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The Centrality of Black Mountain Poetry

N. S. Boone

And also that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel. —Judges 2:10

The not-so-subtle biblical text above warns of the loss of history, the loss of heritage. It is the job of literary historians to tell and re-tell the story of the writers who have shaped our literature, to pass down their most vital works to the younger generations so that they cannot forget where they came from, the shoulders they stand on. Literary historians believe that from a proper vantage point, such stories of past generations provide a way to see more clearly the present circumstance and to create better models for knowing how to meet the challenges that face us now. Thomas Pynchon may have been right when he said, “Except maybe for Brainy Smurf, it’s hard to imagine anybody these days wanting to be called a literary intellectual,”¹ but readers of this journal ought to be concerned about how literary history is being (re)written today, not only for the general benefit well-written histories provide us all, but because it is a precarious historical moment for Black Mountain College studies. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature (NAAL)*, which is the standard literary anthology in U. S. college classrooms, has dropped all three BMC faculty from its pages in its 9th, and latest, edition.² Those who know the history and legacy of Black Mountain College have the responsibility to respond to this omission so that future students will continue to have a chance to learn the Black Mountain heritage and the lasting contributions made by the artists affiliated with the college.

What reasons lie behind the editor’s decision to cut each of the three BMC faculty? I can surmise three possibilities: The first reason, in a word, is diversity. For decades the academy, across the board, has pushed for the noble goal of broadening the canon to include a greater diversity of ethnic backgrounds as well as diversity in perspective—particularly when it comes to gender and race. *NAAL*’s introduction to the “Literature after 1945” period is largely shaped by the story of America’s growing diversity of voices, beginning with the marginalized ethnic voices of Civil Rights

movement to the broader international voices brought to America's shores through immigration in the 1980s, '90s, and 2000s. Though one can argue that Olson, Creeley, and Duncan's work spins out into socio-political directions which lay a strong foundation for diversity of perspective and expression, it is true that all of these writers are dead white men. This fact is notable when one sees what new poets *NAAL* includes in the latest edition who had never graced its pages before: one, Frank Bidart, is a white (homosexual) man, and two, Natasha Trethewey and Tracy Smith, are African-American women. If the push toward diversity is part of the reason for the dropping of the Black Mountain three, *NAAL* has omitted three voices whose own work was central in encouraging diversity of expression—aesthetically, politically, culturally, and personally. Anthology space is limited, and it is difficult work to determine which writers must be sacrificed in order to make room for newly discovered writers, or to broaden the canon's ethnic diversity or gender inclusivity. What I hope to show, later on, is how the Black Mountain poets deserve to remain on the basis of the magnitude of their influence—including how they influenced diversity of expression.

Second, there has been for some time in the arts a movement toward accessibility. The modernist poets—Stein, Pound, Eliot, Stevens—have always been challenging to teach. Not only are they challenging, they also have been categorized as elitist (and Stein, Pound, Eliot, and Stevens each held unapologetic elitist viewpoints). It may be overly simplistic, but the writers who share in the immediate heritage of the moderns (as Olson shares in Pound's heritage) are then often seen as sharing their elitist values. Though the blue-collar, FDR-supporting Olson likely would have bristled at charges of elitism, such is the broad brush with which all challenging poets such as himself are painted.³ There is no doubt, however, that Olson's poetry—filled with hectoring allusiveness—is difficult for the average American Literature Survey student to understand on a first (or second) reading. There is no easy cure for this problem. But *NAAL*'s response has been to eliminate from its pages the poets most devoted to lyrical complexity. It's important to note that Olson, Creeley, and Duncan are not the only complex poets that were dropped. Jorie Graham, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet whose work bears a strong resemblance to the Black Mountain poets (especially in her commitment to process poetics and a phenomenological rendering of perception), was

also left out of the latest edition, though she had been a staple in the anthology since the fifth edition.⁴ If accessibility is something NAAL feels it must emphasize, then it is not difficult to see why the Black Mountain poets were dropped.

Third, it is likely the case that teachers have begged for more space for novelists. Every anthology editor loses sleep over those great writers who must be ignored—the great poems that barely fail to make the final cut. But there is limited space. One of my own personal complaints about the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* over the last number of years is that it has had a poor representation of important American novelists—especially those whose most significant works come from the 1980s. The editors corrected this oversight in the latest edition by including portions of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*—and I think this is a necessary change. Whether or not adding DeLillo and other novelists should necessitate the dropping of the BMC poets is another matter. It should be noted, however, that poetry, overall, makes up far less of the anthology than it has in past editions.⁵ While it is admirable to include the work of more recent novelists, I will argue that, given the centrality of Black Mountain poetry for what happened to poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century, dropping Olson, Creeley, and Duncan is a literary-historical mistake. There are always other poems and other poets to drop (and who those should be makes for a good, long discussion that can’t be broached here).

My claim for the centrality of Black Mountain poetry in this essay will not sound new or unique—especially to scholars in the field. It is an old claim, one that can be found in many literary histories of poetry in the later twentieth century. But it needs to be restated as often as possible, in light of the decisions of NAAL’s editors. Jahan Ramazani, editor of the *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (3rd edition), begins the Contemporary volume with the poetry of Charles Olson (followed by Elizabeth Bishop). He justifies beginning the volume with these two figures in his preface: “Contemporary Poetry opens with two towering presences in contemporary poetry, Charles Olson and Elizabeth Bishop.”⁶ He goes on to explain how these two poets are perhaps the greatest respective representatives of the post-war ethos, in that they represent the dominant strains, at one time popularly referred to as “the raw and the cooked.” Olson and his cohorts represent, of course, the “raw” poetry of the period. Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” is the seminal mid-century manifesto for “open field”

poetics that challenged the academy's predilection for poems that were impersonal, apolitical, self-referential artifacts. Instead of engendering reflection, the projective poem was to be a "projectile"⁷—effecting change in the socio-political realm.⁸ Olson's essay encouraged poets to tap into their own moment-to-moment psycho-physiological state (the "breathing of the man who writes," as Olson says) to produce a kinetic "energy-discharge," provoking poets toward ambitious experimentation with form and content.⁹ Michael Davidson is surely not overstating the case when he says that Olson's efforts "produced a generation of poets that shaped literary history in the 1960s and 1970s."¹⁰

The influence has been so great that scholar Mark Scroggins calls the Objectivist-Projectivism "nexus" not simply a "strain" but an "environment"—"a vast and inescapable background" in which poetry of the later 20th century developed (26).¹¹ One of the ways Black Mountain poetry became so central to American poetry is through the famous 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, edited by Donald Allen. As Alan Golding tells the history of that groundbreaking collection, Allen relied to a large degree on Olson, Creeley, and Duncan to help him shape the theoretical contours of the book.¹² Olson is the first writer included, and more space is dedicated to Olson than any other writer. But more importantly, Allen followed the advice of Olson and Duncan in organizing the anthology according to relationships between writers rather than relying on chronology or other organizing strategy.¹³ Allen's categories—Black Mountain School, New York School, San Francisco Renaissance/Beats—have become the primary designations of literary scholars over the decades since the book's publication. Though critics wrangle over the usefulness of such categories (what else would critics do?), it is unusual for anthology editors and literary historians to avoid using Allen's categories in describing post-war U. S. poetry. Jennifer Ashton saturates her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945* with references to Olson, Black Mountain, and/or "Projective Verse"—so much so that at one point in the essay, she, in a parenthetical statement, says "(another legacy of Black Mountain)."¹⁴ Such is the centrality of Black Mountain poetry—it is related to nearly all the major strains of postwar experimental verse. The Black Mountain poets form a kind of hub around which are connected many spokes that form the wheel of later 20th century American poetry. Why take a detour around the hub to explore the many

spokes connected to it, when the hub is there all the time, providing a focal point that can bring clarity to historical understanding? *NAAL* is taking a detour around the Olson/Black Mountain hub in two ways: 1) by cutting the poetry of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan from its table of contents, and 2) by failing to mention Olson and the Black Mountain legacy in the literary history it provides as its introduction to the “Literature since 1945” volume. In the following sections, I will highlight key features of the history *NAAL* (re)writes, detailing how, even though it is not mentioned, Black Mountain poetry was, or remains, vital to each piece of the history *NAAL* presents.

Confessional Poetry

One of the most common ways to contrast later 20th century poetry with the modernism of earlier in the century is to focus on the term “confessional.” Jahan Ramazani says simply, “Contemporary poetry is generally seen as more personal than modern poetry.”¹⁵ The Eliot-inspired poets of the ‘40s and ‘50s prized dense, complex, allusive, tightly-controlled, hermetically sealed and impersonal poems—the poems a young, aspiring poet such as Robert Lowell would learn to write so well under the tutelage of Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, and others. Lowell won the Pulitzer Prize for *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946, Pulitzer for 1947) on the strength of his ability to contrive dense, highly symbolic, tightly controlled, self-contained lyric jewel boxes. Lowell figures into every history of 20th century poetry because of his shift away from that Eliotic, impersonal style and toward a style that came to be labeled “confessional”—a shift represented in the title of his 1959 breakthrough volume, *Life Studies*. Lowell’s move toward free forms and a more personal use of materials had a tremendous impact on the later century as it opened the way for “respectable” academic poets to experiment with the kinetic, open forms Olson had proposed in “Projective Verse.” Lowell himself, in his acceptance speech for the 1960 National Book Award (given to *Life Studies*), memorably contrasted the academic and the anti-academic styles with the terms “the raw and the cooked.”¹⁶ And Lowell mentioned that his shift in style was inspired by his trip to the West Coast where he saw the energy generated in poetry readings given by Beat poets, such as Allen Ginsberg and members of the San Francisco Renaissance.¹⁷

In its introduction to the postwar period, *NAAL* mentions Lowell's shift, but only obliquely connects it to his experience with Beat poetry.¹⁸

NAAL also gives quite a lot of space, in its introduction to the postwar period, to the Beat counterculture and Allen Ginsberg as its literary exponent. However, no attempt is made to connect Ginsberg and the Beat counterculture with Olson and Black Mountain, even though an argument could be made that Olson was a key influence on Ginsberg's poetics. While it is impossible to argue with biographies of Ginsberg that mention Whitman, Blake, Christopher Smart, William Carlos Williams, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac as key figures in Ginsberg's development, it's fair to question whether or not "Howl" could have come into existence in its present, long-lined form without Olson's theorizing regarding the breath. In a *New Yorker* interview, Ginsberg recalled William Carlos Williams' advice given when Ginsberg was a fledgling poet. Williams, Ginsberg said, urged him to "Proceed intuitively by ear"—which sounds as if it comes directly from Olson's "Projective Verse"—or perhaps more directly from "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You."¹⁹ It's important to note that Williams himself was so impressed with Olson's "Projective Verse" that he reprinted most of it in his autobiography as a statement that proposed the direction he believed poetry ought to take.²⁰ Ginsberg's statement on poetics ("Notes for *Howl* and Other Poems") that Donald Allen used in *The New American Poetry* also reveals his deep debt to Olson's theory on the primacy of the breath. Once again, Ginsberg only mentions Williams by name, but the theory seems more directly Olsonian. Ginsberg says that he was arranging "breath groups into little short-line patterns according to the ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from W. C. Williams' imagist preoccupations" (414-15). But then, he says he followed his "romantic inspiration" toward a "Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath" (415).²¹ The mention of Melville certainly calls forth Olson, whose *Call Me Ishmael*—a groundbreaking book in Melville studies—was what Olson was mainly known for in academic literary circles until the publishing of *The New American Poetry* in 1960. Later in the essay, Ginsberg lays out the particular dynamics of the breath in *Howl and Other Poems*, saying that "each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit," and he says that his particular use of the long line "probably bugs Williams now," but that each line must be the "mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath."²² All

of this focus on breath must have been influenced by Olson's "Projective Verse" and the pride of place he gives "the breathing of the man who writes" in the lineation of the poem.²³

Beyond the influence on Ginsberg and Beat poetics, the publishing connection between the Beats and Black Mountain cannot be forgotten. Robert Creeley, who had been editing *The Black Mountain Review*, invited Ginsberg to be the guest editor of its seventh and final edition in 1957. Thus *The Black Mountain Review* became one of the first opportunities for publication of many Beat voices. Beyond now iconic Beat works, such as Ginsberg's "America," Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," and an excerpt from Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, early work from Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Michael McClure is included in the final issue of a magazine that continues to be a defining artifact of the literary avant-garde in 1950s America.

Race and Politics

Another writer that is central to the *NAAL*'s history of the later 20th century is Amiri Baraka, known in the 1960s as LeRoi Jones. As it does with Ginsberg, *NAAL* lists Baraka's influences and includes Harlem Renaissance authors, Beat poets, and New York School poets, but Charles Olson and Black Mountain are conspicuously absent. Yet even a surface reading of Baraka's early poems reveals Olson's influence on Baraka's conception of poetic form. Baraka's early poem "An Agony. As Now" makes use of one of Olson's more eccentric formal techniques—strings of open parenthetical phrases:

This is the enclosure (flesh,
where innocence is a weapon. An
abstraction. Touch. (Not mine.
or yours, if you are the soul I had
and abandoned when I was blind and had
my enemies carry me as a dead man
(if he is beautiful, or pitied.²⁴

Or there is his use of the forward slash in "In Memory of Radio": "At 11, Let's Pretend/ & we did/ & I, the poet, still do, Thank God!"²⁵ Olson explains how the forward slash can

be used within the line for the effect of a slight pause, without the grammatical implication of other forms of punctuation.²⁶ Baraka admits in his autobiography that since he was introduced to Black Mountain poetry (through his association with Ginsberg and the Beats) he had begun imitating the styles of Creeley and Olson, saying that they had become “ready mades” or “licks’ already laid down” that his writing had to move beyond.²⁷ Baraka, in an autobiography that doesn’t spend much time discussing other people’s ideas, devotes about a half page explaining Olson’s poetic heritage (238) and another half page describing Black Mountain College (even though he never visited the campus—see *p.* 228). In discussing “Projective Verse,” he writes that it “was for many of us the manifesto of a new poetry.”²⁸ And he writes in his statement in *The New American Poetry*, that “Lorca, Williams, Pound, and Olson have had the greatest influence” on him.²⁹ Baraka’s commitment to Olson was so strong that his Totem Press was the first to publish “Projective Verse” as a stand-alone pamphlet, and he published other Olson essays and poems in his various publishing ventures throughout the fifties.³⁰

But Baraka is mostly remembered as one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, whose legacy endures as the most politically motivated literary movement in the postwar U. S. The desire to unify the literary and political was a radical move in the face of the impersonal and apolitical discourse of the New Criticism, which dominated the academy through to the late sixties (and held influence well beyond that time). Even some of the prominent poets within Allen’s *New American Poetry* stated that they did not see poetry primarily within political terms.³¹ Larry Neal, who worked closely with Baraka founding the Black Arts Movement, writes,

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic.³²

Olson, “Projective Verse,” *The Maximus Poems*, and back of that the whole Black Mountain College experiment in aesthetics and education stand behind Neal’s and

Baraka's quest for "radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic"—especially in Neal's sense that the aesthetic must be firmly rooted within a particular community. Olson's effort to ground his epic within the space of Gloucester, and the focus on the poet's own breathing, and taking in his own environment—speaking from and to one's own situation and surroundings—is one of the enduring legacies of Black Mountain poetry. And Baraka seemed to realize the political potential of Olson's work. As he described Olson's poetics, he mentioned how Olson synthesized Pound and Williams, but without "Pound's social pathology and worship of the European Renaissance as the beginning and end of all culture."³³ Though Olson himself seemed aloof from the postwar political moment in terms of civil rights, and Baraka, himself, said that he almost always disagreed with Olson's own political positions,³⁴ that he recognized that "Olson's thing was always more political,"³⁵ and would affirm that Olson's poetry influenced him toward seeing how the political could be manifest within poetry: "I like the fact that he did take a stance in the real world, that the things he said had to do with some stuff that was happening outside the poem as well as within the poem."³⁶

Gender

Olson has often been criticized for his sexism—both in his personal life and in his writings. Olson's tone can be off-putting in today's academy, with its heightened sensibilities regarding gendered language. One can almost at random search through paragraphs of Olson's prose and find all kinds of examples of what Andrew Mossin calls the "masculinist discourse" (and Mossin extends this charge from Olson on to Creeley).³⁷ The writer Michael Rumaker, a former student of Olson who often writes appreciatively of Olson and the experience of Black Mountain College, said in an interview with Martin Duberman that Olson "felt that women just weren't that good writers [sic], that they didn't belong in writing; they should be home tending the kids, tending the house, cooking and so forth" (qtd. In Duberman 380).³⁸ Might these examples of sexism be a possible reason for *NAAL*'s decision to leave Olson and his circle out of their latest edition?

There's no doubt that Olson affected a tone of locker-room machismo. But, when examined holistically, Olson's legacy is ambiguous. The experience of Francine du

Plessix Gray, another of Olson's students at Black Mountain College, illustrates the ironies of Olson and his sexism. She compared Olson to her oppressive father and describes his teaching methods as dictatorial. But then she recalled how Olson cared for her writing and how he helped her improve. She suspected that she fared well with Olson only because she was a bit of a tomboy with thick skin developed from her formative years of dutifully obeying a similarly authoritarian father. She quoted from memory one typically "masculinist" piece of advice Olson gave her: "'Girl,' he'd say pressing his five fingers hard into my scalp until it hurt, 'if you get the high falootin' Yurru and poh-lee-tess and stuck up schools out of that noggin and start playing Gringo ball you'll be okay.'"³⁹ The irony, of course, is that though Olson's tone, and perhaps even his attitude toward women writers, was sexist, his influence remains great—and for many writers, including du Plessix Gray, the influence was not stifling, but liberating in spite of, as well as because of, Olson.

Megan Swihart Jewell spoke to this same ironic relationship in her discussion of Kathleen Fraser's poetry. Fraser was one of many poets who found Olson's ideas on poetry and culture liberating as a feminist. Though she, like du Plessix Gray, initially could not see past Olson's masculinist posturings, she eventually came to see Olson's poetics as foundational for her and like-minded feminists who found themselves on the margins of feminist conceptions of art and politics. Jewell explained how Fraser came to see "Projective Verse" as an invitation for exploration, not only in matters of form and expression in poetry, but in terms of "the relationship between gender, language, materiality, and page space."⁴⁰

Sharon Doubiago, a multiple Pushcart Prize winner, explicitly invoked Olson and his character Maximus within her epic poem *Hard Country* (1982). The same ironic relationship was found within her poem: Olson as sexist, would-be dominator becomes the fertile seedbed of ideological exploration which leads to a liberation from traditionally gendered experience. Doubiago, in an interview, said that Olson was explicitly sexist, but that his sexism was merely a knee-jerk reaction to his deeper embrace of femininity.⁴¹ Scholar Lyn Keller wrote that Doubiago was able, through her invocation of Olson and Maximus, to redefine "the values central to his epic tradition" by "revisionary

emphases in her use of traditional myths, by reconceiving gender traits, and by combining genders with entities traditionally regarded as exclusively male or female.”⁴²

Doubiago and Fraser are notable poets, but are not typically present in major anthologies of twentieth-century poetry. However, Olson’s direct influence extended deeply into the major voices of the century. Adrienne Rich, widely recognized (at least in academic circles) as the most important feminist poet of the 20th century, used the opening line of Olson’s “The Kingfishers” as a title for one of her collections: *The Will to Change* (1971).⁴³ Susan Howe, who has been associated with the LANGUAGE school, and who has written incisive feminist literary revisionary history in works such as *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-Mark*, has drawn heavily on Olson’s poetics.⁴⁴ There are two key points to draw from all of this: 1) Though Olson may have espoused sexist views and used sexist language, the value of his ideas, his innovations in not only poetic form but also the implications his ideas have for socio-political arrangements (what he calls the “stance toward reality” that informs or necessarily follows from “Projective Verse”) have pushed writers beyond Olson’s own limited (and/or inherited) sensibilities. Such a profound influence should not be swept under the rug of history simply because the man himself had obvious faults. Perhaps Doubiago was right to see a deeper femininity in Olson. 2) Olson’s influence in the 50s, 60s, and 70s was so great that, even if he was an inveterate sexist, feminist writers still could not escape his ideas. In either case (and I favor number one over number two), literary historians cannot be responsible if they leave Olson out of the picture.

Technology

NAAL’s introduction features a relatively lengthy discussion of new media technology and how that has shaped and continues to shape literature of the period. Peter Middleton has recently explored how Black Mountain writers (Middleton focuses upon Creeley) took a progressive stance toward science and technology, especially in light of how mainstream academic poets treated those areas of thought and culture. Mid-century poets such as Randall Jarrell tended to view science and technology, at best, with skepticism and at worse with disdain, especially vis-à-vis the arts and the kinds of thinking that one engages in with regards to poetry.⁴⁵ Olson and Creeley,

however, coming out of Black Mountain College, where Buckminster Fuller promulgated his new-age utopian-technological outlook, where Albert Einstein was on the Board of Advisors, and Norbert Wiener's ideas on cybernetics were being circulated, were open to human-technological interfaces and how poetry could change forms in its engagement with new tech. Some of the most recent scholarship on Olson focuses on how his ideas either originate out of or resonate with the theoretical physics of the early and mid-twentieth centuries.⁴⁶ *NAAL*'s introduction does not focus so much on theoretical engagement with technology as it does on how new media has shaped life experience and the experience of reading and writing texts. But Black Mountain's open, progressive stance toward theoretical science and toward integrating the experience of the new sciences and technologies into poetry should not be ignored.

Continuing Relevance

One of the legacies of Olson and Black Mountain that is acknowledged in most anthologies is the poetry and poetics of the LANGUAGE School. These poets largely worked out theoretical notions of language based in Marxist and poststructuralist critique, challenging assumptions about identity and language within the spaces of the poems themselves. Ron Silliman's anthology *In the American Tree* stands as a sort of monument to that movement. In the introduction, Silliman clearly identifies how the LANGUAGE movements started, branching out of an argument against Olson's emphasis on speech in "Projective Verse," but clearly using Olson and Creeley as a base from which they work.⁴⁷ Though LANGUAGE poetry in the eyes of many critics was and remains a dead end, Rae Armantrout, who appears in *In the American Tree*, recently won a Pulitzer Prize for her book *Versed*. The influence in this vein, so it seems, continues.

One of the most talked about books of poetry in recent years has been Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and a National Book Award finalist for poetry. Soldier's poetics has the look and feel of Olson, Creeley, and Black Mountain—eccentric spacing, words spread across the page, discursive prose sequences. Of course, many have appropriated these formal innovations as extensions of the projectivist project. But two aspects of Soldier's work

set it apart from most other books: 1) her use of documentary poetics, and 2) her political stance. We have already noted, in the discussion of Amiri Baraka's work, how Black Mountain poetry helped push verse in the later twentieth century toward political expression. But related to the push toward the political was Olson's emphasis on what has come to be called documentary poetics. Olson, an inveterate researcher, spent much of his life roaming the stacks of libraries and searching through piles of documents in the archives of state buildings throughout Massachusetts. In a letter to his student, Ed Dorn, Olson advised him to search in "*PRIMARY DOCUMENTS*." He went on:

to hook on here is a lifetime of assiduity. Best thing to do is to dig on thing or place or man until you yourself know more abt [sic] that than is possible to any other man. It doesn't matter whether it's Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But *exhaust* it. Saturate it. Beat it" (306-7).⁴⁸

Olson even described his own poetics, in contrast to Creeley's, as "DOCUMENT."⁴⁹ Whether or not Soldier's *Whereas* could live up to all Olson expected of Dorn's own efforts at documentary poetics is an open question, but her use of primary source materials to ground her experiment is evidence that Olson's poetics is still vital and relevant.⁵⁰

Soldier's poems illustrate the importance Lytle Shaw's recent book *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* gives to Olson as he investigates how various forms of "fieldwork"—the methods of archaeologists, ethnographers, and natural historians—informs much of the postmodern experimental poetics that were engaged in political activism and community building, and also how that legacy extended into the visual arts in public installations and multi-media collages.⁵¹ Shaw insightfully points out limitations within Olson's structuring of *The Maximus Poems* (the epistolary form as a distancing effect, for instance), but demonstrates the vitality of Olson's push toward a poetry that documents and seeks to enact a new social reality. Just as Black Mountain College sought to advance art and culture through a commitment to interdisciplinary education, Shaw shows how poets and visual artists have used and continue to use

multifarious means and tools to both understand their inherited environments and to created new social spaces and political possibilities within them.

“Another legacy of Black Mountain”—Jennifer Ashton writes in a parenthetical statement within her introduction to American poetry after 1945. It’s hard to escape the wide-ranging and far-reaching impact of the poetry and poetics of the Black Mountain poets. This essay has sought to reveal the rather obvious relationships between Black Mountain poetry and the key features of later twentieth century literature that *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* has mentioned in its own overview of the period. But, of course, there is so much more that has not been revealed. A brief look at the literature will show how much the poetry of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan has contributed to the visual arts, dance, and music of the later twentieth century, for instance. For now, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* has rewritten the history of latter twentieth century without mentioning Olson, Creeley, or Duncan. Literary scholars and historians may recognize the oversight, but a new generation will arise, one that will not necessarily be told all the old stories. Those who know Black Mountain College are charged with keeping that history alive.

¹ Thomas Pynchon, “Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?” *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1984,

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-luddite.html?>

² Since NAAL’s first edition (1979), Olson, Creeley, and Duncan were featured with poems and an extensive biographical essay on each of them. The latest edition cut each of those features, but it does include a one page excerpt of “Projective Verse” within a section it calls “Postmodern Manifestos.” A very brief biographical note on Olson is given along with the excerpt.

³ Edward Brunner argues that Robert Lowell failed to see Olson’s innovations vis-à-vis Pound by, among other things, emphasizing “working-class values,” and providing “a no-nonsense revisionist approach to the founding of Massachusetts as a business venture” (*Cold War Poetry*. U of Chicago P, 2001, p. 123)

⁴ Graham is known for being an ambitious and difficult poet. She once stated that her generation of poets needed to “recover a high level of ambition, a rage, if you will—the big hunger” (p. 919, qtd. in Jahan Ramazani, “Jorie Graham,” *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol. 2, 3rd edition, edited by Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O’Clair, Norton, 2003, pp. 919-20). Graham connects herself to the Black Mountain tradition by stating, in one interview, that Duncan and Creeley are amongst those poets who will “stand”—and she only mentions about twenty poets in this list of those who will likely be remembered by posterity (“Q & A with Jorie Graham.” *Smartish Pace*, https://www.smartishpace.com/pqa/jorie_graham/).

⁵ Based on my own calculations, 35% of the previous edition (2012), or 439 pages, was devoted to poetry. In the latest edition, 28%, or 344 pages, are devoted to poetry—a significant decrease in the representation of verse.

⁶ Ramazani, Jahan. “Preface to the Third Edition,” p. xxvi. *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, pp. xxxiii-xxxvii.

⁷ See the heading of Olson’s “Projective Verse” (p. 239) in *Collected Prose*, edited by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander, U of California P, 1997, pp. 239-49.

⁸ Michael Davidson says that largely because of Olson, “Poets of the late 1950s thought of their work as capable of effecting change—of doing rather than representing”—see *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, U of Chicago P, 2004, p. 29.

⁹ The quotes come from pp. 239-40 of “Projective Verse.”

¹⁰ Davidson, p. 40.

¹¹ Scroggins, Mark. “From the Late Modernism of the ‘Objectivists’ to the Proto-postmodernism of ‘Projective Verse’” p. 26. *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*, edited by Jennifer Ashton, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 16-30.

¹² Golding, Alan. “The New American Poetry Revisited, Again.” *Contemporary Literature* vol. 29, no. 2, 1998, pp. 180-211. See especially pp. 183-88.

¹³ Golding, “The New American Poetry Revisited, Again,” pp. 187-88, 190.

¹⁴ Ashton, Jennifer. “Periodizing Poetic Practice since 1945” p. 6. *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*, pp. 1-15.

¹⁵ Ramazani, Jahan. “Introduction” p. xlv. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol. 2, 3rd edition, pp. xliii-lxvii.

¹⁶ “Robert Lowell Accepts the 1960 National Book Award in Poetry for Life Studies.” *National Book Foundation*, <https://www.nationalbook.org/robert-lowells-accepts-the-1960-national-book-awards-in-poetry-for-life-studies/>

¹⁷ Lowell mentions the West Coast trip and the ways he adjusted his readings to his audiences in his interview with Seidel. See Seidel, Frederick. “The Art of Poetry: Robert Lowell.” *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, U of Michigan P, 1988, pp. 48-73. See especially, p. 54. The poet Louis Simpson provides a bit more detail on how the West Coast trip influenced Lowell toward more “open” verse. See Simpson, Louis. *A Revolution in Taste*. Macmillan, 1978. See p. 147.

¹⁸ Hungerford, Amy. “American Literature since 1945” p. 14-15. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. E: Literature since 1945, 9th edition, edited by Amy Hungerford, pp. 3-20.

¹⁹ Qtd. in Ramazani, Jahan. “Allen Ginsberg” p. 335. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol. 2, 3rd edition, pp. 334-36. Olson places emphasis on the “ear” in “Projective Verse” when he says “this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind’s, that it has the mind’s speed” and later, “it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born” (p. 242). Also, note the memorable line from Olson’s “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You”: “By ear, he sd.”

²⁰ Williams, William Carlos. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1951), New Directions, 1967, pp. 329-334.

²¹ Ginsberg, Allen. “Notes for *Howl* and Other Poems.” *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (1960), edited by Donald Allen, U of California P, 1999, pp. 414-18.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 416.

²³ The importance of the poet’s breath is stated from the first sentence of “Projective Verse” and *passim*. Olson’s discussion of how the poet can register his breath through lineation takes place on p. 245.

²⁴ Baraka, Amiri. “An Agony. As Now.” *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol. 2, 3rd edition, pp. 634-5.

²⁵ Jones, LeRoi (Amiri Baraka). “In Memory of Radio.” *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, pp. 357-8.

²⁶ See “Projective Verse” pp. 245-46.

²⁷ Baraka, Amiri. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. Lawrence Hill Books, 1997, p. 247.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁹ Jones, LeRoi (Amiri Baraka). “How You Sound??” p. 425. *The New American Poetry*, p. 424-25.

³⁰ Shaw, Lytle. *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*. U of Alabama P, 2013, p. 96.

³¹ See, for example, Denise Levertov’s statement on p. 411-12 and Frank O’Hara’s on p.419-20.

³² Qtd. in Godfrey, Mark, and Zoé Whitley, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, Distributed Art Publishers, 2017, p. 36

³³ *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, p. 233.

³⁴ Benston, Kimberly W. “Amiri Baraka: An Interview” p. 108. *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*. Edited by Charlie Reilly, U of Mississippi P, 1994. pp. 105-17.

³⁵ qtd. in Shaw, p. 96.

³⁶ qtd. in Harris, William J. “An Interview with Amiri Baraka” p. 173. *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, pp. 168-80.

- ³⁷ Mossin, Andrew. "In Thicket': Charles Olson, Frances Boldereff, Robert Creeley, and the Crisis of Masculinity at Mid-Century." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2005, pp. 13-39. See especially, p. 18.
- ³⁸ qtd. in Duberman, Martin. *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. E. P. Dutton, 1972, p. 380.
- ³⁹ Gray, Francine du Plessix. "Black Mountain: The Breaking (Making) of a Writer" p. 304. *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds—An Anthology of Personal Accounts*. U of Tennessee P, 1990, p. 300-11.
- ⁴⁰ Jewell, Megan Swihart. "Becoming Articulate: Kathleen Fraser and *The New American Poetry*" p. 133-4. *The New American Poetry: Fifty Years Later*, edited by John R. Woznicki, Lehigh UP, 2014, pp. 133-54.
- ⁴¹ Goodman, Jenny. "An Interview with Sharon Doubiago" p. 23. *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 38, no 1, 1997, pp. 1-43.
- ⁴² Keller, Lyn. *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*. U of Chicago P, 1997, p. 31.
- ⁴³ See Riley, Jeannette E. *Understanding Adrienne Rich*. U of South Carolina P, 2016, p. 35.
- ⁴⁴ Mark Scroggins says Howe's poems are "predicated in large part on Olson's liberation of the page space for free composition," and that she shares with Olson a concern "with the traces of the historical past" (26-27). For more on Olson's influence on Susan Howe and other contemporary poets, see Steensen, Sasha. "Cunt, Great Mother, Cow or Whore: Charles Olson's Unlikely Influence on Contemporary Female Poets." *The Worcester Review* Vol. 31, nos. 1-2, 2010, pp. 127-134.
- ⁴⁵ Middleton, Peter. "Science and *The New American Poetry*." *The New American Poetry: Fifty Years Later*. pp. 171-98.
- ⁴⁶ To list just two examples: Hand, Dominic. "Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers' and Quantum Physics." *Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2019, pp. 324-45; and Byers, Mark. "Imagining Uncertainty: Charles Olson and Karl Popper." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2015, pp. 443-58.
- ⁴⁷ Silliman writes that one of the key statements of the LANGUAGE school, early in its conception, was Robert Grenier's "'Projective Verse' Is Pieces On" (xvii). *Pieces* refers to Robert Creeley's 1969 volume. "Language, Realism, Poetry." *In the American Tree* (1986). Edited by Ron Silliman, National Poetry Foundation, 2002, pp. xvii-xxiii.
- ⁴⁸ Olson, Charles. "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn." *Collected Prose*. pp. 297-310.
- ⁴⁹ Olson, Charles. "Introduction to Robert Creeley" p. 283. *Collected Prose*. pp. 283-84.
- ⁵⁰ Sadly, in the most easily accessed discussions on documentary poetry and poetics, Olson is not mentioned as a central figure in the construction of the genre. Susan Howe, a writer very much influenced by Olson, is mentioned in one source as having taught a graduate course at SUNY Buffalo on the topic in the '90s, and this is seen as a kind of starting point for the academic discussion of the genre. Rightly, Muriel Rukeyser and William Carlos Williams are mentioned as important innovators, but Olson, in my view, should also be in the conversation regarding poets who helped conceive this dynamic sub-field of poetry. See Magi, Jill. "Poetry in Light of Documentary." *Chicago Review*, January 2016, www.chicagoreview.org/poetry-in-light-of-documentary/. See also Metres, Philip. "From Reznikoff to Public Enemy: The Poet as Journalist, Historian, Agitator." *Poetry Foundation*, Nov. 5, 2007, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68969/from-reznikoff-to-public-enemy>.
- ⁵¹ Shaw focuses on such artists as Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Bernadette Mayer, Mark Dion, and Renée Green.