INTRODUCTION

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Stories of Nation: Fictions, Politics, and the American Experience aims at repairing the lines of communication between, on the one hand, the critical approach in literary and cultural studies that sees all fiction as political in the sense of embodying a set of covert ideological assumptions; and, on the other hand, the perspective that regards political fiction, poetry, and drama as a valid and often popular subgenre of literature that needs some examination, especially in the context of a highly polarized society such as the United States in the early twenty-first century. A prose narrative or poem or film about politics is one type of exercise in the dimensions of meaning that the imagination can give to political experiences. But a political fiction can also be a story about how applied political rhetoric is itself built around structured narratives and images. For instance, in the special edition of *American Literary History* dedicated to "Writing the Presidency," John Michael examines John F. Kennedy's timely "political self-invention," through his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Profiles in Courage,* as an "embodiment of manly vigor and heroic courage" (424, 430). Kennedy's clever gambit, recovering past senatorial biographies in order to burnish his own by association, ultimately helped the young politician inspire supporters and win election. More recently we witnessed the "swift-boating" of 2004 Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, which turned the narrative of his service with the US Navy in the Vietnam War into something problematic, even damaging, contributing to his defeat.

More generally, our purpose and the purpose of the authors in *Stories of Nation* is to broaden the conversation in American literary studies about what constitutes the "political" in literature and culture by reintroducing the dimension of institutional or representative politics, which has, to some degree, been evicted in order to deal with the political as "covert governing ideology."

At the same time, it is impossible not to be aware of the perils inherent in commencing any kind of political exchange with others, especially in polite conversation. There is little question but that we are living in deeply polarized times. One need only turn on the television or the radio or open a social media site to discover a representative of some entrenched ideology or cultural indignation waiting to pounce. Yet, at the other extreme, it bears remembering that even during the historical surge of the 2008 presidential election, roughly forty percent of eligible American voters abstained from even casting a ballot. This divide, though often examined at a demographic level, is perhaps equally reflective of the conflicted personal feelings at play within even the most well-meaning and responsible of citizens. There is comfort to be found in the synecdoches we use to isolate the political realm within the smallest of geographical spaces—the White House, the Hill, the beltway. Those anthropomorphized domains of otherness are not *us*, and what happens there is separate from what happens in our "real" lives. A representative democracy, in which we permit others to speak on our behalf, allows the pride of empowerment when we are pleased with the state of affairs; but more often it provides us the option for plausible deniability when we are dismayed.

The tension in America between ideology and political indifference has long been a part of the national landscape. It should thus not be surprising that literary investigations of the marriage of politics and fiction have themselves often been fraught and conflicted. In his influential 1957 study *Politics and the Novel*, critic Irving Howe searches in vain for a single work of American fiction that he feels engages satisfactorily with political material. Among literary critics, especially of the postwar era, Howe's position has been more the rule than the exception. As John Whalen-Bridge has pointed out more recently, "the kind of story that 'gets its hands dirty' with actual political struggle and affiliation, that which is deemed likely to inspire readers to take sides in a political controversy, is frequently given subliterary status by critics, scholars, and other taste-makers" (2). Historically, this "hand-soiling"

has often been expressed as a form of corruption, in which engagement with politics comes at the cost of one's innocence. A common trope of many of our most popular political narratives, from *Mister Smith Goes to Washington* to *Primary Colors,* is the idealistic young hero eventually drained of his vision by the tired but also untiring cynicism of the establishment political machine. Every election season, in fact, we see this same narrative play out in real life, as bright-eyed neophytes of all political persuasions position themselves as the unsullied means by which we can clear the temple of unscrupulous, morally compromised "Washington insiders."

Fleeing the compromising reach of organized society by moving up or beyond the mountain and off the grid has also long been an attractive option (at least as an idea) for a lot of people, as if the grid were less an expression of the basic infrastructure of modern society than a prison house of ideological and moral conformism. There are both leftwing and conservative versions of this feeling, of course, from the hippie communes of the early 1970s to the 2016 armed stand-off with federal agents at a national wildlife refuge in Oregon. It is not difficult to discern that a deeper hostility to politics as negotiation and compromise informs the core beliefs of those who opt out—which is, of course, a highly political decision in itself. Clashes with state power and elements of national consensus may indeed become, in such situations, more rather than less likely. Stipulating, then, that mere geographical removal from regular social interaction does not guarantee freedom from either legal or social constraint, or even from the unwelcome influences of political culture, the question as to how one *does* politics in a framework of cultural and moral suspicion of that very activity is unavoidable. It is a question that American literary artists have shown some interest in over the last couple of centuries, but often in ways that lead them to curious resolutions in which their own unease with the subject matter takes center stage.

On the opposite side of the field, however, are political practitioners who have understood that the well-turned narrative, the invocation of a poetic image, and similar rhetorical assets are essential features of the toolbox of democratic and popular representative politics. The political language of the United States may be more compositional, more aesthetically indulgent, more literary, in fact, than that of other societies, and that itself would be an explanation for the unwillingness of most American writers to fully embrace a political identity in their writing. How does one distinguish between the political figure who can tell a good story and the narrative artist with political

ideas? How should the creative imagination be differentiated from the limited vision and self-interest of the politically ambitious? It might also be observed, however, that one aspect in common between fictional and political rhetoric is that the struggle to become is more interesting to audiences than the arrival at resolution. Simply put, it is more exciting to have a turbulent story of sin and redemption than a routine tale of advancement through education and career. A dance with risk and suffering—it does not have to be extreme—in a politician's past can give their account something of the richness of a first-person narration in a canonical American novel. American voters approve of character development.

It is not a difficult task to scribble or type a short list of presidents of the United States who have, both as candidates and as officeholders, represented themselves successfully to the electorate as embodying a story of fortuitous events outside the machinery of predestined social fate—whether that fate involves the availability of wealth or the frustration of poverty, the security of an establishment clan, or the unpredictability of a (somewhat) dysfunctional family. One can think of John F. Kennedy and Theodore Roosevelt as exemplars of the first type of each pair, Abraham Lincoln and William J. Clinton as representatives of the second. This relative contingency of background as a narrative trope is a requirement, it would seem, if you wish to convey to your fellow citizens that you have internalized neither the class bitterness of the poor nor the unseeing detachment of the rich. Those who fail to so convince American voters are most often not rewarded with the office of president.

One of those convincing enough in his presentation to the American public was John Fitzgerald Kennedy, elected by a slim margin in November 1960. In his discussion of the origins and meaning of President Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address, Thurston Clarke notes that JFK ran as a candidate and later accepted his victory at a peculiar moment in modern American history when the cultural power of literacy on one side and of visual media on the other were in somewhat of a tense transitional posture (8). Kennedy was a presidential contender and a president-elect who was quite comfortable with literary references in a country that was also comfortable with them, but was, at the same time, shifting to a culture of image, of television, of a kind of impatience with words that demand too much consideration. Despite much attention at the time to Kennedy's good looks and relaxed style, it is now quite easy to see him as the baroque president, the one who was, by accident of history, the last rhetorician at the switching-point of the era of words and the age of visuality.

Kennedy deployed a personality that implied both the commonality of his antecedents—he had not inherited a special perspective from his background—and the uniqueness of his vision for the country. Neither was exactly true, as the Kennedy worldview was distinctive, and his political vision, at least in part, quite moderate and mainstream. But language comes between the self and the consequence, and JFK is not the first American political leader to have his words enter cultural memory as more than just the record of a political career. A certain canniness common to successful public figures enabled JFK to find his rhetorical center of gravity. Here his individual image could be both the consequence of his background and, at the same time, a space where voters saw not a rich Boston Irish Catholic but a man who had known war and danger and yet combined optimism and maturity with an "egalitarian spirit" that gave him the invaluable "ability to connect" (Clarke 89). At fifty years' distance or more, we know enough to be skeptical, cynical even.

Yet, our study of American political fictions would be remiss if it failed to acknowledge the subtle narrative craft JFK could bring to bear on even the most pragmatic policy debates, such as in this Cold War speech from 1961 at the University of Washington:

> For there are carefully defined limits within which any serious negotiations must take place. With respect to any future talks on Germany and Berlin, for example, we cannot, on the one hand, confine our proposals to a list of concessions we are willing to make, nor can we, on the other hand, advance any proposals which compromise the security of free Germans and West Berliners or endanger their ties with the West.
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> No one should be under the illusion that negotiations for the sake of negotiations always advance the cause of peace. If for lack of preparation they break up in bitterness, the prospects of peace have been endangered. If they are made a forum for propaganda or a cover for aggression, the processes of peace have been abused.
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> But it is a test of our national maturity to accept the fact that negotiations are not a contest spelling victory or defeat. They may succeed; they may fail. They are likely to be successful only if both sides reach an agreement which both regard as preferable to the status quo—an agreement in which each side can consider its own situation can be improved. And this is most difficult to obtain.[1]

In this passage, boldly stripped of evasiveness and hedging, Kennedy suggests that idealistic theories of negotiation fail to understand the limits of

such acts and that they are open to being abused. Furthermore, negotiations are not—he asks Americans to understand—necessarily closed by the victory or defeat of one party. This is a "test of national maturity" that seems to be required. Finally, the nature of advantage and disadvantage in human affairs means that the threshold of difficulty for negotiations—for example, over the status of West Berlin—is set high, and the United States for all its power and influence has constraints on how it can proceed, or even if it should proceed. Thus in November 1961 the president set out a narrative of limits, a story of maturity over naivety, a speculative fiction of how Americans might proceed cautiously but with determination in the conflict with the Soviet Union.

Under a hostile inspection, American authors might appear to want to have their cake of innocence and to eat it too: to condemn political life for its corruption and complications, and simultaneously to imply that the literary arts are where realistic thinking and mature reflection take place. Still, reading JFK, would anyone seriously prefer Norman Mailer or Jack Kerouac to have been president at the moment of the Cuban Missile Crisis? Or, to dial the volume down a little, to have had Walt Whitman instead of Lincoln in the White House? The latter is genuinely an interesting question, as Allen Grossman has argued in his study of the poetry of policy and the politics of poetry in Washington during the Civil War years. Is there a meaningful relationship between political words and words about politics? To answer that and the many similar questions that arise in *Stories of Nation*, our contributors probe the mutual suspicions and the often oddly codependent energies that political narratives and narratives of politics have maintained with each other throughout the history of the American settlement and the subsequent United States.

The first section of this book, The Politics of Fictions, contains essays focused on works of fiction and poetry consciously engaged in the political realm, whether as platforms for social change or as aestheticized works taking advantage of the dramatic possibilities inherent in political conflict and strife.

For the second group of contributions, The Fictions of Politics, the measure for inclusion was the exploration of structures and motifs from the narrative arts in discourses of American political life, and the interactions of public institutions and policy with recognizable forms of fictional representation, from novels to popular music and television drama. The relationship may, indeed, say something about the all-pervading quality of our politics,

or at least its capacity—not unlike Hollywood's—to beat the bushes to find any kind of material that would lend itself to organized storytelling.

We acknowledge the division we are sketching between our two broad groupings is seldom as clean and clear as their rubrics might suggest. In fact, many of these essays contain elements of both, and in actual practice those elements can be hard to separate. But understanding that convergence, too, is no small part of what inspired this project.

Christopher Hebert's "The Death and Life of American Adam: Myth and the Contemporary American Political Novel" starts off the first section by examining the contested legacy of R. W. B. Lewis's American Adam and by challenging mainstream literary critics' ongoing deployment of the Adamic figure, even today, to explain widespread American hostility toward politics and the supposed antipathy of American authors toward political subject matter. Focusing on a body of contemporary novels featuring radical political activists published in the decade following 9/11, Hebert explores the unexamined importance of gender and activism in debates about the character and content of contemporary American political novels.

Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson's essay "'Be Yourselves Declarations of Independence': Nineteenth-Century Literature for Twenty-First-Century Citizenship" confronts a classic dichotomy. Taking on the familiar dilemma of the reforming intellectual—that is, the purported opposition between mature reflection and active engagement—this essay examines the value of deliberation as the indispensable groundwork for dissent. The authors explore the ways in which both Harriet Beecher Stowe in the nineteenth and Russell Banks in the twenty-first century deploy the tools of fiction to assert the political value of preparatory thought against the romance of spontaneous intervention.

In "'A Day-Dream and Yet a Fact': Universal Emancipation in *The Blithedale Romance,*" Luke Bresky asserts that the implications of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 troubled Nathaniel Hawthorne more than he was willing to acknowledge openly in his novel *The Blithedale Romance*, often read as a narrative of detachment from political crisis. Bresky makes the case that the continual re-emergence of flight, refugees, and runaways as motifs in the novel suggests that unresolved conflicts in the national debate after the passing of the Act are a kind of recurring guilt that the narrator and protagonist, Myles Coverdale, studiously tries to avoid. The story brings him, however,

continually into contact with these phenomena, suggesting that Hawthorne as author found himself thinking about them more than he wanted to admit.

An important political and poetic text in its own period, James Russell Lowell's Harvard Commemoration Ode has mostly failed to spark interest among contemporary critics, who remain unenthusiastic about the poem's now-unfashionable aesthetics and overtly patriotic themes. Indeed, Lowell seems to be the one figure among the so-called "Fireside Poets" whose reputation has been the most difficult to recuperate. Nevertheless, in "'Speaking as an American to Americans': James Russell Lowell's Harvard Commemoration Ode and the Idea of Nationhood," Stephen J. Adams reexamines Lowell's poem, seeking to restore the work to its proper historical context, where it stood as a document consciously wrestling with the difficult legacy of the Civil War and striving for a reaffirmation of American nationhood.

Matthew Blanshei takes up the issue of the representation of labor struggles in his contribution, "'Imprisoned in the Present': Class Conflict as Trauma in W. D. Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*." In this essay, Blanshei argues for a Freudian reading of Howells's epic New York novel in which the characters seem unable or unwilling to understand the nature of the social struggle they find themselves pulled into. Blanshei sees a failure of nerve on the part of the main protagonist, liberal editor Basil March, who is confronted by his former comrade Lindau, a left-wing German immigrant, with an idealist critique of American society that March is not prepared to entertain.

Examining the intersection of fiction and political philosophy, David Witzling argues in "Lockean Fundamentalism and the American Literary Tradition" that liberals and progressives have become increasingly unable to understand—let alone empathize with—the conservative view of property rights as a basis for free individual citizenship. He notes, for example, that the idealizing and transhistorical rhetoric of Tea Party activists over the last few years has tended to baffle academic historians and literary scholars who grasp all epiphenomena as historically contingent, including the values of the Early Republic. Witzling reads Henry James's late short story "The Jolly Corner" as an exploration of property as a moment of individual and social integrity that is always lost, projected into memory or a mythical past. The implications for American literary scholarship, the author suggests, are that an increasingly wide gap opens between liberals and conservatives (including among our students) in which ideas that were

once constitutive of American existence are read out of the literary tradition as ideologically impermissible.

In "Character and Charismatic Authority in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*," Anthony Hutchison seeks to demonstrate how the relationship between form and content in the American novel of politics is informed by a complex constellation of political impulses that can be broadly understood as republican in origin. From late nineteenth-century works such as Henry Adams's *Democracy* on to mid- and late twentieth-century fictions such as Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men*, Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*, and the temporarily anonymous *Primary Colors*, such a structure replicates the dynamic between "dictatorial" and "senatorial" conceptions of power that has animated both classical and modern articulations of republican political thought through the ages.

Jerry Giddens's essay on Richard Brautigan recovers and reveals a lost West Coast literary and activist culture. In "Gentle Provocateur: Richard Brautigan, San Francisco, and *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966*," Giddens argues that we should see the counterculture of the era as engaging in serious political interventions even as it appeared to be undermining conventional notions of politics, public behavior, and civic interaction. Brautigan's fiction engages what was only then beginning to be a controversial political topic, although that is difficult to imagine now as the abortion debate has moved through many stages over forty years, and battle lines have become marked by a pathological partisan animosity. For Giddens, to read Brautigan now is to enter not only a literary, but also a political, world that believed in authenticity and honesty.

In the opening essay of the second part of the book, "Failures of Consensus: Contesting Election Sermons in Puritan New England," Meredith Marie Neuman begins by sharply challenging the interpretive framework of the jeremiad, the accusatory prophetic sermon beloved of New England ministers and regarded now as a kind of American cultural trope persisting down to the present day. She investigates the ways in which the New England religious leadership responded to both the crisis in England in the 1640s and the ultimate restoration of the Stuart monarchy by trying to avoid importing political conflict. Nevertheless, two respected and influential figures, Increase Mather and William Hubbard, developed opposing interpretive positions on the meaning of contemporary events in the latter part of the seventeenth

century, positions that undercut our expectations of where we might find the roots of tolerance and democratic values in the American past.

In "Tribal Sovereignty, Native American Literature, and the Complex Legacy of Hendrick Aupaumut," Katy L. Chiles challenges us to think in new ways about the key terms of this collection: "fictions," "politics," and "American." Through the case of Hendrick Aupaumut, a Mohican who served in the American Revolution and was commissioned by President George Washington to travel into the Ohio Valley to negotiate with Native American tribes, Chiles examines the idea of indigenous sovereignty as a political fiction that struggled to assert itself as having the same kind of validity as European tales of nation-states imposed upon the Americas.

Martin Griffin's contribution, "Dave Burrell's *Baghdad Blues*: Fiction, Race, and History in 1950s Iraq," examines the novel by former US cultural affairs officer Samuel L. Greenlee, one of the tiny number of African Americans in the foreign service in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Griffin argues that *Baghdad Blues* is a compelling fiction that represents with satiric accuracy the racially loaded context in which black diplomats worked even when, ironically, they were trying to sell the United States as providing a better model for the developing world than the Soviet Union. At the same time, however, the record suggests that Greenlee himself reshaped the nature of his government experience in the light of his later political beliefs, and a comparative reading of his novel and the State Department archives from 1958 points to questions of fiction, truth claims, and the value of public as well as private documentation.

The fiction that J. Lester Feder addresses is the pervasive idea that American notions of politics and morality can be charted geographically, conveniently pitting North against South, "middle America" against the coasts, red states against blue states. "The Whole United States is Southern: Country Music and the Selling of Southern Conservatism in the Nixon Era" analyzes how this imagery of division has been constructed. Through a case study of the country music of the late 1960s, Feder shows how middle- and working-class whites from all regions found an affinity for songs that depicted the South as an idealized homeland for those who felt displaced by youth culture, deindustrialization, and the increased empowerment of minorities.

In Jerry Lembcke's piece, "*Apocalypse Now* and *The Charm School*: Film, Literature, and the Making of CNN's 'Tailwind' Disaster," the author peels back the skeins of memory, fiction, and fantasy that obscure the history of

CNN's infamous 1997 news and current affairs debacle, a sensational story about the attempted murder by American special forces of American POWs in North Vietnam that fell apart within hours of the broadcast and led to the resignation of senior news broadcaster Peter Arnett. Lembcke reveals how ostensibly personal and truthful accounts of the Vietnam experience can be discovered at source in movies and prose fiction, and explains this against the broader phenomenon of conservative narratives of betrayal that have become an ever-present political subtext in the United States.

Thomas Doherty's "*24*: The Following Takes Place in Real Time" brings the examination of political fictions into the post-9/11 world. In the immediate aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, apocalyptic scenarios no longer seemed like farfetched fantasies, and, for some, ethical qualms about torture were put on pause in the interests of national security. The TV drama *24* emerged into that space, and its penchant for up-close-and-personal torture sessions became its most controversial and excruciating hook—not because of the physical pain inflicted on the suspect, but because of the moral complicity demanded of the viewer. The show tapped into deep-rooted fears, not all them paranoid, and asked tough questions, not all of them with pleasant answers.

The final contribution to *Stories of Nation* is about the fictions we tell each other about art. In her essay "Chagrin and the Politics of American Aesthetics," Constance DeVereaux makes the case for understanding the history of art and its status in this country as a complex interweaving of conflicting attitudes present in the landscape of early America, from the suspicion of art on theological grounds by the Puritans to the aesthetic dismissal of American "amateurism" by European observers. DeVereaux contests as well the authority of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose strictures on the relationship of democracy to artistic achievement have been often uncritically embraced by Americans and replicated in the national conversation about the place of the arts. DeVereaux sees the acceptance of the theory of popular detachment from art and aesthetics in America as a political fiction itself, one that is ominously easy to adopt, as it seems to fit certain stereotypical perspectives on culture and education.

In gathering these pieces together here under *Stories of Nation: Fictions, Politics, and the American Experience*, we hope it is not hyperbolic to suggest that there are times when the rhetoric of politics offers more interesting narratives than the rhetoric of fiction; nor, indeed, do we believe it misleading to assert that a generation's hostile investigation into the politics of American literature

has not led to much more than the energies of critique declining into the mechanics of disapproval. Now, a primal innocence obtains in the corridors of the American literary professoriate, as nervous about the open discussion of real political choices as any suburban dinner party, office lunch table, or Fourth-of-July celebration. This volume would aim to intrude upon it.

NOTE

1. It should be pointed out that Kennedy was always sensitive to the accusation that his best speeches had been written by his long-serving press secretary Pierre Salinger. It is unlikely that any president would go ahead with no direct input for a speech on a crucial issue of national policy, but we accept that the scholarship has argued over this and may attribute some JFK texts to originating sources other than President Kennedy himself.

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