Sam has heard that Stuckey’s is terrible and the Country Kitchen is good” (3). This sentence is quintessential Mason: syntactically simple, linguistically blunt (“terrible” and “good”), and packed with references to the US corporate and popular culture of the 1980s. Indeed, Mason’s fiction is highly allusive, but the allusions are to popular music (from Motown to Bruce Springsteen), corporate retailers, and broadcast television—cultural forms aligned with markets rather than against them. These references demonstrate the intelligibility of Mason’s fiction for a broad reading audience, and its familiarity with, if not necessarily endorsement of, corporate America. But the novelist repurposes these forms of lowbrow culture to appeal to readers across the educational spectrum: all will recognize these cultural forms, even if they don’t all embrace them. Mason thus envisions a more coherent, integrated reading audience, united in its awareness of popular culture rather than divided along class lines.

In Country further develops this vision of a coherent audience by deliberately engaging the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a work of art that raised similar questions about the relationship between avant-garde art and a broad public audience. This art project was also one that, like the NEA’s state-funded fictions, found itself implicated in debates about what art “by the people” or “for the people” should look like. The winning design, submitted by Yale undergraduate Maya Lin, was nonfigurative, and, to some, unheroic. Tom Carhart called it a “black gash of shame”; Tom Wolfe denounced it as a “tribute to Jane Fonda”; and an editorial in the *National Review* sneered at this “Orwellian glop” (Carhart qtd. in Hess 265; Wolfe B4; “Stop That Monument” 1064). Upon first hearing of the winning proposal, Ross Perot reportedly shouted, “It’s not heroic. . . . It’s something for New York intellectuals. . . . It’s twenty-first century

art” (qtd. in Scruggs and Swerdlow 68). The uproar over Lin’s design caused the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), the group that advocated for the Memorial, to commission Frederick Hart for a realist statue to complement Lin’s more abstract sculpture; Hart would go on to criticize Lin’s design for being “intentionally not meaningful” and claimed, “It doesn’t relate to ordinary people” (qtd. in Scruggs and Swerdlow 129). This controversy surrounding the Memorial’s design reprises the debates about accessible art that plagued the NEA in the early 1980s, the same debates that motivated support for the minimalist movement in literature. Mason, one may say, participates in this debate by concluding her novel, and the family road trip, at the Memorial site. The narrative’s dramatic culmination also serves as a confrontation, and eventually a compromise, between populism and modernist aesthetics.

When the Hughes family first glimpses the Memorial, the sculpture seems forbidding: “It is massive, a black gash in a hillside, like a vein of coal exposed and then polished with polyurethane” (239). Sam’s grandmother, the perfect mouthpiece for working-class, rural America, reacts with the same skepticism as the Memorial’s real-life opponents: “‘It doesn’t show up good,’ Mamaw says anxiously. ‘It’s just a hole in the ground’” (239). As the family advances, however, the Memorial becomes more recognizable. Standing at the center of the V, Sam notices that the walls, which first looked “like the wings of an abstract bird, huge and headless” (239), now remind her of “the white wings of the shopping mall in Paducah” (240). Thus, does Sam remove the Memorial from its context in the art world and resituate it in her hometown. This figurative relocation reflects Sam’s new sense of ownership over this national monument: “It feels like giving birth to this wall” (240), she says about this imagined comparison. By refocusing modernist aesthetics in this way, Mason reconstructs the sculpture as the “people’s memorial” that Scruggs and the VVMF intended.

The Wall’s legibility, demonstrated by Sam’s engagement with the list of names, furthers this transformation. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a textual monument, covered with names familiar to its many readers; in fact, the inscription of those names was one of the only design requirements that the VVMF specified when it announced the design competition. Sam finds her father’s name inscribed there, and her grandmother takes a photo of Sam’s face next to the etching. But an uncanny moment follows shortly afterward, when Sam finds her own name on the structure. “SAM A HUGHES. . . She touches her own name. How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall” (244–45). Mason herself had this same experience during her first visit to the Memorial in 1983, when she found her own name on the Wall. She

writes of this strange encounter, “More Bobby Masons. I knew then that Vietnam was my story too, and it was every American’s story. Finally, I felt I had a right to tell a small part of that story. Seeing the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, and children—the families—there that rainy day, I knew we were all in it together” (5–6). These moments of recognition, as Mason describes them both in her fiction and in her essays, are also moments of radical inclusion in which distinctions based on age, gender, and life experience are collapsed in the interests of national unity. Such a moment reminds us of the “social effect” of art that Mason addresses in her occasional essay, the essay with which this article began. But we would be remiss if we did not note the limits to this utopian vision, in which significant differences in gender, race, and class are elided in the interest of generating a cohesive portrait of the American people. Moreover, the errors of the State Department and executive branch in advancing destructive foreign policy—errors alluded to in Wolff’s novella—are strangely absent from the concluding scene of a novel that has thus far been sensitive to the travails of veterans who returned home only to find themselves uncelebrated, unemployed, and sick. Instead, the state emerges not as a military aggressor but as a benevolent sponsor of national memory.

4. From Minimalism to Middlebrow Realism: The NEA at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century

Although four presidents have taken office since 1988, when it comes to the NEA and the art it funds, we’re still in the Reagan era. The NEA continues to support fiction that shares *In Country*’s formal and thematic concerns and that offers a compromise between innovation and accessibility. Examining the list of winners since 1985, we find mostly writers who marry modernist (or postmodernist) difficulty and accessible literary realism. These writers include Julia Alvarez (1987), Cristina García (2004), Michael Cunningham (1988), Jennifer Egan (1991), Jeffrey Eugenides (1995), Jonathan Franzen (2002), Lorrie Moore (1989), Jane Smiley (1987), and David Foster Wallace (1989). Their work riffs on traditional realism while maintaining a sociohistorical orientation, telling us something about the way we live now. In this way, their work contrasts with the high formalism of Ben Lerner, or with the confessional experimentalism of Chris Krauss and other writers in the *Native Agents* series. None has received NEA funding.

These days, state-funded fiction turns toward the market rather than away from it, with novels typically offering readers reassurance rather than radical critique. Even those writers who address the flaws

of the free market or the problems of the contemporary politics, such as Franzen or Egan, resolve these difficulties, and maintain the status quo, rather than depict revolution or real social change. Consider the family reunion at the end of Franzen's best-selling and award-winning *The Corrections* (2001) or the joyous public concert that concludes Egan's Pulitzer-winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). Sidestepping the critiques of global capitalism delivered earlier in each novel, such scenes represent moments of narrative resolution, as in the last scene of Mason's novel. Like *In Country*, these novels perform compromise, though with different objects and on different terms. On the whole, recent NEA winners write middlebrow novels that middle-class readers will purchase.

For many of these writers, "middlebrow" is not the dirty word it is for so many academic critics of contemporary fiction. Franzen, winner of an NEA grant the year after he published *The Corrections* (2001), has been foremost among those writers publicly advocating the "sinful pleasures of realism" and has openly admitted that he writes plot-driven novels because he hopes to fulfill his "hunger for a large audience" ("Mr. Difficult" 109, "Perchance to Dream" 41). Indeed, Franzen matches Mason nearly point for point when it comes to public statements about the problems with difficult literature and the importance of winning over the average reader. In these remarks Franzen compares himself to Michael Crichton, repudiates the difficulty of a writer like Gaddis, and expresses an interest in attracting the "open-minded but essentially untrained fiction reader" (Studer and Takayoshi). Franzen's ideal reader is not quite the same as Mason's factory worker (the former probably earns more money than the latter and, according to Mason, is more likely to seek out art), but both readers require fiction that is familiar and engaging, not complex and alienating. Statements like these, and others, by federally-funded writers illustrate a change from the NEA's old agenda, which that require training the unschooled fiction reader so that she could appreciate the (formally, thematically) challenging fiction that the state should support. The dreams of 1970s arts administrators seem firmly in the past.

The NEA's support for writers like Mason and Franzen, who produce fiction that does quite well in the literary marketplace, demonstrates the most significant change in the project of state patronage. Rather than funding "non-commercial" work, like the kind collected in the *American Literary Anthology*, the NEA backs fiction that seems likely to become a "commercial success," as Mason called her novel, and often rewards writers, like Franzen, who have already achieved such success. We might see this as a form of self-defense, even self-preservation: if the NEA has been charged with being irrelevant and unnecessary, then high sale figures for state-sponsored

books show the agency's continued relevance. Paradoxically, taxpayer money (exercised in book purchases) is the only thing that can justify the state's use of taxpayer money. But we might also see the NEA's choice to support writers like Mason and Franzen, who are attempting to reinvigorate a seemingly extinct literary form in the post-postmodern age, as its way of being as close to the cutting edge of the fictional world without, as Heston warned decades ago, "gett [ing] nicked." Minimalism and the new realist novels that emerged in its wake navigate the competing claims of innovation and intelligibility in ways that retained the reader's attention without shirking the writer's obligation to make something new. If the story of state-funded fiction begins with the debate between populism and elitism, perhaps it is not surprising that the story ends, or must end for now, somewhere in the middle.

Notes

1. I wish to thank my many readers, including members of the Harvard American Literature Colloquium and participants in the New England Americanists Collective as well as Louis Menand, Deak Nabers, and Kathryn Roberts.
2. Michael Szalay has examined the genesis of the NEA Literature Program, but whereas Szalay focuses on the convergence of political and literary-critical discourses at the moment of the agency's founding, I trace the effect of the NEA on American literary history in the decades following the agency's establishment. See *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (2012), 72–78.
3. By "integrative," I mean fiction that describes and performs the integration, or reintegration, of individuals and communities. Such fiction often assumes traditional narrative forms that link the individual and the larger social body, particularly the nation-state. Examples include the *bildungsroman* and the national allegory. On the *bildungsroman*, see Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987) and on national allegories, see Caren Irr, "Postmodernism in Reverse: American National Allegories and the 21st-Century Political Novel," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57.3–4 (2001): 516–38.
4. The reemergence of literary realism at the end of the twentieth century has recently garnered critical attention. Robert Rebein calls the "revitalization of realism" (7) one of the "most significant developments in late-twentieth-century American literature," while Gordon Hutner identifies the "return to realism" as "the most dominant movement in contemporary fiction in the last 25 years" (423). But the role of literary institutions—including and especially the NEA—in bringing about this return has yet to be recognized.
5. Populism has a long history in America, but for the purposes of my argument, I'm referring to a version of postwar populism that generates suspicion of "elites" and suggests that "the people" should direct governmental policy. For a partial

history of populism in America, see Richard Hofstadter *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (1995), 62.

6. Critics have offered various explanations for why minimalism developed when it. John Barth suggested that the new literary movement was connected to the “national decline in reading and writing skills” and claimed, “Dick-and-Jane prose tends to be emotionally and intellectually poorer than Henry James prose.” Several years after minimalism’s heyday, John Aldridge published a book-length screed against the new “assembly-line” fiction and the colleges and creative writing programs that produced it. More recently, McGurl offered a positive take on the connection between minimalism and the rise of the creative writing program, suggesting that shifting demographics in higher education made literacy and literature available to new classes of citizens (286).

7. David Caute and Frances Stonor Saunders provided important, foundational studies of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. See Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (2003) and Stonor, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (2000).

8. Stone, who has won two fellowships several decades apart, represents an interesting case. Stone’s imagination owes something to the acid-fueled experimentalism of the 1960s counterculture of which he was briefly a part. Nonetheless, his themes have always been part of the main culture; as he once said to the *Paris Review*, “That is my subject. America and Americans” (“The Art of Fiction No. 90”. Interviewed by William C. Woods. *Paris Review* 90 [Winter 1985]). Thus, Stone’s fiction offers its own kind of compromise, between cutting-edge, even alienating narrative style and cultural relevance, a compromise that may explain why he has appealed to the NEA in different moments.

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