

FORUM

Black Mountain College: Revisiting
Projections, 60 Years After

MARINA MORBIDUCCI

Introduction

Everything that Acts is Actual

Denise Levertov

Antefacts

Quite *à la Black Mountain*, in accordance with the typically informal, yet intensely productive, style of the experimental College set in the picturesque scenario of the Blue Ridge Mountains (Asheville, North Carolina, 1933-1957), the idea of this “Forum” sprang forth out of a conversation at the dinner table. The project of a “Forum on Black Mountain College,” to be possibly hosted at *RSA Journal*, as a matter of fact, took shape during my visit at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies (KCUFS), Japan, in December 2015, under an international exchange scheme between KCUFS and Sapienza University, Rome. “Talk was probably the community’s most characteristic activity” Martin Duberman remarks (101), adding “it wasn’t talk sequestered to classrooms. … People constantly dropped into each other’s studies, staff and students interacting without planning or formality” (101).

In our case, the occasion of such constructive talking was favored by a lovely treat at a *sake* restaurant. During the meal, Matt Theado, Professor of American Literature at KCUFS, naturally enough started talking about American experimental poetry, an interest we shared. By pleasant and mutual surprise, we realized that both of us had been, and still are, Black Mountain College *aficionados*, and that Professor Hitomi Nabae too, of the same Department, also sitting at the table, had approached the movement

in her studies dealing with the influence of the American avant-garde in Japanese arts.

The unexpected convergence of interests seemed singularly propitious for a further engagement in the topic at an international level. The possibility that a fresh opportunity of renewed research on the historical College could arise just from the other side of the globe, during an informal gathering, had some kind of savory premonition in it.

Hence, the desire to organize a joint event on the Black Mountain College experience, with a special focus on poetry and visual arts, grew and consolidated. We soon got in touch with two outstanding scholars connected to the BMC poetics, Ann Charters and Mary Emma Harris, both of whom accepted our invitation. We are grateful to them for their participation. In addition, we were delighted to find out that the editorial board of *RSA Journal* had meanwhile granted such dedicated space.

Antecedents

Black Mountain College, now officially an academic discipline (Black Mountain College Studies), represents a lifelong attraction in my personal case. Please allow me to briefly go over the story of my intellectual engagement with it and of its fortune in Italy.

In 1975, late poet, translator, scholar, and professor Margherita Guidacci introduced me – a young student with a vivid interest in contemporary American Poetry – to the Black Mountain College Poets. Thanks to a 1976 Fulbright-Hays scholarship, my research on the topic continued at SUNY-Binghamton, the university where the editorial board of the post-modern literature journal *boundary 2* was established. At that time (1976-77) the bulky Creeley issue (published in 1978) was being prepared and edited, and I was offered the privilege of being involved in its making. My friendship with Bob Creeley began then and lasted until he left us in 2005 (meanwhile, he had visited Rome several times). Professor W. V. Spanos, my tutor at SUNY-Binghamton, at that time was lecturing on post-modernism and the American post-modern tradition, from Whitman to Pound, Williams, and Olson. His lectures were all memorable and ground-

breaking; not simply an impressive master, he was also a forerunner of theory in the US academy.

In 1987, Annalisa Goldoni and myself edited an anthology of poetry and criticism entitled *Black Mountain College: Poesia & Poetica*, comprising the first Italian translations, with original texts fronting, of the so-called group of Black Mountain Poets. The group was constituted by those writers who, according to Donald Allen's criteria, had been either teachers or students at Black Mountain College, or were authors published in the *Black Mountain Review*. As the first Italian book on BMC poetry, it also featured critical essays by George Butterick (the curator of the Charles Olson's Archives at SUNY-Buffalo in the '80s), Annalisa Goldoni, and myself. In addition, this publication contained the first complete Italian translation of the BMC poetical *manifesto*, "Projective Verse" (1950) by Charles Olson. In "Rivisitando lo scenario poetico del Black Mountain College: sessant'anni dopo," I revisited BMC and once again presented it to an Italian audience, but no further monographs on Black Mountain College have appeared in Italy so far.

Thirty years after this pioneering work, and sixty years removed from the official closure of Black Mountain College as a physical space (1957), its echo, with its propelling power, is once again resonating in these pages.

At present

This re-energized initiative was greatly inspired by the renewed interest in the field manifested in the US, along with the art exhibition "Leap Before You Look,"¹ which was first held at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston (from October 10, 2015 until January 24, 2016), to be then transferred on tour to the Hammer Museum, UCLA (February 21- May 16, 2016), and then to the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University (from September 9, 2016 up to January 1, 2017). The exhibition's catalogue, published by Yale University Press, features 318 color and 170 b/w illustrations, spanning 400 pages, definitely a massive publication collecting the most significant production of the artists who either taught or studied at BMC.

In her introduction, curator Helen Molesworth states:

In 1933, John Rice founded Black Mountain College in North Carolina as an experiment in making artistic experience central to learning. Though it operated for only 24 years, this pioneering school played a significant role in fostering avant-garde art, music, dance, and poetry, and an astonishing number of important artists taught or studied there. Among the instructors were Josef and Anni Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Karen Karnes, M. C. Richards, and Willem de Kooning, and students included Ruth Asawa, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly. *Leap Before You Look* is a singular exploration of this legendary school and of the work of the artists who spent time there. Scholars from a variety of fields contribute original essays about diverse aspects of the College – spanning everything from its farm program to the influence of Bauhaus principles – and about the people and ideas that gave it such a lasting impact. (1)

This volume, in which writings, musical compositions, visual arts, and crafts are also included, “convey[s] the atmosphere of creativity and experimentation that was unique to Black Mountain College, and that served as an inspiration to so many” (*ibidem*).

The same sense of “enduring legacy” pointed out by Molesworth emerges also from the simultaneous debate organized by the Modernist Studies Association 17th Conference – held in Boston in October 2015 and titled “Modernism and Revolution” – in which the relevance of the BMC experience in terms of cosmopolitanism and mixture of forms of art was energetically highlighted. The treatment of the BMC avant-garde stance was articulated in three different roundtables: “Conceptual Underpinnings,” “Interdisciplinarity,” and “Dispersed Publishing Networks.” Some of the most noteworthy scholars on Modernism and Post-Modernist theory from various universities across the US participated in the discussion. A similar focus was also achieved during the symposium organized by the Humanities Center at the University of Maine, in cooperation with the National Poetry Foundation (on October, 22-24, 2015), during which “presentations, roundtable discussions, readings, and open forums” fostered “a wide-ranging conversation about the people, ideas, artworks, social contexts, and conflicts that defined Black Mountain College during its relatively brief but highly influential existence” (*Symposium* n. pag.).

It is interesting to note how the “kick-off event” of this Symposium was explicitly dedicated to celebrating poetry: “The Poetry of Black Mountain College: A Celebration.” Concluding the three-day debate, the question was how to focus on “new directions for BMC-related research in the wake of *Leap Before You Look*” (*ibidem*). In other words, we would like to point out how the multifaceted creative soul of the BMC experience continues to manifest itself and thrive in renewed debate.

For obvious reasons, we cannot go through the whole history of Black Mountain College. Martin Duberman’s exhaustive classic *Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community*, 1972 remains an unobjectionable authority. However, we do want to remember how

[t]he teachers and students at BMC came to North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains from around the United States and the world. Some stayed for years, others mere weeks. Their education was unlike anything else in the United States. They experimented with new ways of teaching and learning; they encouraged discussion and free inquiry; they felt that form in art had meaning; they were committed to the rigor of the studio and the laboratory; they practiced living and working together as a community; they shared the ideas and values of different cultures; they had faith in learning through experience and doing; they trusted in the new while remaining committed to ideas from the past; and they valued the idiosyncratic nature of the individual. But most of all, they believed in art, in its ability to expand one’s internal horizons, and in art as a way of living and being in the world. (“Leap” n. pag.)

It is in this spirit of cosmopolitanism and free inquiry that we are honored to host the authoritative voices of the scholars here included: Ann Charters, Mary Emma Harris, Hitomi Nabae, and Matt Theado. To them, for their scholarship and generosity in sharing, we are deeply grateful and strongly indebted.

Anticipation

In the following pages, Mary Emma Harris, with her essay “Black Mountain College: Open Form in American Education,” concentrates on

the overall development of the arts and artistic curriculum at BMC, from its early period to its closure. Being the author of the pivotal book *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (first edition 1987, reprinted in 2002), she revisits the main events that forged the unique artistic experience which originated from and grew at Black Mountain College. For instance, it was at Black Mountain College that Merce Cunningham formed his dance company, John Cage staged his first “happening,” and Buckminster Fuller built his first dome. Harris claims that the

founders of Black Mountain College were cognizant that they were creating a new form in American education. . . . Black Mountain College was an evolving, conflicted, interactive, open form, nourished by an experimental spirit. This open form fostered challenge, constant redefinition, and change. It permitted a free exchange of ideas and an unrestricted flow of creative energy.

Harris also points out how “from the beginning it embraced experimentation, redefinition, and new thinking,” seeking “to educate the whole person – head, heart, and hand – through intellectual studies, community life, and crafts.” As a matter of fact,

[c]ompartmentalization, departmentalization, and curricular and extracurricular activities did not exist at Black Mountain. Learning took place in mealtime conversations, on construction projects, on the farm, and in informal gatherings.

The life of BMC, and its legacy, vividly expands from Harris’s account.

In her contribution, Ann Charters brings to the fore “the free-spirited atmosphere of creativity and independence at Black Mountain” and “the free-wheeling educational experience” that took place there in the 1950s.” However, she primarily focuses on her personal contact, mutual friendship, and professional comradeship with Olson: “[d]uring the hours I spent with Olson, we never stopped talking.” From her account, Olson’s stature emerges as both poet and educator. Charters confesses, for instance, that after witnessing “Olson’s raffish life style in his modest apartment in Gloucester, he seemed to epitomize the spirit of Black Mountain to me.” She also recalls his physical and intellectual stature:

Olson was physically a large man, a flesh-and-blood, exuberant Maximus figure, large and untidy enough to personify my romantic idea of what an experimental arts college might have been like in rural North Carolina.

Charters continues describing not only her first impact as a student but also her experience as a mature scholar and author herself, focusing upon their exchanges on poetry, the American tradition, Melville, and obviously Olson's "Special View of History," for which Charters wrote the Introduction. From her account, Olson resonates as

particularly adept at carrying on simultaneous multiple conversations with his visitors, focusing without apparent effort on whatever topic they brought to him. It was a skill he used more brilliantly than any professor who taught my classes at UC Berkeley or Columbia University. ... Olson's thoughts ranged freely and widely from subject to subject, beginning with literature and continuing into art.

While emerging as widely knowledgeable in different fields of learning, his style was totally informal and straightforward, reigning

over his kitchen table as if he were conducting a graduate seminar, offering endless big cups of black coffee and small glasses of Cutty Sark scotch to lubricate the hours we spent excitedly exchanging ideas. ... When asked about his theories of education before becoming rector of the college, Olson answered, "I came with no ideas; Black Mountain did it all."

Matt Theado, in his essay "The Arrival of *The Black Mountain Review*," devotes his attention to the editorial experience and poetical revolution created by the seven issues of *The Black Mountain Review*, the journal founded by Olson to spread the BMC poetic line and fame, in order to avoid the imminent closure of the College due to financial difficulties. Under the direction of Robert Creeley, the journal's artistic choices immediately reveal its commitment to innovation and experimentation. Detailed incursions into some of the most significant contributions in the journal display its capillary, intrinsic, and innovative power. Far from echoing the editorial establishment of the time, under the aegis of Creeley's famous statement,

“FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,” the *BMR* encapsulates the most exquisitely avant-garde choices of the period: “*The Black Mountain Review* announces itself as a vehicle for new forms, new expressions, and new poets” and is “one of the most significant publications in US literary history, challenging the contented sphere of New York intellectuals and East Coast establishment poets that held sway in the post-War era.” Theado’s essay shows how

(t)he Black Mountain Review served on the one hand as a cultural tool to funnel the poems that grew in such a space as this into the general reading community. On the other hand, the review was itself a space that nurtured poetry and demanded a nonconformist spirit of art. Out of this space, a theory of poetry arose that matched in intensity and originality the experimentation in the other disciplines for which Black Mountain College was known.

Finally, Hitomi Nabae presents her essay-interview where she recounts BMC’s influence on Japanese art:

A Japanese art journal, *Art Trace Press*, issued a special number in summer 2015 featuring Black Mountain College (1933-1957; BMC). As there has been no scholarly book published in Japan that examines the significance of BMC as a center for art and education as a whole, this magazine is truly pioneering. ... The “Round-table Discussion” by art historians, Masayuki Tanaka, and Michio Hayashi, and a critic and poet, Hisaki Matsuura, serves as a brilliant introduction of BMC to Japanese readers.

If, on the one hand, “it is well known that Japanese art and Zen philosophy were an inspiration to many artists in the US, especially the Beat Generation poets”, on the other, “the influence of Japanese craftsmanship” is less known:

In 1952, Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, along with the founder of Mingei (Folk-crafts), Muneayoshi Yanagi and the British potter Bernard Leach, gave a seminar at BMC. They had already been invited to give several seminars in other areas of America but especially added BMC.

Therefore, Nabae's contribution focuses on "such encounters between American and Japanese craftsmen." The interview with Douglas Kinsey, an American painter and print-maker, "will shed a light on the encounters, or trans-cultural, trans-lingual exchanges of these great spirits of the East and the West." Nabae suggests that "[t]hrough the conversation with Kinsey," it is possible "to trace the ripples and circles of BMC spirit and the involvement of Japanese craftsmanship in the American scene"; "[i]n such way ... the BMC legacies are carried on."

We would like to endorse these concluding words, with the hope that such revitalization of the BMC experience can echo further – in time and space – and truly become "projective."

Notes

¹ In the title there is an evident reference to the intentional reversing of the traditional saying "Look before you leap," adopted by W. H. Auden in his famous poem.

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MARY EMMA HARRIS

Black Mountain College: Open Form in American Education

What is honored in a country will be cultivated there.
Plato¹

Preface

Eric Weiner in *The Geography of Genius* identifies shared characteristics among several cultures which experienced “Golden Ages”: Athens between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, Hangzhou under the Song Dynasty, Florence in the Renaissance, Edinburgh in the Age of Reason, Calcutta in the Bengal Renaissance, Vienna both in the time of Amadeus Mozart and of Sigmund Freud, and, finally, Silicon Valley in contemporary times. In summary, he attributes such cultural flowerings to three common qualities: disorder, diversity and discernment. He also notes that such communities are intimate and interactive, wherein challenging conversation thrives. Timing and serendipity matter as does coincidence. Physical activity is a stimulus to creative thinking. And perhaps, of greatest importance with respect to Black Mountain College, such societies become “talent magnets.”

This essay does not suggest that Black Mountain hosted a Golden Age. Neither does it focus on individual genius. Instead, it observes commonalities between these enlightened societies and the small college to shed light on the generative, dynamic educational community which has had a profound influence on American art.

Disorder

Disorder is simply the order we are not looking for.
Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*

Creative people are forever dancing in this space, on the edge of chaos.
Chaos is order dancing.
Eric Weiner, *A Search*

Weiner concludes that social and political disorder occurs when the existing order is fragmented by war, plague or other catastrophes. This disorder may be a new order that has yet to be recognized or it may be a chaotic environment from which a new order will emerge. In such times of uncertainty, societies and individuals are willing to take risks as there is little to lose. Although war may precipitate disorder, peace is a necessary component of a Golden Age. Otherwise, all resources are consumed by the war effort. Weiner distinguishes between “chaos” as a characteristic of disorder and “anarchy,” in which there is no recognized authority. Although Black Mountain College is at times referred to as an “anarchy,” in fact, there always was an established structure within which disorder and freedom thrived.

Black Mountain College was born of rebellion and discord in a time of social and political unrest. A conflict at Rollins College in Florida in the spring of 1933 culminated in the firing of Classics professor John Andrew Rice and others. Simultaneously, in Germany, Adolph Hitler was elected Chancellor, and, under duress, the Bauhaus, where Josef and Anni Albers had been both students and teachers, closed. The Great Depression gave rise to a plethora of political and social ideologies that culminated in a “perfect storm,” out of which Black Mountain College emerged as a courageous, innovative venture in American education.

one loves only form
and form only comes
into existence when
the thing is born ... (Olson, “I, Maximus”)

Every perceptible thing has form ...

Every form has meaning. (J. Albers)

What is the nature of an experimental action? It is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen. (Cage 69)

The founders of Black Mountain College were cognizant that they were creating a new form in American education. A corollary to the modernist dictum of “form follows function” was the awareness that “form determines function.” It is primarily the form of Black Mountain College that sets it apart from other progressive era schools, and this form was largely responsible for the dynamic community that evolved over the twenty-four years of the college’s existence.

Black Mountain College was an evolving, conflicted, interactive, open form, nourished by an experimental spirit. This open form fostered challenge, constant redefinition, and change. It permitted a free exchange of ideas and an unrestricted flow of creative energy. Conversation was intense and challenging. Rather than be defined by a movement or prove a rigidly delineated theory of education, from the beginning it embraced experimentation, redefinition, and new thinking.

The founders, aware of the need to reassure parents and potential donors, tempered innovation with caution. The 1933-34 catalogue issued in the spring of 1934 notes that the college was to be a place where “free use might be made of tested and proved methods of education and new methods tried out in a purely experimental spirit,” while simultaneously assuring parents that for the first year the college would use only techniques proven in the “western world” – an exquisitely broad field of possibilities. Parents are further reassured that since “experiment is, for the individual, also experience ... no experiment is being tried which is not submitted beforehand to the test of reasonable likelihood of good results.” (*Black Mountain College* n. pag.)

The willingness to undertake the task, the risk, and the high adventure of building an experimental and experimenting democracy, depends in part upon the habits of thought and action, which it is the function of education to develop. (Hook)

When every day offers the adventure of seeking the word for the meaning rather than the meaning for the word, when action and word merge and become one, then shall we have the higher learning in America, and not before. (Rice 596)

At Rollins College, John Andrew Rice and his supporters encountered an authoritarian Board of Trustees and a rigid, vindictive president. At Black Mountain College, faculty would have total control. Governance was an interactive, tiered democracy which embodied the right to challenge authority. The college was also owned and operated by the faculty. A faculty-elected Rector with no separate authority chaired the Board of Fellows and faculty meetings and represented the college to the outside world. The Board of Fellows, comprised of faculty elected by the faculty and a student elected by the students, appointed faculty and managed the financial administration. The entire faculty was responsible for all educational matters and student conduct. The community as a whole – faculty, staff, students, and family members – discussed general matters and often debated or challenged Board and faculty decisions. An Advisory Council of prominent individuals had only the power of persuasion. The students formed a student government and were actively involved in decisions about college life as well as educational policy.

Academic independence was further guaranteed by the college's determination that it would not accept gifts that brought with them control over educational policy. There was no endowment, and the college had to annually raise funds for its own continuance.

The college sought to educate the whole person – head, heart, and hand – through intellectual studies, community life, crafts, and a work program. The student was to assume primary responsibility for his or her education. There were no required courses, and grades were recorded in the office only for transfer purposes (the student did not know what they were). Methods of teaching varied: John Andrew Rice, self-appointed Socrates, presented questions and themes for discussion and encouraged the student to examine cherished assumptions; Eric Bentley lectured, assigned papers, and gave tests; Josef Albers required a completed assignment as a ticket to class. Students entered the Junior Division for a period of general study. Advancement to the Senior Division, a period of specialization, was achieved by an examination covering all areas of the curriculum. Graduation was

achieved through examination by the faculty and an outside authority in the student's field of concentration. Academic bookkeeping, such as course hours and quality points, was eliminated as a measure of education.

From the beginning, it was determined that the arts "which often exist precariously on the fringes of the curriculum" would be an "integral part" of college life. Initially, the arts were not included for their own sake — "no efforts will be made at first to train professional artists" — but instead as means to an end:

[The arts] when properly employed, [are] least subject to direction from without and yet have within them a severe discipline of their own; and also because of the conviction that, through some kind of art-experience, which is not necessarily the same as self-expression, the student can come to the realization of order in the world; and, by being sensitized to movement, form, sound, and the other media of the arts, gets a firmer control of himself and his environment than is possible through purely intellectual effort. This is theory, but a theory that has met the test of experience. It has already been shown to the satisfaction of those who have had a share in it that the direct result of the discipline of the arts is to give tone and quality to intellectual discipline. (*Black Mountain College* n. pag)

Beginnings are usually more interesting than elaborations and endings. Beginning means exploration, selection, development, a potent vitality not yet limited, not circumscribed by the tried and traditional. (A. Albers 52)

Although the founding years at Black Mountain College are often overshadowed by the years when those who were to achieve prominence in the arts attended, it was during these critical pioneering years that the college evolved as a community, compelled by internal energies and ideas. It was more organic entity than institution. As the school evolved, the community incorporated characteristics of a small college, a farm school, a summer camp, an arts commune, a pioneering outpost, and, in its idealism, a religious community.²

Of financial necessity, faculty and their families lived alongside students in the massive Robert E. Lee Hall, a rented Southern assembly-type structure, with a large lobby flanked by dormitory-like rooms.³ Thus, the college did not become a student ghetto on evenings and weekends. Walter

Locke, who visited in the fall of 1934, described Black Mountain, with its thirteen faculty and thirty-one students as a “family college.” The large lobby with its “blazing fire,” he observed, was the family living room. To the visitor, students and faculty were hardly distinguishable, both sharing in the college chores and intermingling freely (Locke n. pag.).

College life was informal and unregimented. Classes were held in the mornings, late afternoons, and evenings. Afternoons were free for recreation, the farm, and the work program. The community gathered for afternoon tea before dressing for the evening meal. After dinner, there was folk dancing with John Evarts, music teacher, at the piano and community singing. On weekends, the college provided its own entertainment. There were concerts, parties, drama performances, lectures, dances, and hikes in the mountains. Formal wear was often donned for evening festivities. A local beer joint with a good dance floor – initially Roy’s Inn and later renamed Peek’s Tavern – provided an escape from the closely-knit community. The massive amount of publicity attracted visitors, upon whom the college called for lectures, concerts, and community discussions. There were disciplines but no academic departments, and interdisciplinary communication was a natural outcome.

A critical corollary to the student’s accepting responsibility for his education was that, although sharing sleeping space, each student had a separate study, a room where, alone, the student confronted the task of taking charge of his education. This feature was so important that when the college moved to its own property at Lake Eden, the top priority was construction of a Studies Building.

The arts were integrated into all aspects of community life. Art students created sets for drama performances; music students sang and/or played. Ted Shawn and dancers visited the first year when on tour and taught the community folk and ballroom dances. There were after-dinner community singing and Saturday night concerts. Students created elaborate decorations using available materials for parties.

Disorder was inherent in the college’s open form, and Black Mountain was never an easy place to be. In contrast to the utopian vision of a democratic community in which faculty and students were united in work and study presented in college publicity, personality conflicts and disagreements over ideals and the practicalities of daily life were unceasing.

The Board of Fellows, faculty, and community meetings were often subject to heated debates. Periodically, conflicts would culminate in a schism, with the surviving community left to heal wounds and mend remnants. The possibility that a faction could take over and ouster the establishment engendered a constant fear of intrigue. Every year, new members of the community arrived with a barrage of suggestions for improvement.

The relationship between faculty and students epitomized Mark Hopkins's metaphor of the student on one end of the log and the teacher on the other. In the first catalogue, "constant intimate contact" was described as essential to the dissolution of the usual hierarchical relationship between faculty and students (*Black Mountain College* n. pag.). A corollary to this intimacy was vulnerability. Pretense was not a cover for incompetence. Frailties were unveiled. There was little privacy, and personal lives were exposed. Although this close relationship is often misconstrued to mean that students and faculty were the same or equal, it was instead the nature of engagement that was unconventional.

Compartmentalization, departmentalization, and curricular and extracurricular activities did not exist at Black Mountain. Learning took place in mealtime conversations, on construction projects, on the farm, and in informal gatherings. The college did not over-program to assure a predetermined result or protect against the unpredictable. The spontaneous, unplanned event was possible.

Absent an authoritarian regime to ensure adherence to an established form, Black Mountain College changed year-by-year – some say week-by-week. Students of the 1930s hardly recognized the college of the 1950s and vice versa. Authority was vested in personalities, and the most vital personalities often determined the tenor of the community. For example, although it is often assumed that Josef Albers was rector of the college, in fact, it was only for one semester that he was willing to reluctantly accept the position. Charles Olson, a commanding personality who returned to teach in 1951, did not accept the rectorship until the fall of 1953.

The 1930s were characterized by a pioneering spirit, a can-do ethic, and a sense of creating something new and significant. This spirit found its ultimate challenge in the spring of 1940, when, faced with eviction from the rented campus in June 1941, faculty and students constructed a large

Studies Building as well as other structures at the Lake Eden property, which it had purchased in 1937 as protection against such an ouster. The new campus was more dispersed than Lee Hall, with both pre-existing rustic wooden buildings and modern structures constructed by the college.

Conflict, struggle for survival, and innovation characterized the college during the Second World War. Most American men were drafted or left to join the war effort, and the college was peopled largely by European refugees, older Americans, and female students. Critic Eric Bentley challenged the progressive ideals of the college and proposed a more efficient, intellectual Black Mountain. He and others forced the issue of integration, and in the summer of 1944, the college admitted its first African-American student. Of greatest consequence, that same summer the college sponsored the first of the summer sessions in the arts.

At war's end, older, more mature GIs enrolled, and new faculty were hired. M.C. Richards and her husband Albert William Levi, in literature and social sciences, respectively, and John Wallen, in psychology, challenged the existing order. With approximately eighty students, the community began to break into cliques, and the faculty questioned whether it was becoming too large. It was during this period that students who were to achieve prominence in the arts first enrolled.

By 1950 in the United States, the risk-taking, ideological community of the Great Depression had been replaced by a materialistic, conformist society. McCarthyism created an atmosphere of fear. Increasingly, the college was a small Bohemian arts community with a constantly diminishing population. The idealism of the founding years had been replaced by a "beat" attitude, a sense of alienation from conventional society. In the fall of 1953, the entire community moved into a few faculty cottages, abandoning the lower campus as well as the few remaining vestiges of progressive education. Still, even in the final years, innovation characterized the college. The influential *Black Mountain Review*, edited by Robert Creeley, was first issued in the spring of 1954. Poet Robert Duncan and drama teacher Wesley Huss collaborated in the last year on the writing and performance of Duncan's *Medea. Part One: The Maiden Head*.⁴

In the fall of 1956, Charles Olson and Wesley Huss, the only two faculty members in residence, decided to close the Lake Eden campus.⁵ Undeterred

by financial difficulties and lawsuits, Olson imagined a new life for the college as a “dispersed” university with an international curriculum. In San Francisco, Duncan and Huss continued their drama curriculum, and Olson delivered his “Special View of History” lectures there in March 1957. The actual end of the college occurred in the spring of 1957 when courts ordered all academic programs to cease until debts were paid.

The Law of Unintended Consequences

Responsibility is to keep
the ability to respond.
Duncan, “The Law I Love”

All real art is or was modern in its time, daring and new,
demonstrating a constant change in seeing and feeling.

If revival had been a perpetual virtue,
we would still live in caves and earth pits.

In art, tradition is to create,
not to revive.

Josef Albers, “Present or/and Past?”

Projects were abandoned or changes rejected any number of times, and the consequences of these unrealized possibilities will never be known. On other occasions, choices – which in a more authoritarian environment would have been controlled – inevitably and irrevocably altered the direction of the college, demonstrating Weiner’s “law of unintended consequences.” Primary among these are the arrival of Josef and Anni Albers only two months after the college opened, the special summer sessions in the arts, the visit by John Cage and Merce Cunningham in April 1948, and the hiring of Charles Olson in 1948-49 to conduct monthly seminars.

In the summer of 1933, the founders invited Josef Albers, former Bauhaus teacher of the preliminary course, to join the faculty. They anticipated an innovative art teacher. Albers was also an abstract artist as well as an assertive personality, and, once he learned English, an influential exponent and articulator of the college’s ideals. From his arrival, the college was associated with the most forward movements in the visual arts. To

the American spirit of progressivism, he brought the spirit of European modernism, which for Albers meant embracing the spirit and possibilities of the present time while respecting the past. Although he was rector only for a few months in the fall of 1948, he was a compelling presence in the community. Through his teaching and that of Anni Albers, weaver and textile designer, the college was a center for the transmission of Bauhaus teaching and ideals in the United States.

The first of the special summer sessions in the arts which were to alter the history and influence of the college were sponsored in 1944. The Music Institute was a celebration of Arnold Schoenberg's seventieth birthday. The Art Institute had among its faculty photographer Barbara Morgan, muralist Jean Charlot, and painter Amédée Ozenfant. This was a daring venture during wartime with gasoline rationing and other restrictions. Conductor Heinrich Jalowetz, organizer with Fritz Cohen of the Music Institute, noted the plan was "audacious ... [but] one learns especially here to maintain that nothing is impossible" (Jalowetz). For the most part, the guest faculty, many of whom later achieved prominence in the arts, were unrecognized, often impoverished, and thankful to have respite from the heat of the cities where air conditioning was uncommon.⁶ One consequence of the summers was that students interested in the arts increasingly registered for the regular sessions, and for the first time the dominance of the arts in the curriculum was challenged by a group of faculty and students.

The seemingly inauspicious visit of John Cage and Merce Cunningham in April 1948 on a two-person tour had lasting consequences. Cunningham danced, and Cage gave the first complete performance of his *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946-48). They were invited to return for the 1948 summer to teach alongside Willem de Kooning and Buckminster Fuller as well as Richard Lippold and Peter Grippe. With their arrival, the arts curriculum, which previously had been dominated by the Germanic tradition, was inextricably linked to the community of young Americans who were to redefine American art in the second half of the Twentieth Century.

Although Cage did not return to the college until the summer of 1952, and Cunningham only for a one-week seminar, they were a generative

presence in the community. Cage recommended composers Lou Harrison and Stefan Wolpe to teach music in the 1950s; Cunningham recommended choreographer and dancer Katherine Litz. In 1952, Cage staged what has come to be known as the first “happening,” and, inspired by Robert Rauschenberg’s all-white paintings, on his return to New York composed his silent piece 4' 33". In the summer of 1953, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company took form at the college.

In New York, Cage and Cunningham were at the center of a community of artists, musicians and dancers for whom Black Mountain College was both a touchstone and a shared identity. Some met at the college; others, at chance encounters at parties and other events. Included in this group were M.C. Richards, David Tudor, Remy Charlip, Nick Cernovich, Ray Johnson, Richard Lippold, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Susan Weil, and others. In 1954, Cage, Richards and Tudor along with Black Mountain students Paul and Vera Williams and ceramists Karen Karnes and David Weinrib joined to form The Land – a Black Mountain for adults – north of New York City.

Charles Olson first commuted from Washington, DC one weekend a month for the 1948-49 school year to teach in the place of M.C. Richards, who was on sabbatical. He remained for the 1949 summer session. In the summer of 1951, he returned from the Yucatan and remained on the faculty – with several absences – until the closing. For the first time, the college was dominated by a single personality. In his own words, it was “Olson’s University.”⁷ Through his presence, the dominant medium of the arts shifted from the visual arts to writing and literature. The *Black Mountain Review* was to become one of the most influential publications of the twentieth century.

Diversity

Josef and Anni Albers were only the first of a number of refugee intellectuals and artists to whom the college opened its doors. With their arrival, the fledgling, provincial school isolated in the mountains of North Carolina was transformed into an international community.

The Europeans, who represented diverse political points of view, had in common only that they had been forced out of Europe by the Nazi regime. Contrary to many schools that refused to take refugees because of Jewish quotas or concerns they might bring an obstreperous personality into their midst, Black Mountain was willing to take a chance. As a consequence, the faculty boasted leading scholars and artists whose presence complemented that of the mostly younger Americans. Xanti Schawinsky (BMC 1936-38), also from the Bauhaus, taught art and theater. His class produced two performances: an experimental *Spectodrama: Play, Life, Illusion* (1937) and a *Danse Macabre* (1938). Among the many eminent refugee faculty were Heinrich Jalowetz (BMC 1939-January 1946), a pupil of Schoenberg and director of the Cologne Opera before he was dismissed in 1933; Max Wilhelm Dehn (BMC 1945 winter-June 1952), eminent Frankfurt geometer, who adapted to the community by teaching Mathematics for Artists (with limited success); and composer Stefan Wolpe (BMC 1952-56), who had few students but composed major works while at the college.

Although in the founding years students came primarily from privileged families in the Northeast, increasingly the college attracted students from diverse parts of the country. During the war, Walter Gropius at Harvard sent Asian students, who would not have been welcome elsewhere, to perform their architecture practicum. Ruth Asawa, a Japanese-American, enrolled after she was not able to perform her requisite teaching practicum in Milwaukee because of hostility toward the Japanese. African-American students and faculty joined the community beginning in 1944.

Numerous articles about the college drew the curious and the committed as visitors. Contrary to academic convention, visitors and invited guests were not housed in a hotel, entertained by a couple of faculty members after a performance or lecture, and then sent on their way. Instead, they dined with the community, were housed in Lee Hall (or later in cottages at Lake Eden), and were drawn into discussions. Students did not hesitate to take John Dewey to the local beer joint or to invite Albert Einstein for a hike. Among the esteemed visitors were Anaïs Nin, Henry Miller, Fernand Léger, Aldous Huxley, Albert C. Barnes, and Zora Neale Hurston.

Discernment

To “see” is to re-form all speech.

Robert Duncan, “Notes”

“What do you think you’re going to do here, Mr. Albers?” Albers said “Make

open the eyes.”

Dreier⁸

Of the three characteristics of a Golden Age, the role of discernment, the ability to understand that which is not obvious or clear, is perhaps the most important yet the most difficult to describe. Key elements of discernment are judgment and perception, both central to teaching and learning at the college.

Black Mountain College sought to prepare students for responsible life in a democratic society. It was anticipated that through community experience students would develop emotional maturity and the ability to make intelligent, discerning judgments. The overriding “rule” was “be intelligent.” There were guidelines, and there was advice from the faculty, yet, ultimately each student was responsible for his decisions. Students had to navigate their way through complex issues, conflicting personalities, and life experiences. There were no formulae and no absolutes.

The two central themes of Josef Albers’s classes were perception – “a constant and accurate ‘seeing and perceiving’”⁹ – and relativity of visual experience. For Albers, visual phenomena had parallels in life. Just as colors interact and change in juxtaposition, so too do personalities in different situations and in relationship to different individuals. In design classes, students created *matière* studies in which they observed that materials in relationship to others assume new characteristics. Class notes are peppered with homilies:

In color there is rarely right and wrong – also life is also the same way.

If you can master the color you hate – you change to sympathy. Also in real life.

Design is planning. … Design means conscious choice.

Who has lied once, no one will believe him.

Who has lied twice, people believe him.

Who lies three times, he believes himself.

Old German proverb. One lie said a 1000 times becomes Truth. I.e., Europe.
These lies do that. By repeating an element, you give multiplied attention.

Habit is in the way of creative production.

Matière. Peel your eye so you become sensitive to form.

Design means conscious choice... Design means highest developed feeling intellect economy!! (Peterson)

A corollary to “seeing” is the act of “recognition.” Students at Black Mountain used whatever was at hand for their studies, including junk from the local dump, leaves, pebbles, and other materials. Anni Albers and student Alex Reed created hardware jewelry using sink strainers, hair pins, and other materials. The perception of students was altered to recognize possibilities for art in unconventional materials. When Rauschenberg passed the window of a shop on Seventh Avenue in New York and noticed the angora goat used in *Monogram*, it was an act of recognition, informed by a perceptive, educated eye.¹⁰ Student Ruth Asawa, after observing utilitarian wire baskets in a market in Mexico, recognized in this common material the potential for elegant wire sculptures.

Poverty

Contrary to Weiner’s observation that wealth is a prerequisite for a Golden Age, Black Mountain struggled every year for financial survival. Among the faculty, limited financial means were often a source of tension. For the community as a whole, however, limited means were a stimulus for innovation. At the request of the students, workshops evolved to meet community needs. A farm was started the first year. The press printed college forms and theater and concert programs; the darkroom, photographs for publicity. A local carpenter helped students build

furniture for their studies. Anni Albers developed a weaving program, the only one of the workshops in the thirties to have a professional curriculum. Local flora and trips to the town dump provided ingredients for Albers's *matière* studies. Imaginative solutions to problems were honored.

Serendipity, Timing, and the Magnetism of Creative Community

Weiner observes that the "pool of talent" in a Golden Age is no greater than at other times but that certain conditions foster the flourishing of that talent. He further observes that such cultures become "talent magnets." (Weiner 29).

Black Mountain College's reputation as a liberal arts college with a strong arts curriculum where students could study in a vibrant, democratic, unstructured atmosphere was spread through publicity and through word-of-mouth. Increasingly, students interested in professions in the arts enrolled. In the postwar years, GIs were not dependent on parental support or approval. Frequently, summer session students remained for the academic year. Asheville was Kenneth Noland's home, and he, as well as his brothers Harry and Neil, enrolled. Robert Rauschenberg met Susan Weil in Paris in the summer of 1948. Already, she had been accepted as a student for the fall semester. He applied and entered late in the semester. When he returned in 1951, he brought Cy Twombly from the Art Students League. Ray Johnson learned about the college from Elaine Schmitt (Urbain) at the Ox-Bow School of Art. Ruth Asawa, a student at Milwaukee State Teacher's College, also heard about the college through Schmitt and her sister. Dancer Viola Farber read an advertisement in a magazine. Kenneth Snelson saw a book on the Bauhaus in the library. Often, a high school teacher recommended a student who would not have thrived in a conventional school. The students were a self-selecting group willing to take a chance on an unaccredited experimental school. For the few students who enrolled, many more chose other options.

Physical Exercise

Weiner notes that the Greeks were walkers and that it has been shown that physical exercise stimulates intellectual activity. The work program at the college was an important corollary to intellectual and artist pursuits. Initially, at Lee Hall work was primarily on the farm and simple housekeeping chores. With the move to Lake Eden, there were major construction projects as well as general maintenance of the property and housekeeping chores, such as dishwashing and scrubbing. When a train with the coal car arrived in the village, the coal had to be shoveled into the college truck and transported to the furnaces.

The Illusion of Self-Support

Black Mountain College allowed itself one illusion: that it could survive financially on a year-by-year basis without an endowment or other reliable yearly source of income. Theodore Dreier, a founder, was from a prominent New York family. His mother Ethel Eyre Dreier was president of the Women's City Club of New York, and her endorsement of the college opened doors for donors who otherwise would not have considered it. Dreier, who taught mathematics, worked indefatigably to raise funds year-by-year. After the war, the GI Bill provided a modest, but steady, source of income. By 1948, however, that source was ending. Those who had helped the college in the 1930s were not willing to support it indefinitely. After Dreier left in 1949, the college was almost solely dependent on loans backed by mortgages on the land, and it was those debts, along with unpaid salaries which were listed as a debt against the college, that led to the college's end.

The Golden Seed

The commonalities of societies which have nourished Golden Ages shed light on the emergence of Black Mountain College as an interactive and

vital creative community. The college did not represent itself as a Golden Age. Instead, it was a garden where “golden seeds,” as M.C. Richards put it (170) were nourished and allowed to sprout. While it was self-consciously experimental, it did not anticipate its ultimate influence on the arts and on education. Those who taught and studied there and who later were to achieve prominence in many professions were at the time unrecognized. As with societies where Golden Ages flourished, the conditions which fostered the creative life of the college are complex. The college existed in a specific moment in world history, and its experience cannot be transported or repeated. At the same time, its ideals and structure can serve as an example for others seeking to create relevant, vital communities of learning.

Notes

¹ As quoted in Weiner 61-62.

² A similar description of the college appeared in an article. Unfortunately, I have lost that reference and most humbly acknowledge my source.

³ Families with small children lived in nearby cottages.

⁴ The play was published as *Medea at Kolchis; the maiden head*.

⁵ Joseph Fiore, art teacher, had taken a leave-of-absence.

⁶ Summer faculty were guest faculty and were not members of the corporation.

⁷ Charles Olson to Robert Creeley, May 22 [1952], *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, 92.

⁸ As quoted by Barbara Loines Dreier in interview by Mary Emma Harris, June 21, 2000, Black Mountain College Project.

⁹ Josef Albers, “if there is one truism of education today...,” *Black Mountain College Papers*, Western Regional Archive, Archives of the State of North Carolina, Asheville. Henceforth, WRA.

¹⁰ The description of “found objects” suggests that a person is looking for a specific thing. More important is a heightened awareness that enables the act of “recognition” when confronted with the unanticipated. Weiner posits that randomness is far more important for the artist than choice (196-197).

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ANN CHARTERS

CHARLES OLSON AT BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE: THE PERSISTENCE OF HISTORY

my memory is
the history of time
Charles Olson, *Maximus*

In June 1957, I graduated as an English major from the University of California in Berkeley. If I had known then about Black Mountain College, the experimental arts college in North Carolina, I might have thought about applying there as a graduate student to take classes with the poet Charles Olson. Contact with him and other American writers such as Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, who also taught at the college, would have been so different from the staid approach of my professors teaching the academic canon at Berkeley that the heady breath of fresh air at Black Mountain might well have changed my life. But it was the wrong time. I was too late to study at Black Mountain College with Charles Olson. A year before my graduation, the college had stopped accepting new students.

Actually, Olson's views were available to me much closer to home. In February and March of 1957, after his job ended as rector of Black Mountain, he visited San Francisco and Berkeley to give seminars on what he called "The Special View of History." I didn't know about Olson's lectures to a select group of local California poets, so I missed my chance to hear him. I had only seen copies of *Black Mountain Review* for sale at City Lights Bookshop in San Francisco's North Beach, where I'd browsed through the literary magazines. It took a decade before the idea of Olson's teaching at Black Mountain College began to gradually take hold of me. More than half a century later I find the idea still "alive and kicking" in my imagination.

Like many other readers, in 1966 it was Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* that introduced me to the achievement of the Black Mountain poets such as Olson, Duncan, and Creeley. This

groundbreaking anthology of 454 pages featured avant-garde rather than academic poets. As an editor at Grove Press, Allen was sympathetic to experimental writing in the United States and saw it as “closely allied to modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting, today recognized throughout the world to be America’s greatest achievement in contemporary culture.” He made a similarly large claim for the new American poetry, which he thought was “now becoming the dominant movement in the second phase of our twentieth century literature [after the work of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, H.D., and Wallace Stevens and others] . . .” (Allen 12).

Allen grouped the new American poets into different geographical sections of the United States, including the Beat poets in New York City and several poets of the San Francisco Renaissance. He presented the writing of the Black Mountain poets first in his anthology. Allen didn’t write any introductions to the different sections of his book, but he included many of the writers’ statements on poetics as an appendix. It was here that I first read Olson’s “Projective Verse” essay, which I found to be a challenging aesthetic manifesto. I wasn’t sure I understood exactly what Olson was saying in his dense text, but I was impressed by his urgent tone and his intense engagement with his topic.

Reading Olson’s poetry in the Black Mountain section of the anthology, however, was different. I immediately responded to the mixture of spontaneity and toughness in his voice, as well as his stance, which couldn’t be clearer. In his poetry, Olson seemed to know me better than I knew myself. As a young member of America’s 1960’s counter-culture strongly opposed to America’s escalating war in Vietnam, I felt that he had me in mind when he wrote in one of his early “Songs of Maximus”:

In the land of plenty, have
nothing to do with it
take the way of
the lowest,
including your legs, go
contrary, go
sing (Allen 13)

In Olson's confident assertion of his nonconformity, I caught echoes of the tradition of his spiritual ancestors, the New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Reading Olson's words in this song and in his other *Maximus* poems in the anthology seemed to encourage my potential for creativity. Even before I admitted it to myself, I wanted to become a writer. Unconsciously, I had begun the process of taking Olson as my "courage teacher," as Whitman is described in Allen Ginsberg's poem "A Supermarket in California."

In 1967, my husband Sam and I became friends with Robert Hawley on our trips to Berkeley, where Sam was working as a producer for Vanguard Records with the band Country Joe and the Fish. They had composed an anti-Vietnam War song, "Fixin' To Die Rag," that was a hit around the world. Sam and I were collecting books by Beat Generation authors, and Robert had started a small press called Oyez, funded by his job in Oakland as a bookseller. With his small press, he published exquisitely printed books and broadsides of poetry by Olson, Duncan, Creeley, William Everson, Mary Fabilli, Jack Spicer, and other San Francisco Renaissance poets.

A decade earlier, Robert and his wife Dorothy had been Olson's students at Black Mountain College, and they were dedicated supporters of his writing. At Black Mountain, Olson had encouraged Hawley to pursue his interest in the subject of Western Americana and helped him to begin his career in the book business by giving him the task of cataloging the books in the library before the college closed down.

Late in 1967, Hawley furthered my engagement with Black Mountain by suggesting that I write a book for Oyez. He proposed a study of Olson's first book, *Call Me Ishmael*, his reading of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Two years earlier, I had completed my doctorate in American Literature at Columbia University with a dissertation that included a chapter about Melville's life in the Berkshires, where he wrote his most famous novel. Hawley believed I had the necessary academic knowledge of Melville's work to elucidate Olson's radical view of the nineteenth century writer.

I didn't have the good fortune of experiencing first-hand the free-spirited atmosphere of creativity and independence at Black Mountain, but apparently Hawley had internalized it after his years with Olson at the college. He was willing to publish my neophyte's study of Olson

and Melville as an Oyez book without subjecting my manuscript to an academic review. Hawley was also willing to give me Olson's address at 28 Fort Square in Gloucester, Massachusetts. I could write to the poet if I had questions about his involvement with Melville or his interpretation of *Moby-Dick*. After Hawley sent me the address, I was on my way. My first letter to Olson from my home in Brooklyn Heights, New York was dated January 7, 1968, and the poet answered it three days later. With Olson's help, my writing about *Call Me Ishmael* went quickly.

On June 13 we met for the first time when I visited him in Gloucester and spent the night in his home. It was a one-bedroom, cramped, poorly insulated apartment in a shabby wooden two-story building, where – thanks to Olson's personal charm – I almost immediately felt welcome. I also met George Butterick, his doctoral student at SUNY Buffalo, who would become his editor. During the hours I spent with Olson, we never stopped talking. I managed to ask him the few questions I had left about Melville and also photographed him as we took a walk together in his neighborhood. Oyez published my study and my photographs of the poet and his Gloucester environment in *Olson/Melville: A Study of Affinity* later in 1968.

Before I met Olson, I had spent several months analyzing his thoughts about Melville, so I was familiar with his independent spirit and intellectual approach. After our day together, his personal style readily re-enforced my image of the free-wheeling educational experience that had been Black Mountain College in the 1950s. That was when Olson took over its leadership from the German artist Josef Albers (1888-1976).

If I'd ever been fortunate enough to meet Albers, I don't think I would have thought of him as an embodiment of Black Mountain, though actually he was associated with the college much longer than Olson. An international pioneer of twentieth-century modernism, Albers came from the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany to Black Mountain College at its founding in 1933, stayed on until 1949, and then for several years became the chairman of the Department of Design at the Yale University School of Art.

After I witnessed Olson's raffish lifestyle in his modest apartment in Gloucester, he seemed to epitomize the spirit of Black Mountain to me. To begin with, Olson was physically a large man, a flesh-and-blood, exuberant

Maximus figure, great and untidy enough to personify my romantic idea of what an experimental arts college might have been like in rural North Carolina. As I described my first sight of him in my book *Evidence of What Is Said*:

Olson stood before me framed in the doorway [to his kitchen]. He was dressed in a light blue, un-ironed cotton short-sleeved dress shirt and a pair of baggy slacks. Obviously he hadn't been awake for very long. He was as tall as Hawley had described him, but I didn't find his size menacing. He had gray stubble on his plump cheeks, and behind his large glasses his blue eyes seemed kind, if a little puzzled to see me. He sized me up quickly, remembered who I was, and welcomed me inside. When he spoke, I noticed that his accent sounded less pronouncedly Massachusetts than Jack Kerouac's, though both men had been born in cities – Lowell and Worcester – in the same state. (Charters 15)

My passionate interest in the writing of Kerouac and Olson had developed after I completed my doctorate. I obviously felt a fatal attraction to bohemians. Perhaps it was a reaction against the many years I had sat quietly in the classroom, keeping a low profile while I docilely completed the requirements for my academic degrees. Or perhaps I felt an immediate rapport with Olson when I discovered in Gloucester that he was as much an educator as a poet. He was particularly adept at carrying on simultaneous multiple conversations with his visitors, focusing without apparent effort on whatever topic they brought to him. It was a skill he used more brilliantly than any professor who taught my classes at UC Berkeley or Columbia University.

In our conversations, Olson's thoughts ranged freely and widely from subject to subject, beginning with literature and continuing into art, especially the local artists in Gloucester such as Fitz Hugh Lane. He reigned over his kitchen table as if he were conducting a graduate seminar, offering endless big cups of black coffee and small glasses of Cutty Sark scotch to lubricate the hours we spent excitedly exchanging ideas.

As Olson wrote in a poem nearly a year later, on March 7, 1969, he was lonely in Gloucester after the death of his wife Betty in an automobile accident, and his mind was "hungry for everything" (Olson, *Maximus* 604). But on a deeper level, as Duncan understood, Olson "saw education as a

spiritual attack. ... He wanted things to happen in his students spiritually. ... Ginsberg shares it. This is actually Charles' alchemy" (Wagstaff 248).

The second time I visited Olson in August 1968, I also went next door to the apartment that George Butterick was occupying, surrounded by the open boxes of Olson's manuscripts that Butterick was attempting to organize. On his desk, I saw many worn manila folders containing loose pages of Olson's typescripts and handwritten manuscripts. I noticed some pages about Melville, as well as many pages that seemed to be part of a series of lectures Olson had delivered during the last months of Black Mountain College in 1957. He'd called it "The Special View of History."

While I was reading material in this folder, Olson appeared in the doorway, and I asked him if I could borrow the pages where he discussed Melville for my book about the Olson/Melville affinity. I didn't realize it, but this was the beginning of the second project I did with the poet, my editing of the manuscript of his lectures comprising "The Special View of History." This text is the one that links him most closely in my mind to his teaching at Black Mountain College.

Olson first came to Black Mountain in the fall, 1948, and he visited once a month, for a week at a time, during the rest of the year. He was also there in the summer and fall, 1949, and lectured during an evening in May, 1950. His most extended teaching began in the summer, 1951, continuing with short leaves of absence until Black Mountain closed in the fall of 1956 ("and on for another year," he later recalled, "to settle its affairs, until July, 1957") (Charters 117).

Robert Duncan, who taught there during the spring and summer, 1956, when Olson lectured on "The Special View of History," refers to the years in the early 1950s, before the college began to run down financially, as the period of its most illustrious writing students – John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Ed Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, Michael Rumaker, Fielding Dawson – and the beginning of the *Black Mountain Review*.

Robert Creeley, who first edited and published the *Review* in Majorca, came to Black Mountain in March, 1954 for about two months, then returned a year later in June, 1955, and stayed until January, 1956, leaving just before Duncan arrived. When asked about his theories of education before becoming rector of the college, Olson answered, "I came with no ideas; Black Mountain did it all" (Charters 117).

Both Duncan and Creeley regarded Olson's interest in history as one of

his dominant concerns, both as an educator and as a poet. It was at Black Mountain, preparing “The Special View,” that Olson fully realized how “a man’s life is an act of giving form to the condition or state of reality (concerned obviously as a moving thing himself) at the exact moment of his birth – So therefore error or truth in the execution of that imperative is the whole shot!” (Charters 86). According to Butterick, the specific impetus for Olson’s lectures on history at Black Mountain goes back before 1954; at that time, for Olson, it was “Letter 23 Maximus broke it” – the poem ending

I would be an historian as Herodotus was, looking
for oneself for the evidence of
what is said.... (Olson, *Maximus* 104-5)

Olson later explained his reference to Herodotus in his talk “On History” at the Vancouver Conference, 29 July 1963:

Obviously the word “history” is a word – unless you take it to root. ... And the root is the original first use of it, in the first chapter if not the first paragraph of Herodotus, in which he says “I’m using this as a verb ‘*istorin*, which means *to find out for yourself*. ” After all, Herodotus goes around and finds out everything he can find out, and then he tells a story. It’s one of the reasons why I trust him more than, say, Thucydides, who basically is reporting an event. ... (Butterick 147).

To find out for yourself, Olson’s demand is always the active voice, that we use history, not that we be used by it. As Creeley told me when I interviewed him in Annisquam, Massachusetts, Olson offers a stance diametrically opposed to existentialism in rejecting that view of history as something “you’re stuck with in some inexorable manner and it grinds you out, you’re always too late because it all happened last year. It’s an awfully sad way to think” (Olson, *Special View* 12). Olson takes a more positive, much broader sweep in defining history as “whatever happens, and if it is significant enough to be recorded, the amount of time of the event can be minute” (Charters 124).

In his preface to his notes on “The Special View of History,” written at Black Mountain in 1956, Olson stated that his lectures proceeded from

a “concept of man with the dynamic first proposed in *Projective Verse*” (Olson, *Special View* 13). In theory and in action, history held a continuing fascination for him; he expressed in his work his deeply personal sense of discovering what had happened in the past, often turning his immersion in history into the creation of a poem.

On January 13, 1962, for example, Olson wrote the Maximus poem “A Later Note on Letter #15” that expanded on his interpretation of history as a personal commitment to action:

which was a verb, to find out for yourself:

‘istorin, which makes any one’s acts a finding out for him or her self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere at least by seizure, that the objective (example Thucidides, or the latest finest tape-recorder, or any form of record on the spot live television of what – is a lie
as against what we know went on, the dream: the dream being self-action with Whitehead’s important corollary: that no event is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal event

The poetics of such a situation
are yet to be found out. (Olson, *Maximus* 249)

Olson began *The Special View of History* with an epigraph quoting the poet John Keats, the Romantic poet’s famous diary entry in 1817 defining what he called the human quality of Negative Capability, “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge” (Olson, *Special View* 14).

When I interviewed Duncan in San Francisco on June 5, 1969 about teaching at Black Mountain College, he emphasized that he, Olson, and Creeley were linked by their belief in Keats’ Negative Capability, or as Duncan put it, by their shared belief that an individual’s action involves the acceptance of imagination and mystery. This concept values intuition and uncertainty above reason and knowledge. “It’s the imagination,” Duncan

told me, “the revelation of something as dream, as magic. Whereas the literalists [the academic poets] will plug along as if the most solid thing was solid, [not] making out the magic experience as the poem” (Wagstaff 240).

On September 19, 1968, I wrote Olson that I would like to examine the folder of his papers comprising “the lecture series” on history at Black Mountain. “If you could possibly send them, or Xeroxed copies, it would be great. There is, I think, much there to get into. And perhaps put this material together for publication. IT SHOULD BE PUBLISHED. It’s great, rich stuff, containing many insights into your work” (Charters 71). Olson replied on September 20th that he welcomed my idea “of looking over the whole back-load of material. … It will certainly put you in whatever they mean by the cat-bird’s seat. That is, I’m sure the material would be most successful if severely (practically) edited” (Charters 73).

The process of transcribing and editing “The Special View of History” took nearly a year. After I examined Olson’s papers more closely, I wrote him on April 10, 1969 that I wanted to prepare a second book for Oyez consisting of perhaps 50-60 pages, with “The Special View of History” at its center. I’d write an introduction, and then ask Duncan and Creeley if they’d like to contribute something “on what they remember of being with you there. My idea of this book is to follow a pencil outline of the ‘History’ seminar I found in one of the folders” (Charters 112-113).

I also had access to notes taken by the young poet John Wieners, who had attended Olson’s series of lectures on history at Black Mountain. I suggested that Olson help me organize the contents of the book. “There might also be a chart or two, a reading list, some loose notes that you used to get into the lectures, etc. Whatever you’d like too. If you want such a book, let me know soon – for then I’ll type out what I have and send it to you for going-over” (Charters 113).

The first week of June 1969, I went to San Francisco to interview Duncan about Black Mountain College. On June 23, 1969, unaware that Olson’s health was rapidly deteriorating – he was already suffering from the liver cancer that left him only six more months to live – I wrote him another letter about the Black Mountain project, and we spoke on the phone the following day. I sent him some questions about the lectures, and he answered all of them by letter on June 27, 1969.

I visited Olson for my third and last time in early July 1969, when I returned the folder of materials about “The Special View of History” that he’d lent to me. I also left him a Xerox copy of my edited material. I had hoped to go over my text with him in Gloucester, but he preferred to take a walk and talk to me instead. After I told him about a dream I’d had about my young daughter, I remember him saying to me on that day, “You have a real talent for dreams.”

Creeley was then living in near-by Annisquam, Massachusetts, and I interviewed him about Black Mountain College on July 7, 1969. Three days later, apparently having read the Xeroxed manuscript I’d left of my version of “The Special View of History,” Olson sent a telegram to me in Brooklyn Heights with the words “Just change the word crucial to nexal and send it off. Good luck and Happy voyage. Love, Charles” (Charters 120).

Olson wrote his last letter to me on July 28, 1969, ending it “Yrs with love & continuing success -- & approbation, Charles” (Charters 124). He died at New York Hospital on January 10, 1970 before Oyez published the slim volume I had pieced together to comprise *The Special View of History*. Olson never got to tell me what he thought of it. He had liked the photographs I had included in my earlier book *Olson/Melville*, saying “You’ve really caught my physicality.” I hoped he would at least have liked the new book’s cover, a black and white photograph of the dramatic Jean Charlot mural at the College of a barefoot peasant enfolded in a hooded garment, reading a manuscript page. After Olson’s death, I had traveled from New York City to the deserted college buildings in North Carolina to photograph the mural.

In Olson’s papers deposited at his archive in the Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut are the original documents comprising “The Special View of History.” In 2005, the late Olson scholar Ralph Maud spent some time with them and concluded on the evidence of several manuscripts that Olson had probably revised his original Black Mountain lectures on history at least twice, once to write an article for *Origin* magazine, and a second time to present the material as his series of five lectures in San Francisco in 1957. Maud tried to interest another publisher in re-issuing “The Special View of History” with these amendments and additions, but this project was never realized.

I cherish my memories of working with Olson on the two books I completed for Oyez, but I am most happy with a piece about looking for Herman Melville in the Berkshires that I wrote in February 1969, an imaginative construct combining Melville's words with my own. It is included in my recent book *Evidence of What Is Said*. Though I never attended Black Mountain College, I believe that I couldn't have written about Melville so freely without the influence of Olson's "alchemy," his passionate belief in chance and indeterminacy. His example was sufficient for me to break through the stranglehold of my academic inhibitions and take to heart, finally, his advice to answer a creative work with a creative work.

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MATT THEADO

The Arrival of *The Black Mountain Review*

You spot a new literary magazine in the rack in a little bookshop in New York City, brushing against the latest *Origin*, in sight of *The Hudson*, *Kenyon*, and *Paris Reviews*. *The Black Mountain Review* is emblazoned on the cover over a kaleidoscopic pattern of red and green triangles. Bottom right corner: “Spring 1954 / 75 cents.” To the left of the design, three names appear: Charles Olson, Robert Hellman, René Laubliès. Olson’s name rings a bell; his poems have appeared regularly in *Origin*,¹ and he’s had a few poems in *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Several copies of *In Cold Hell, In Thicket*, his first book of poetry – which is, in fact, *Origin 8* – is now stashed in the Poetry Section between Frank O’Hara and George Oppen. But Olson is best known for a startling essay entitled “Projective Verse” that had been published in 1950 and was subsequently boosted by William Carlos Williams, the kind of boon most avant-garde writers only dream of. Olson’s name on the cover conjures a rush of promise, a dash of challenge.

You pluck up the new magazine and thumb through it. The first poem is one of Olson’s: “On First Looking Out of La Cosa’s Eyes.” If you’re not yet versed in Olson’s style, the experience is certainly surprising and likely bewildering. The poem begins this way:

Martin Behaim – and nothing
between insula Azores
and Cipangu

(Candyne
somewhere there also
where spizerei

and yes,
in the Atlantic, one
floating island : de Sant
brand an

Jarringly unlike popular magazine verse (where *are* the verses?), nothing genteel or sentimental about it. Olson builds on arcane historical references – without providing footnotes, of course. Today's readers can easily look up these references online: Martin Behaim created the first globe of the earth just before Europeans learned of the existence of the lands that came to be called the Americas. On Behaim's globe, Cipangu – that is, Japan – was just around the bend from the Azores. Juan La Cosa, a 15th century Spanish navigator and mapmaker who had sailed with Columbus, constructed one of the earliest world maps that included the New World.

Readers in the 1950s with few quick-reference resources to hand may have stood baffled, gaping at the first poem of this new magazine, not grasping what it was about. They would recognize that the poem's title echoes Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and probably see how both poems consider the experience of viewing new worlds, though Olson shifts Keats's perspective from inward to outward, from the past to the future. They would have seen a scattering of words that make obscure allusions in a peculiar syntax. "On First Looking Out of La Cosa's Eyes" situates the reader in the place / time of emerging knowledge. Poets have handled the subject of navigation to the New World in any number of ways; we might think of Walt Whitman's "Passage to India" or his final poem, "A Thought of Columbus." Whitman did not write in the standard verse forms of his day, true, but his intentions were clear to his readers. Olson is following a rationale for poetry radically different from Whitman's. As he declared in "Projective Verse," "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT," a phrase he attributed to Robert Creeley, a poet who also appeared in *Origin*. Getting back to the poem at hand, we may venture that it traces the patterns of discovery, the movement from perplexity and ignorance to a hazy comprehension of a new world obscured in the mist, yet one already gained by the poet who stands on the dim shore, beckoning. The poet challenges readers to put the pieces together, to build from clues and fragments, until they participate in a poem that recreates a sense of discovery of the, well, of the New World. Experientially, the form of this poem is an extension of its content.

In this way, the poem is aptly situated as the leadoff poem in a new magazine that introduces another emerging world – the New American

Poetry. Olson's poem both heralds and typifies new possibilities in poetic forms; *The Black Mountain Review* announces itself as a vehicle for new forms, new expressions, and new poets. On first looking into it, one may imagine the reader's "wild surmise."

The Black Mountain Review is one of the most significant publications in US literary history, challenging the contented sphere of New York intellectuals and East Coast establishment poets that held sway in the post-War era. The magazine's seven issues from 1954 to 1957 introduced important new poets who were acknowledged in 1960 in Donald Allen's groundbreaking *New American Poetry* as the "Black Mountain Poets."

The Black Mountain Review did not appear in a vacuum. It was one of dozens of little magazines available in the US in the middle 1950s. Little literary and arts magazines came and went with the seasons, and keeping up with them could be difficult. The delightful or quirky magazine you saw here one month may not be here the next – or ever. The artistic impetus of little magazines was often robust, nevertheless. Specific titles may have been fleeting, but approximately one hundred and ten experimental journals were typically available world wide, a number that remained constant throughout the 1950s (French 548).

At the time of the magazine's conception, Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 in the North Carolina mountains, was on its last legs. The school's faculty had included such luminaries as Joseph and Anni Albers, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Franz Kline, M.C. Richards, and more. The social and cultural atmosphere of the Depression Era had shifted by the 1950s, however, and experimental, liberal programs sometimes garnered suspicion and disdain from a public growing less tolerant of liberal ideals. There was pressure within the school's administration to foster a more conventional atmosphere, and over time the school's divided identity weakened its appeal. By 1953, the more conventional faction of the school had diminished; by then, though, only fifteen students were enrolled (Erickson 279) and the school was desperately low on funds.

Poet, teacher, and rector Charles Olson planned to reinvigorate the school's vitality. He had been corresponding for years with Robert Creeley whom he invited to edit a literary magazine in the hopes that

such a publication might bring renewed attention to the school. From his current home in Mallorca, Spain, Creeley sought submissions from some Black Mountain College students and from various acquaintances and correspondents and put together the first issue. The inaugural publication had 64 pages: eight poems, one short story, an essay, eight reproductions of René Laubiès paintings, and a sheaf of reviews.

When looking back on the venture years later, Creeley summed up his purpose for the magazine:

it was a place defined by our own activity and accomplished altogether by ourselves – a *place* wherein we might make evident what we, as writers, had found to be significant.... To be published in the *Kenyon Review* was too much like being ‘tapped’ for a fraternity. It was too often over before one got there, and few if any of one’s own fellow writers came too. Therefore we had to be both a press and a magazine absolutely specific to one’s own commitments and possibilities. (“Introduction” vii-viii)

Around 500 copies of the initial run were printed inexpensively in Mallorca and shipped to Black Mountain for distribution. For their circulation, Creeley relied on various friends, such as Irving Layton in Montreal, or poet Paul Blackburn who personally distributed the magazine to New York City bookshops.

Into what kind of cultural atmosphere did the review appear? Marjorie Perloff explains that the most-acceptable, most-successful American poetry in the 1950s was required to be “self-contained, coherent, and unified: that it presents, indirectly to be sure, a paradox, oblique truth or special insight, utilizing the devices of irony, concrete imagery, symbolism, and structural economy.” That is to say, that it conforms to the attributes of the New Critical version of good poetry. Perloff identifies certain poems by John Crowe Ransom as exemplifying these traits lauded by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their *Understanding Poetry*. Whitman was not particularly admired. “In those days,” Allen Ginsberg recalled in a 1996 interview, “Walt Whitman was considered a jerk.” By this, he meant that the established gatekeepers of American literature did not admit Whitman as a particularly significant poet, so he was neither frequently nor amply anthologized. At the same time, William Carlos Williams’ poetic

techniques (influenced by Ezra Pound) and subject matter had long since been absorbed and no longer seemed revolutionary. Yet Williams' influence was essential for The Black Mountain Poets and related Beat poets such as Ginsberg, whose success fortified Williams' renewed importance.

Thus, at the time of *The Black Mountain Review*'s first issue, the business of poetry in the United States was conducted primarily by poets who typically adhered to the most frequently published and anthologized styles, typically relying on established forms of stanza, rhyme, and meter. Kathryn Van Spanckeren describes the most well-known poets of the time this way:

Often they were from the U.S. eastern seaboard or the southern part of the country, and taught in colleges and universities. Richard Eberhart and Richard Wilbur; the older Fugitive poets John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren; such accomplished younger poets as John Hollander and Richard Howard; and the early Robert Lowell are examples. In the years after World War II, they became established and were frequently anthologized. (n. pag.)

An entirely different way of seeing poetry was in the works. Perloff points to little magazine poetry that had been fomenting beneath the stacks of the mass-market glossy magazines and the university-housed poetry journals. "In this context," she points out, "it must have been wholly exhilarating to pick up *The New American Poetry* (1960) and read, in its opening pages, a poem by Charles Olson called 'The Kingfishers.'" (n. pag.)

The striking difference between Olson's language and style and those of most other poems of the day would certainly have been among the reasons for a reader's exhilaration. The status of US poetry had been fashioned decades before. Lisa Steinman, in *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (1987), writes that

between 1900 and 1930 cultured readers turned to the high sentiments of American genteel poetry, like that of Trumbull Stickney and Thomas Aldrich, while the average American read the sentimental verse of poets like Edgar Guest and James Whitcomb Riley in the leading magazines of the day, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. Although such poetry was viewed as a refuge from

the harsh realities of the world, and so as having an almost sacred character, it was not generally taken seriously. Nor were those who wrote poetry. (15)

While upstart factions of poets sporadically challenged the established traditions of their day, the 1950s, as Perloff indicates, had propagated a particularly conformist atmosphere in United States poetry. Social conformism was a natural result of the general solidarity of the war effort, with millions marching in uniforms to defeat a common enemy that in the post-war 1950s mutated to aggressive totalitarianism. Conventional thinking held that pressure from outside its borders would bring adherence to American idealism, while pressure from within to conform to standard norms would sustain the US's emergence as a global power.

The rise of mass consumerism and new technologies emblematic of post-war prosperity helped swell the circulation of popular magazines. In fact, this popularization of mass culture had begun even during the war years. Writing in the *Sewanee Review* in 1945, R.P. Blackmur pointed to this commercialization as an obstacle the "serious writer" has always been challenged to overcome, one that he believed to be growing more manifest: the writer needs to satisfy an audience that demands "something less than he could provide." Blackmur claimed that the situation was worsening because of the increasing development of the mass market, where writers were judged "by the standards of the market and neither by the standards of literature nor by those of the whole society" (293). In 1944, he pointed out, *Time* and *Life* had a combined circulation 4,745,000 while the *Saturday Review of Literature* had 23,000. The *Saturday Evening Post* had 3,393,000 while the *Virginia Quarterly* and *The American Scholar* had 3,000 and 5,000, respectively. Blackmur credited *The Saturday Evening Post*'s descent to "the standards of the new illiteracy" for its great increase in circulation (296). Blackmur also diagnosed the decay-via-growth of a once-solid literary stanchion: "The *Atlantic Monthly* was held to 25,000 through the editorship of Bliss Perry, but ... when it reduced its standards to those of *Harper's Monthly*, it began to approach *Harper's* circulation" (296).

For Blackmur, the lack of a supportive center, or "cultural capital" of the sort that had been prevalent in pre-war Europe, prevented the long-term development of young, idealistic poets who periodically form "abortive

and sterile groups" (294). Instead of artistic patronage or cultural support on a national scale, Blackmur argued that the country developed mass but lacked intensity. Given the lack of a cultural center, the marketplace dictated the nature of the product; Blackmur concluded that the "theory of a cultural market does not work" (295). Serious writers could not find a market that rewarded serious artistic creation, nor could serious writers rely on universities to support poets and arts, and in their inevitable failing, writing will be merely imitative of what's gone successfully before: "All's Alexandrian else" (298).

Were the conventional tastes of popular market readership so formidable as to deter poets from writing innovative, daring poetry? In 1952 *The Partisan Review* hosted in its pages a forum titled "Our Country and Our Culture," asking a panel of intellectuals and writers to respond to four questions; the primary ones were these: "Must the American intellectual and writer adapt himself to mass culture?" and as a corollary, "Can the tradition of critical non-conformism ... be maintained?" ("Our Country" 285). Norman Mailer, predictably maintaining his personal defiance, decried that older intellectuals and writers had changed their attitudes regarding their relationship with America: "The New Criticism seems to have triumphed pretty generally, PR's [*Partisan Review's*] view of American life is indeed partisan, and a large proportion of writers, intellectuals, critics – whatever we may care to include in the omnibus – have moved their economic luggage from the WPA to the Luce chain, as a writer for *Time* or *Life* once remarked" (298). Mailer cautions that adaptation to the mass culture is less likely to beget art than "propaganda" (301).

Louise Bogan, another contributor to *The Partisan Review's* forum, likewise calls out the older generation as both catalyzing and rewarding imitation and repetition rather than innovative movements: "'The modern style,' in the graphic and plastic arts, is now the accepted, 'official style' and modern literature has, for some time past, been hardening progressively into a set of recognizable clichés" (562). In the midst of this cultural calcification, Creeley found that he and the poets who were simpatico to his ideals were dissociated from the established presses and magazines. "Either they were dominated by the New Critics with whom we could have

no relation,” Creeley believed, “or else they were so general in character, that no active center of coherence was possible” (“Introduction” vi).

Poet and publisher Allan Dowling continued the exploration of the theme in *The Partisan Review*. He claimed that it was “very difficult for the average artist, or intellectual, because of the extremely high costs of living, to spend his time in the few centers where he may meet and mingle with others of his own craft, and find a market for his product” (293). Though his reference seems directed to urban settings, he may as well have been referring to Black Mountain College. By 1954, the student body there had dwindled to nine students, the dining hall and dormitories were closed, and students lived in cottages and purchased their own food. In effect, Black Mountain, which the drama teacher Wesley Huss described as “a community of subsistence dwellers,” became something of an artist colony (Harris 174; cited in Erickson 279). Michael Rumaker, a student at the college who sought a place that might nurture his poetry and also accept his homosexuality, was undaunted by the spartan conditions: “Perhaps I had found a safe place – a rare enclave in America at that time – for my own queer self” (qtd. in Erickson 280). Students and faculty alike were finding, despite the school’s financial challenges, a supportive center for their art, a mini-version of the sort called for by R.P. Blackmur. *The Black Mountain Review* served on the one hand as a cultural tool to funnel the poems that grew in such a space as this into the general reading community. On the other hand, the review was itself a space that nurtured poetry and demanded a nonconformist spirit of art.

Out of this space, a theory of poetry arose that matched in intensity and originality the experimentation in the other disciplines for which Black Mountain College was known. Olson had been corresponding for years with Creeley, and together they had hammered out the core ideas that Olson promulgated in his essay on Projective Verse. In prioritizing “open” form poetry, Creeley explained that “forms accepted from another time or usage carry with them a predetermined character which may or may not prove inimicable [sic] to the poem under hand.” Instead of relying on traditional notions of poetry centered on forms such as sonnets, or on metrics and conventional rhythms, Creeley and Olson believed the poet ought to rely on the breath, the way a person says a thing (Layton 25). Ultimately, the poem stands as an autonomous whole of its own creation: “a poem suffers

too much if it is considered as anything but the given poem, under hand ... a poem is an actual high energy construct" (27). Creeley goes on to say that a poet may use the sonnet form, if that in fact suits the purpose of his poem – if the poet intends irony, for example. "Form is always an extension of content," he maintained.

From this background, *The Black Mountain Review* arrived in the mass-market milieu of the mid-1950s with Charles Olson's leadoff poem and its startling presaging of the magazine's energy. The second poem in the review was written by Thomas White – a pseudonym for Robert Creeley, it turns out. "Song" strains against the ballad stanza ("I would marry a very rich woman / who had no use for stoves / and send my present wife / all her old clothes") much in the manner he had described; a sonnet form may enhance the irony of a poem.

Creeley's core of contributing editors – Olson, Blackburn, Layton, Cid Corman (editor of *Origin* who not only supported the new venture but sent Creeley his mailing list), Kenneth Rexroth, and later Robert Duncan – were all more or less dedicated to the principles of open-form or Projective Verse. The idea of Projective Verse is best seen as a starting point, a concept of how poetry operates, rather than a proscriptive guide for how to write it. Even sympathetic readers did not always firmly understand the poems or stories they were reading. Michael Rumaker, who would publish important stories in *The Black Mountain Review*, initially was perplexed by Creeley and his work when Creeley arrived on the campus in 1954: "He came at you out of nowhere, with no antecedents (as I thought then), with his perplexing sensibilities and acute but difficult perceptions. Whatever was he talking about?" (137). Seasoned poets, too, sometimes struggled to understand Creeley and Olson and their ideas of poetics. Creeley relates that when one of his stories was accepted at *Kenyon Review*, editor John Crowe Ransom said he didn't understand it, and Robert Penn Warren said it didn't have a plot. Creeley was cowed by their response: "It was like being the awful kid at school who was doing something irrevocably wrong" (Faas 167).

Canadian poet and long-time Creeley correspondent Irving Layton put the question directly to Creeley in 1954 in one of his many letters. In this case, he was complaining that he and other interested, intelligent readers struggled to comprehend Creeley's recent review of William Carlos

William's poetry. More generally, he confessed his bafflement at most of what Creeley and Olson wrote in their expository writing, claiming they had "developed a strategy of syntax, a method of leapfrogging nouns and verbs, a detective game of missing connectives which makes the greatest demands upon a reader's alertness. If the aim is to mystify the reader rather than to enlighten him, you succeed admirably." Layton put forth a request: "Why don't you write a simple expressive English which can be read and comprehended without too much straining ... ?" (168) If Creeley were to do so, Layton maintained, then he might draw more readers to his verse. Instead, his opaque explanations were prohibitive.

But Layton's retort was mild compared to the critical attacks of poets who were unsympathetic to the Black Mountain poets' Projective Verse / open form poetry. James Dickey on Olson's theories of verse: "One is never sure one understands it! He has all kinds of notions about the relationship of 'the line to breathing and other bodily processes,' and he uses a curious and perhaps private vocabulary to talk about them. ... The test of all theories of poetry is the kind of poetry they produce, and this is where Olson and his followers seem to me to fail all but abjectly. Their work has absolutely no personal rhythm to it; it all comes out of the tiresome and predictable prosiness of William Carlos Williams" (196).

Dickey's reaction generally represents the New Critical response to the Black Mountain Poets, but not all readers of the *Black Mountain Review* were steeped in New Critical interpretations, nor were all New Critical-trained readers as hostile. For the next three years, in trying conditions and against the odds, *The Black Mountain Review* was regularly stocked on that rack in the little New York bookshop, radiating the news about the New World. The journal appealed strongly to a new phalanx of poets who were bringing out new poems in new styles.

Notes

¹ Denise Levertov, Irving Layton, Robert Duncan, Paul Carroll, Paul Blackburn, and Robert Creeley had been published in *Origin* by 1954 and would appear in *The Black Mountain Review*.

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HITOMI NABAE

Experiment and Experience: Trans-Cultural and Trans-National Legacies of Black Mountain College. An Interview with Douglas Kinsey

Introduction

A Japanese art journal, *Art Trace Press*, issued a special number in summer 2015 featuring Black Mountain College (1933-1957; BMC). As there has been no scholarly book published in Japan that examines the significance of BMC as a center for art and education as a whole, this magazine is truly pioneering. While people who were involved in BMC have often been discussed individually, such as Charles Olson in poetry or John Cage in music, as have genres such as dance or architecture, the inter-disciplinary experience has not been approached. However, the editors of *Art Trace Press* focused on BMC as a ground-breaking environment in education. The “Round-table Discussion” by art historians, Masayuki Tanaka and Michio Hayashi, as well as critic and poet, Hisaki Matsuura, serves as a brilliant introduction of BMC to Japanese readers. Yet their historical overview of BMC is not sufficient to imagine the actual interfaces of artists and students and the sources of their creative force and new ideas.

In the post WWII era, it is well known that Japanese art and Zen philosophy were an inspiration to many artists in the US, especially the Beat Generation poets. What is less known perhaps is the influence of Japanese craftsmanship. In 1952, Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, along with the founder of Mingei (Folk-crafts), Muneayoshi Yanagi and the British potter Bernard Leach, gave a seminar at BMC. They had already been invited to give several seminars in other parts of America, but they

added a special trip to BMC. Mary Emma Harris refers to this seminar in *The Arts at Black Mountain College*: “The highlight of the Crafts institute was a two-week seminar held October 15-29 with Marguerite Wildenhain of Pond Farm in Guerneville, California; Bernard Leach; Shoji Hamada; and Dr. Soetsu Yanagi, director of the National Folk Museum in Tokyo” (231). In 1951, Olson had written to Leach to ask him to recommend a resident potter, and he suggested his former apprentices Alix and Warren MacKenzie, who were then living in Minnesota. Leach had already planned to come to the US with Hamada and Yanagi for seminars in Minnesota (joining the MacKenzies) as well as in California, so he suggested another seminar at BMC. Leach observed “American potters are drawing ideas of form, pattern, color and skills from beyond the seas, both East and West. One is from China, Korea and Japan the other from the contemporary movements of art and architecture [Bauhaus]” (Leach 29). Although it was seen that American craftsmanship lacked the kind of tradition of Europe or Japan, Wildenhain countered him that, “an authentic American tradition would be forged in time through a synthesis of many cultural influences” (Harris 232). Arguably, American tradition grows through encounters and collaborations by different craftspersons in both East and West, and my paper will focus on such encounters between American and Japanese craftsmen.

The following interview with Douglas Kinsey, an American painter and print-maker, Professor Emeritus at Notre Dame University, sheds light on the encounters, or trans-cultural, trans-lingual exchanges of these great spirits of the East and the West. Kinsey studied with Warren MacKenzie, who was an important student and friend of Leach and Hamada and who also attended the 1952 seminar at BMC. Kinsey grew up in the Midwest and was not a student at BMC, but he was aware of its presence at the time and was feeling the new wind from both sides of the continent – BMC and Japan. He is one who still remembers the spirit of BMC and the influence of the Japanese potters. Through the conversation with Kinsey, I trace the ripples and circles of BMC spirit and the involvement of Japanese craftsmanship in the American scene.

When did you first come to know about Black Mountain College?

Probably when I was in college, 1953 to 1957. It seems I've always known about it. It may have come from attending a college strong in the liberal arts [Oberlin College, Ohio] where you were aware of new developments in the arts.

What do you know about it?

Too much to deal with here! The projects and teaching methods had a great influence on the arts as they developed in mid-century America.

You studied with Warren MacKenzie. How did you meet him?

I took a class from him in 1957 or 1958 when I was in graduate school at the University of Minnesota. Although I was in the painting program I had always been interested in ceramics, so I took the chance of making a fool of myself. Warren approved of such experimenting and I was thrilled with him. He was open and friendly. He also told me that he was a Quaker. At that time, I was the only Quaker I knew of who was devoted to the visual arts. To the traditionally austere Quakers, art had been extraneous or even suspect.

In the late 1950's, Warren's idea that form was more important than utility in pottery corresponded to the ideas of Abstract Expressionism in painting that were the leading edge in America at the time. Of course, I had also been playing with those ideas and accordingly trying to paint rapidly, spontaneously and without planning. This approach in ceramics has much in common with Korean folk pottery and with the works produced for the Zen tea ceremony. At any rate, I threw a pot and finished it with a strong, spontaneous calligraphy with a stick that actually poked holes in the pot and made it useless to hold water. Warren was very pleased and encouraged me, even though my concept was more developed than my throwing technique and craftsmanship ever would be.

Warren and his wife Alix would invite me to stay with them at their house in the country. The house was simple and severe in an almost Japanese manner. The walls were white, there were no window coverings, and there was a great deal of unfinished wood. I was amazed and have borrowed their taste ever since then. It might not have been the result of a Japanese influence at that time but surely represented a universally found taste for simplicity and a sense of the handmade that Mingei also exemplifies.

In the Mackenzies' house there was a moss green ceramic vase which held raisins and peanuts to restore the weary potters coming in from the wheel and the kiln. It tapered to a strong rim. The sides had been slapped with a paddle with a fish -scale pattern while it was still wet. It was so understated that I hardly saw it when I first encountered it. Then second time I saw it, I was overcome by the subtle strength under its unobtrusiveness. It was my first sight of a Hamada masterpiece.

After Warren and Alix had finished their MFA degrees in Chicago in the late 1940s, they went to Cornwall in England in hopes of working with Bernard Leach. They had not actually been invited by Leach, but, in the next two years, Leach became the MacKenzies' mentor and friend. When Leach visited them while I was still in graduate school, I spent hours talking with him. I read his books and incorporated his ideas into my graduate thesis on the modern painter Marc Chagall.

As you know, MacKenzie was involved in bringing Hamada, Yanagi and Leach to give workshops and seminars in the States in 1952. MacKenzie came to Black Mountain College during the 1952 session and returned in 1953, the summer after Leach and Hamada's visit, to lead the same type of workshop on his own.

You just referred to Mingei. Shoji Hamada, Kanjiro Kawai and Soetsu Yanagi, who started the Mingei (Folk Craft) movement in Japan and in 1936 founded Mingei Museum. They valued works which we use every day and are made by unknown craftsman. Yanagi's Mingei toha Nanika (What is Mingei) rediscovers beauty in folk-crafts from the point of view of usefulness, simplicity, and anonymity. Mingei also found a healthy aspect in folk crafts. Did you know about Mingei before you went to Japan?

Warren MacKenzie probably told me about it, but by the time we visited Tokyo in 1975, I had been reading about its founder, Yanagi, and about Mingei. My wife Marjorie and I had become friendly with the Weatherhill/Heibonsha publisher's representative at our professional society meetings and had been using the good deals he offered to accumulate a number of beautiful and scholarly books about the arts and architecture in Japan. In 1975, we went to the old Bingoya Mingei shop in Shinjuku that Marjorie had visited on her brief trip to Japan in 1962. She knows she purposefully sought it out but can't remember how she knew about it. We also sought out the Folk Craft Museum in the Osaka Expo Park, as well as the Mingei Museum in Tokyo, and wanted to pay homage to Hamada during that 1975 trip.

Tell me about your visits in Japan and your encounter with Hamada Shoji.

Because of my friendship with MacKenzie, Marjorie and I had hoped to meet Hamada when we traveled to Japan in 1975. However, we were strongly advised by the director of the Folk Museum in Osaka not to do so since he was elderly and overwhelmed by foreigners who wanted to meet him. The director had been so kind to us that we accepted his advice. However, we were already going to be taken to Mashiko by a former student of mine, a Japanese nun who had been studying at the University of Notre Dame (where Kinsey was teaching). We were to visit the father of one of her students who had a large pottery studio, which turned out to be adjacent to Hamada's property. When we explained our promise to not try to meet Hamada, one of the students at this pottery said it would be possible for us to visit Hamada's pottery without meeting him because she knew Hamada's son, and he could escort us. The most important connection I made in visiting Hamada's studio was to see a wooden paddle on top of a pile of tools. That paddle had the pattern I had seen at MacKenzie's house. Hamada's son verified that the paddle was a very old one. My experience at MacKenzie's house in Minnesota had come full circle.

At this point the soft green mist of spring turned into a downpour. Hamada's son invited us into the main house, a huge, old, traditional farmhouse, one of several that Hamada had moved to his property. The rain pounded down as we dried out and warmed our feet in the sunken hearth of

the vast main room. His mother gave us tea to get us warm and then served us tiny dishes of the plums from the plum wine she was bottling back in her beautiful stainless-steel kitchen. An immense space but very homey. The day already seemed perfect.

As the rain turned back into mist, Hamada's son thought the time was right to visit the little museum of world folk craft that Hamada was developing. Well, to our surprise, as we headed down to the damp path to the museum, we ran into a dozen Western journalists surrounding Hamada himself. When we were introduced and Hamada heard that I was a student of MacKenzie's and had met Leach, he took us to the museum himself – without the crowd of journalists. Hamada's interest in the handmade object was clear as he introduced us to his collection of folk craft from around the world. He and his wife and son were very generous to us. Such a brief encounter did not especially generate new ideas but confirmed old ones.

What influences did Hamada's work have upon you and upon American potters and artists?

I don't know very much about what potters here in America think about Hamada now – or even how many people know about him. I do know that Hamada, through Leach and MacKenzie, was the grandfather of the rediscovery of beautiful form for functional stoneware in America in the 1960s. Right now, there is a diversity in pottery that reflects every development in art, but the Japanese based strain is still strong.

I would say that his legacy is more of an attitude than a specific kind of form. It is an encouragement for a potter to be willing to leave his piece at the point that reveals how it was made. It always suggests movement. The surface is not "cleaned up" or over refined. Rather, the process is direct and shows the discovery of the form. In a sense, the end product is the creative activity made visible. Black Mountain College (1933 – 1957) situated in the mountains of North Carolina, was extremely successful in generating artistic creativity. Students worked in orchards and vegetable gardens. Students could stay as long or as short as they wanted. Many teachers were avant-garde artists from New York or Europe, and many of them have become famous since their Black Mountain experience. They were musicians, poets, dancers, actors and visual

artists including potters. Many art forms joined, creating new ones such as “happenings” which have since thrived in New York and subsequently the total art world.

Hamada, Yanagi, Kawai who started Mingei Movements believed that crafts created out of necessity in everyday life are beautiful. They are not as high art nor are they the product of mass production. These founders wanted to tell the world that a craft made by an unknown person could be appreciated as something beautiful. He had his own view of “art” and “craft.” How about you? What do you think of the terms “art” and “craft”?

Or how do I differentiate art and craft? I have pretty defined ideas about this. They are not the generally accepted idea. Art to me is the making of something that the maker hasn't seen before. He starts out not knowing what he is doing. To him his effort is original. A craftsperson is someone who knows from the beginning what he wants to do. The implication is that he has seen it before. His criterion of success is learning to do it well. I must note that this differentiation has nothing to do with the materials used. A potter, by this definition, might be an artist; a painter might be a craftsperson. Nor does this definition have anything to do with whether the end product has a practical use or not. Hamada is definitely an artist. His work has a presence that is inspiring; it doesn't make any difference if it holds water or not.

What is Hamada's legacy in contemporary American pottery?

This is partly answered under “what influences” above. He still has resonance in America where potters have seen his work. It is not easy to see his work. It also takes a meditative person to treasure his unobtrusiveness. He is an amazing designer but is not showy. The observer must be able to recognize authenticity.

What legacy would you like to leave with your students?

I would want it to be close to what I see as Hamada's influence. I want their work to be well designed and to stimulate on many levels. I would want it to feel human and humane in some kind of way. The observer needs to feel able to identify with the work.

What do you think was the impact of the visit of Hamada, Yanagi and Leach on the students at BMC and on pottery in America?

The direct impact on the BMC students needs a first-person informant. Nationally? In that era, before social media, impacts were gradual and incremental. The seminar at BMC was Hamada, Yanagi and Leach's contact with America's East Coast. Even though the school was hidden in the southern mountains, there was a strong tie to northeastern cities, especially as former faculty and students moved away. For instance, poet and former faculty member Mary Caroline Richards, now a potter, returned from New York for the seminar. Her meditative book, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person* (1964), could be found in every hippie potter's studio in the 1960s and 1970s. The influence of the seminar spread from potter to potter. Today, when I go to a farmer's market, potters will occupy several booths. Their stoneware is almost inevitably based on Hamada and Leach, even though the very young potter may never have heard of them.

The above interview was conducted by way of a series of emails we exchanged from November to December 2016. I may need to restate that Professor Kinsey met Warren MacKenzie in 1957, the year BMC closed down due to financial reasons. Kinsey was then too young to be part of BMC but he knew about it and also learned its spirit from Professor MacKenzie who Leach had recommended to Olson as a new ceramics instructor at BMC, although it was not realized. If it had, Kinsey would have never met MacKenzie, nor Hamada whose work Kinsey saw in MacKenzie's kitchen. I would like to add that without Kinsey I may not have had the chance to become interested in BMC, Hamada, or Mingei. The spirit of BMC, even after its disappearance, indeed kept influencing the wide world.

A Japanese potter, Hamada, had worked with Leach for three years at St. Ives, UK. Leach, as he writes in his essay, *A Potter in Japan*, lived and worked with him and other Mingei craftsmen in Japan. Their works, interestingly enough, attract all people, regardless of their racial and national identities. They are neither purely Japanese (Eastern) nor British (Western). They are simply beautiful and attractive. What is common among them is that they worked with natural material with their hands and discovered the way to express its essence, or its true nature. Mingei craftsmen preferred to call their work “crafts” and not “art,” supposing one is spontaneous and useful and the other more egoistic as a museum piece. But it is also what Kinsey calls “art” as they drew out something new that none has ever discovered before – a new perspective. Moreover, the artists and craftsmen working together and exchanging ideas as Hamada, Leach and MacKenzie have done, set an example of a healthy growth of our culture. Personal contact and collaboration seems to be a way to share and inherit the spirit of craftsmanship and the conduct of life, or “attitude” in Kinsey’s word, à la BMC. To add, Kinsey’s wife and art historian, Marjorie, and Mary Emma Harris were graduate school roommates. Marjorie wrote in her email: “We have followed developments about keeping the history of BMC through our friendship with Mary Harris. Her records, her interviews with everyone left alive after she began research about 1970, truly show the influence of the college.” I, too, through the Kinseys, and they through MacKenzie and Harris, feel part of the encounters, or trans-cultural and trans-national exchanges of great spirits of the East and the West. In these ways, therefore, the BMC legacies are carried on.

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Appendix



(from Art Trace HP: This edition has a thorough chronological index of BMC.)



(Pottery Seminar, 1952 at BMC. From left: Hamada, Leach, and a woman participant, Harris 233)



(A Container by Shoji Hamada. Nabae's family collection)