

**Spitting Fire:  
Black Mountain and the Black Arts Movement in the Poetry of Jayne Cortez**  
Joseph Pizza

*Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*

Volume 12: Expanding the Canon (Spring 2021)

Article URL: <https://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/pizza-black-arts/>

Published online: May 2021

**Published by:**

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

**Editors:**

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

**Production Editor:**

Kate Averett, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

**Note:**

The *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* is a digital publication, intended to be experienced and referenced online. PDFs are made available for offline reading, but may have changes in layout or lack multimedia content (such as audio or video) as compared to the online article.

**Spitting Fire:  
Black Mountain and the Black Arts Movement in the Poetry of Jayne Cortez**

Joseph Pizza

Connections between Black Mountain and the Black Arts Movement may, at first, appear surprising. Literary histories, after all, tend to mimic the groupings arranged by writers and editors in a given era and, despite the period's relative progressivism, schools and anthologies in post-war America appear as segregated as the larger society of the time. In addition to this, while Black Mountain may have been the first higher education institution in the Jim Crow South to integrate, little connection has been made between this fact and the school's larger pedagogy and aesthetics.

Nevertheless, during Charles Olson's tenure as rector, Black Mountain faculty and students did continually work in the spirit of 1930s and 1940s popular front politics to integrate the campus, looking also to African American models, and particularly jazz, in reimagining the shape of postwar teaching and writing. Such efforts, in fact, would resound with like-minded communities of writers elsewhere. From Black Mountain to New York, San Francisco, and beyond, Black and white poets alike in this period shared affinities for the era's various jazz stylings and the larger hipster subculture that developed around it. While Beat Generation clichés, replete with references to Norman Mailer's controversial "White Negro," are often marshalled as examples of this subculture, Olson and Creeley's work at Black Mountain exemplify another, less discussed extension of the development of a postmodern jazz poetics that would have wide-ranging implications for writers involved in both the New American Poetry and the Black Arts Movement.

In tracing the development of Black Arts poetics, scholars of African American poetry have recognized this. Lorenzo Thomas, a participant in the Umbra Workshop that functioned as a precursor to later Black Arts Movement considerations of poetry and poetics, has noted that "Black Arts poets maintained and developed the prosody that they had acquired from Black Mountain and the Beats."<sup>1</sup> This point has been elaborated by Aldon Lynn Nielsen, who has argued that the Black Arts Movement did not appear randomly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but as the outgrowth of an

integrated downtown scene in New York, one where both Allen Ginsberg's persona and Charles Olson's poetics held sway.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Michael Magee has written on the intertwining of jazz aesthetics and pragmatist philosophy at Black Mountain, insisting on the need to better understand how contemporary African American poets have utilized key elements of Olson and Creeley's poetics, "disrupting the whole notion of lineage in the process by reconfiguring Black Mountain's own ancestry."<sup>3</sup> James Smethurst, too, in detailing the literary history of the Black Arts Movement, has attested to both the effects of de jure segregation on educational centers like Black Mountain College and to the resistance to such segregation in the interracial collaboration common to poetic communities inspired by Black Mountain in 1950s and 1960s New York and San Francisco.<sup>4</sup> In New York, on the Lower East Side, a group of former Black Mountain students would join with Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) and other African American poets to advance Olson and Creeley's poetic theories in ways that would affect successive generations of writers in New York and beyond.

In tracing that trajectory here, I want to focus on one such instance of this literary history: the adoption and adaptation of Black Mountain poetics by prominent figures in the Black Arts Movement. In particular, I want to draw attention to the role of the body in Olson's influential essay "Projective Verse," connecting it to later adaptations of this perspective by Black Arts poets via the interventions of Baraka and others. While Olson's original formulation of projective verse as a haptic, embodied poetics, clearly assumes a white male writing for a similarly homogenous audience, the adaptation of his work to fit the experiences of African American poets and readers reveals a dynamic performance aesthetic at the heart of his approach. In fact, in so far as Olson's conception of projective or open field poetics defines Black Mountain as a recognizable grouping of poets, this adaptation of his work speaks to African American poets' larger engagement with the legacy of the College via his writing. In doing so, they also recognized the crucial jazz influence that inspired Olson and Creeley's early formulations of the body's role in projective composition. Perhaps more than any other, the weaving together of these strands can be observed in the work of Jayne Cortez. As both a Black Arts poet and a vocalist for the band The Firepitters, Cortez's employment of open field concepts mark the fullest realization of its performative potential. In

analyzing one such performance, I hope to demonstrate here both the enduring applicability of Black Mountain poetics, and the transformative refashioning that such theoretical concerns underwent in being reimagined by Black Arts Movement poets and writers.

### **Fielding the Body**

In Olson's 1950 essay "Projective Verse," breath not only determines the poetic line, but it also grounds writing in the body of the poet. In focusing on "the breathing of the man who writes," projectivist poetics involve the writer in a politics of difference, of the physical uniqueness of each author and his or her reciprocal exchange with a diverse audience.<sup>5</sup> These two aspects, in fact, preoccupy the entire essay. As Olson insists in part one, "the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes"; while in part two he argues that the "projective purpose of the act of verse," the attention to "breath, voice," necessarily alters the poet's relationship to nature and to the world "outside of the poem."<sup>6</sup> Focusing on the physicality of poetic composition therefore opens up the social dimension of writing, retrieving its larger context from the abstraction of received forms. Moreover, failing to involve the body suggests, in Olson's terms, failing to appreciate the "force" that animates writing and drives the poet to connect with a reader.<sup>7</sup> In this "kinetic" Olson repeatedly sketches a reciprocal relationship that continues the distribution of force from writer to reader, one whereby it is suggested that this occasion's reader can become the next occasion's writer, converting such force into their own piece for subsequent readers to receive and do the same.<sup>8</sup> In this way, Olson's approach invites adaptation, requires, in fact, that the reader "use" his work by playing an active part in the poetic process. Rather than deliver a message, then, the projectivist poet engages the reader in an act of creation and encourages, in turn, a creative response. Moreover, in doing so, Olson's refusal to abstract this process, to retreat into the realm of discourse, never loses sight of the body's essential role in the poetic act. As he writes in the conclusion to "Projective Verse":

I say a projective poet will [move] down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama, has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all acts spring.<sup>9</sup>

Rooting his poetics in the beating heart of the writer, Olson emphasizes the physicality of the compositional process, rescuing it from the overly cerebral conceptions of midcentury academic and neo-formalist verse.

A similar attention to the body and its consequent use in history is evident in one of Olson's best-known poems, "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]," a piece also written during his time at Black Mountain. The recent availability of a 1966 video recording of Olson reading the poem adds a new dimension to the "spatial nature" of Olson's performance, his enactment of the work within the visual frame of the camera.<sup>10</sup> As readers often note, in this section of *The Maximus Poems* the "I" at first appears much more pronounced, more confessional than elsewhere, with its focus on childhood memories of smalltown America. However, the autobiographical narrative of the poem's opening is complicated by a tissue of references and allusions in the second half, interrupted, for instance, by the voices of A.N. Whitehead and Robert Graves in lines 20-25, and by the geographical force field of Gloucester throughout.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the "geography of it" represents the essential antagonism of the poem, with the speaker refusing to submit to the "novel abstract form" of sentimental Americana.<sup>12</sup> His imagined resistance to this therefore offers a model of embodied dissonance, of the struggle to "compell" the community "to change" rather than be subdued by it.<sup>13</sup> The video captures this aspect dramatically via Olson's measured, breathless reading, replete with sweat-soaked shirt, wild eyes, and smoking cigarette.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps most all, its conclusion represents Olson's intentions best. To close the reading, the poet opens his arms wide, puffing out his chest during the final lines and thereby drawing attention to the physicality of his presence, as though to emphasize that "polis," in fact, is located in the very chest of the poet, just as "Projective Verse" would have it.<sup>15</sup> Here, then, "this," the demonstrative pronoun that closes the piece, points, dramatically, to the body of the poet enacting the poem's radical democracy, modeling, in this way, a self that is responsive to his various intersections with a variety of others.<sup>16</sup>

Though Olson never approached the performative heights of his colleague Allen Ginsberg, there is nonetheless something of a middle ground in this reading, a space akin to what Raphael Allison has termed the “dialectic between humanism and skepticism,” between the ludic celebration of presence on the part of the Beats and other popular poets of the era, and the more cautious and ironic approach to readings taken by New York School writers like John Ashbery.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, as Allison shows, Olson’s readings witness a duality that troubles his performance: “In fact, for Charles Olson, readings weren’t mere displays of spontaneous and improvisatory ‘oral poetry’ but rather battle-royales between the forces of page and stage, voice and text.”<sup>18</sup> This sense of battle is apparent in the filmed performance of “Letter 27,” where Olson reads as though declaiming the poem at Gloucester, raising and lowering the pitch of his delivery as he pushes back aggressively at the air surrounding him. This physicality becomes all the more complicated when the poet’s stance, as he details it in “Projective Verse,” is adopted by other bodies, those of women, say, or African Americans. As the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero has recently argued, attending to the voice as physical manifestation, as the stubborn signature of embodied uniqueness, requires a recognition of the very differences that the abstractions of Western political discourse’s tendency toward monolithic fictions—the nation, the city, the people, even the individual or the voice—either elide or ignore.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on the work of Olson’s near contemporary, Hannah Arendt, Cavarero has explored voice’s obstinate physicality and the sexual and racial dissonances that such physicality sounds. For Cavarero, even contemporary discussions of voice that attempt to register its embodied uniqueness, like Roland Barthes’ “grain” or Hélène Cixous’s “*languelait*,” abstract this quality, converting it into “the voice,” a singular and disembodied subject of discourse.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in her analysis, it is only in polyvocal song and in certain strands of experimental poetry that such qualities become apparent. Following these, she approaches the voice as a “vocalic matrix” where “relationality,” the act of saying, rather than the message of what’s said, holds sway: “The voice not only announces this relation, but it announces it as corporeal, material, and rooted in the always embodied singularity of an existent that convokes the other with the rhythmic and sonorous breath of his or her mouth.”<sup>21</sup> Her

use of “breath” here parallels in many ways Olson’s, as does her concern for the politics that emanate from such a position:

“Wherever you go, you will be a polis,” says Arendt, citing a famous sentence that bears witness, according to her, to the way in which for the Greeks the political consists in a space created by acting and speaking together “which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.” The *polis*, according to Arendt, is not physically situated in a territory. It is the space of interaction that is opened by the reciprocal communication of those present through words and deeds.<sup>22</sup>

Like Olson, then, Arendt’s understanding of polis insists on its embodiment in the corporeal uniqueness of each person. In the exchange of breath, a reciprocal recognition of the physical diversity that abstraction elides becomes a potentially new ground and condition of any communicative act. For Cavarero, this relationality forms the basis of her larger argument:

the speakers above all make heard a mutual dependence on a voice that is invocation . . . an acoustic dialogue that takes its cadences from the very rhythm of breath. Their logos is oriented toward resonance, rather than toward understanding. Like a kind of song “for more than one voice” [*come una specie di canto a più voci*] whose melodic principle is the reciprocal distinction of the unmistakable timbre of each — or, better, as if a song of this kind were the ideal dimension, the transcendental principle, of politics.<sup>23</sup>

This shift toward “resonance” and away from “understanding” alters typical approaches to dialogue. Rather than express or convey a message, voices resonate in a call-and-response fashion. It is a distinction that holds equally in the world of post-World War II American poetry, where the academy’s dominant focus on traditional lyricality, on first-person monologue, characteristic of neo-formalists and confessional writers alike, might be contrasted with the dissonant poetics of breath espoused by Black Mountain and other New American poets in much the same way. In this regard, the musical metaphor she invokes is telling. Music, in the form of jazz, was essential to Olson and Creeley in elaborating a poetics of breath. For now, it is perhaps enough to note that such an approach to voice as physical embodiment is aligned in important ways with Olson’s

larger conception of context as haptic, as the “touch on all sides” that constitutes the interacting relations of a polis.<sup>24</sup> Of course, drawing this connection between Cavarero’s work and his own, it must be admitted that Olson’s conception of the projectivist poet is almost always male. As Rachel Blau Du Plessis has written, such blindspots in Olson’s poetics leave, as a result, unfinished business for later female writers, ones which I want to suggest Cavarero here witnesses and Black Arts poets like Jayne Cortez anticipate.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, whether he would have recognized it or not, Cavarero and Arendt clearly share with Olson an opposition to the Western tendency to privilege a generic voice as such, a disembodied voice that is nonetheless indexed as that of the white, affluent, cisgender, male, unless otherwise interrupted by vernacular.

Such interruptions, in fact, have been the focus of recent work by Fred Moten. In particular, his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, explores in many ways an African American vernacular expression that indexes a body at once at odds with, while also folded into, American cultural codes. In rereading, for instance, Aunt Hester’s primal scream as described in the opening chapter of Frederick Douglass’s famous *Narrative*, Moten reveals what Karl Marx thought of as an “impossible example,” the speaking commodity.<sup>26</sup> As such, Aunt Hester’s scream represents “[t]he commodity whose speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign.”<sup>27</sup> This critique aligns well with Cavarero’s understanding of voice as the body’s stubborn resistance to metaphysics, its insistence on marking her specific materiality, over and against the disembodied voice of the Western philosophical tradition. As Moten observes, “the revolutionary force of the sensuality that emerges from the sonic event Marx subjunctively produces,” produces subjunctively, that is, by assuming the would-be impossibility of the speaking commodity, is precisely the performative aesthetic that his study so astutely details.<sup>28</sup> In other words, by representing the speaking body as a perennial resistance to the dehumanization of systemic racism, he reimagines such embodied performances as “the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances.”<sup>29</sup> Moten’s phrasing here evokes well both the “New Thing” of 1960s avant-garde jazz and, in its



hyphenization, the “Changing Same” detailed by a writer who played a key role in transforming Olson’s poetics for poets of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka.<sup>30</sup> If Aunt Hester’s scream insists on a body, Baraka’s work functions as a resistance to the alienation of commodification, dwelling literally “in the break,” echoing the study’s title.<sup>31</sup> As such, Moten reads Baraka’s early career as a site where “[s]yncopation, performance, and the anarchic organization of phonic substance delineate an ontological field wherein black radicalism is set to work.”<sup>32</sup> In attempting to bring this reading to bear on Baraka’s syncopation of Black Mountain poetics, I’ll be corroborating and extending the perspectives of Moten and Cavarero by conjoining them with the poetics that both led to and followed from Baraka’s representative break.

### **Charmed Performance**

As often in the story of 1960s American poetry, the work of LeRoi Jones, the later Amiri Baraka, serves as a bridge linking Black and white practitioners in general, but, more specifically, for my purposes here, as one linking Black Mountain poetics and Black Arts methodologies. A denizen of several, mostly white, artistic scenes in the Village of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Baraka’s writing took its cue from Black Mountain. Reflecting on this in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Baraka traced his earliest encounter with Black Mountain to a meeting with Dan Rice, Joel Oppenheimer, and Fielding Dawson at the fabled Cedar Tavern. Through them, he gained access to the growing legend of the College:

I learned about Charles Olson's work and began to read it. Also Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan. I got hold of copies of *The Black Mountain Review* and witnessed real excellence not only of content but design. One, a thick white-covered book, had a Dan Rice pre-minimalist abstraction that I thought was the hippest thing I'd ever seen. I learned about *Origin*, the forerunner of *BMR*. Not only those writers, but younger writers like Ed Dorn, John Wieners, Michael Rumaker, Ed Marshall . . . All these people had come out of Black Mountain or been there at various times and we upheld its memory and its aesthetic.<sup>33</sup>

In Baraka's remembrance of these early and influential encounters, then, his allegiance is clear. As he insists, "we upheld" Black Mountain's "memory and its aesthetic." As he

writes later in the *Autobiography*, he republished Olson's "Projective Verse" in 1959 for a wider audience precisely because he and many other African American writers found it to be a "manifesto of a new poetry," even going so far as to say that it was, for him, a poetic "bible."<sup>34</sup>

In his enthusiasm for Olson, Baraka was not alone. Other prominent African American poets in the period have discussed their shared affection, at least in their early careers, for "Projective Verse." Lorenzo Thomas, for instance, returned repeatedly in his literary scholarship to Olson's influence on both Umbra poets and the later Black Arts Movement.<sup>35</sup> Stephen Henderson, too, in his influential 1973 study and anthology of Black Arts poets, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, explores the pervasive influence of bop prosody and projective verse on the "structure" and "typography" of their work.<sup>36</sup> Granting that Black Arts poets were naturally influenced by such white writers, he worried, though, over their ability to break free of both Black Mountain and Beat poetic models, and to found a poetry of their own.<sup>37</sup> In doing so, Henderson points repeatedly to Larry Neal's conception of "'the destruction of the text,' in which the text of a poem is merely a 'score,'" a chart, as jazz musicians would say, for performers to improvise over.<sup>38</sup> Something similar happens in Olson's performance of "Letter 27," of course, where non-verbal cues play an almost equal part with the text or "score" of the poem. However, Neal's intentions, while keeping, in intriguing ways, with readerly expectations in *The Maximus Poems*, go far beyond the kind of performance offered by Olson in the video discussed above. In his reading of Olson, Amiri Baraka certainly came to share this perspective. In a 1970 essay on the "Black creator's" need to break away from the slavery of European machines, Baraka mocked projectivism as, in the hands of white writers, being unnecessarily tied to the typewriter:

A typewriter? —why shd it only make use of the tips of the fingers as contact points of flowing multi directional creativity. If I invented a word placing machine, an 'expression-scriber,' *if you will*, then I would have a kind of instrument into which I could step & sit or sprawl or hand & use not only my fingers to make words express feelings but elbows, feet, head, behind, and all the sounds I wanted, screams, grunts, taps, itches, I'd have magnetically recorded, at the same time, & translated into word—or perhaps even the final xpressed

thought/feeling wd not be merely word or sheet, but *itself*, the xpression, three dimensional—able to be touched, or tasted or felt, or entered, or heard or carried like a speaking singing constantly communicating charm. *A typewriter is corny!!*<sup>39</sup> Humor aside, Baraka's aim here is to argue for a "three dimensional" Black aesthetic, a charmed performance that could draw on the talking book tradition, on oral storytelling, and on the large and growing field of African American music, genres which too often were regarded by white writers and scholars as merely folk or popular media. In his attempt to create a form of communicative charm, Baraka, like Neal, Henderson, and other artists and writers involved in the Black Arts Movement, sought to privilege the act of performance as the epitome of African American poetic achievement. In reimagining "Projective Verse" as a first step toward an improvisatory performance art, then, Black Arts writers acknowledged the significance of Olson's poetics, while also moving past them to reconfigure Black Mountain's legacy in ways that have been overlooked and misunderstood.

### **Embodying Dissonance**

Among the Black Arts poets whose writing exemplifies the critiques of both Henderson and Baraka, Jayne Cortez's work holds a special significance. Having been married early in her career to avant-garde saxophonist Ornette Coleman, Cortez would become a performer in her own right with her band The Firespitters, which featured their son, Denardo Coleman on drums. Indeed, her poetry witnesses the fulfillment of a performance tradition inaugurated by black music, extended by Olson, and reimaged by Baraka. To take one example, Cortez's poem "I See Chano Pozo" exemplifies a similarly cross-cultural genealogy, drawing inspiration, ostensibly, from both projectivist poetics and the music of the famous Afro-Cuban conga drummer of the same name. Having appeared simultaneously in her 1982 collection *Firespitter* and in her band's album of the same year, *There It Is*, the piece oscillates between print and audio performance, combining elements of both in her reading. In doing so, however, as even a quick glance reveals, the text borrows many of the typographical innovations associated with Olson's projective verse, from the unusual spacing and shifting margins, to its use of the performer's breath to determine line-breaks. As both Thomas and

Nielsen have suggested, Cortez's work, in this way, is descended from Olson's poetics, though it certainly puts those poetics to new use.<sup>40</sup>

The poem's subject, it should be noted, lived a short but eventful life. Growing up in Havana, Chano Pozo learned to play congas while plying several trades, ranging from newspaper boy to Mafia hit man.<sup>41</sup> At the same, he became a devotee of Santería, the polytheistic, African diasporic religion, that syncretized elements of Christianity and Spiritism. Pozo, in fact, pledged his allegiance to Shango, syncretized as the Roman Catholic Saint Barbara and understood as the spirit of thunder, lightning, justice, virility, and patron of the drums. Taking these experiences with him, Pozo emigrated to the United States in the late 1940s, where he was introduced to trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. Their collaborations on songs such as "Manteca" and "Tin Tin Deo" brought his music to prominence, spawning the Latin Jazz genre and leading to a host of imitators throughout the 1950s, including, most famously, Desi Arnaz. Unfortunately for Pozo, however, he did not live to see these developments, as he was shot and killed in a Harlem bar in 1948. The influence of his music, however, would persist, its cross-cultural mix of African drumming, Latin American rhythms, and Caribbean sensibility enriching Gillespie and a younger generation's approach to jazz through its diasporic aesthetic.

Cortez's poem celebrates Pozo as the embodiment of the diasporic imagination, as a new world conjurer of various Yoruban, Ashanti, and other African "talking" drums—"Atamo," "Atumpan," "Ntenga," "Bata"—drums used in various West African religious rites.<sup>42</sup> In this way, his drums give voice to the forgotten histories of slavery, colonialism, and the struggle for freedom. The conga here works as both protest—brought over by enslaved Africans, the dance was outlawed in Cuba by Gerardo Machado and only occasionally permitted by Fulgencio Batista—and play. Consequently, Pozo's "very fine conga of sweat" registers this history through the ambiguous "groans," "growls," and "yells" of "revolutionary spirits" in the opening.<sup>43</sup> This is transferred to Africa later, where late-1960s civil wars in "Angola" and Nigeria ("Calabar"), which also served as proxy battles between the U.S. and Soviet Union, bring to bear the complicated histories of colonialism and Cold War politics.<sup>44</sup> As both a "Lucumi," a devotee of Santería, as well as a member of an "Abakwa," an Afro-Cuban secret society, Pozo appears as a "healer" to

these divisions, as a “very fine encuentro.”<sup>45</sup> To have “heard,” “Oye,” Chano Pozo, then, is for Cortez also to locate him in the cross-cultural here of the poem, to chart such encounters through the performance of this history.<sup>46</sup>

The Firespitters’ music reinforces this dynamic sense of encounter in various ways. The recording, similarly, casts Pozo as a heroic figure for music’s celebration of African diasporic rhythms and religion. In doing so, it also reconfigures the field of projective verse, opening it up to a Black Arts understanding of performance that blends the innovations of Black Mountain poetics with the musical experimentation of Pozo, Gillespie, and others. Indeed, the musical piece opens with Coleman’s conga drumming, followed by the entire band chanting “I see / Chano Pozo” over a driving bass line.<sup>47</sup> Sonically, the effect echoes and updates Pozo’s own music; meanwhile, Cortez’s unadorned spoken word renders the poem largely as it appears on the page. Perhaps the greatest difference in this regard is the subtle additions to the audio recording. Aside from the band’s refrain, chanted following Cortez’s own repetition of the phrase at the break of each verse or strophe, she also embellishes the text at various points with a seemingly improvised “yeah,” “oye,” or “Chano” to soften the line-breaks and respond to the music’s pulsing rhythm.<sup>48</sup> For similar reasons, it would seem, the line “Lucumi Abakwa Lucumi Abakwa,” with its lengthy pauses and heavy accents, was omitted from the recording.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the sense of an extended, imagined community emerges through the intergenerational encounter that Cortez and her son Denardo make with Pozo’s diasporic spirit. In this way, Coleman’s drum solos after each chanted refrain, and at the very end of the piece, recall Pozo’s own playing, giving the effect of hearing both Coleman and Pozo at the same time.<sup>50</sup> So, too, Cortez’s shouts of “oye” and “olé I say,” which can be heard at times on Pozo’s recordings as well, sound a ghostly double-voice, conjuring the spirit of the drummer via a syncopated delivery that is represented by the shifting margins on the page.<sup>51</sup> In fact, using the page as a score, or chart, for vocal delivery effectively adapts Olson’s typographic innovations, thereby reimagining projective verse as an essential component of a larger performance aesthetic. For instance, when reading the poem while listening to the recording, the text’s indentations are moved throughout to enact the dramatic pauses necessary to syncopate the reader’s rhythm, much like Pozo’s and

Coleman's drumming. Similarly, the heavily weighted line-breaks complicate sentence grammar, much like those of Robert Creeley's poetry, disrupting prepositional phrases and stringing together independent clauses into long, complex chains of anaphoric drumming.<sup>52</sup> Beating interrogatives and imperatives into a rhythmic chant, the poem commands the reader to move in tune to Pozo's "mediation," to engage with the performance as dramatic encounter.<sup>53</sup> Cortez's delivery enacts much the same, particularly in the changes of tempo necessitated by her son's drumming and the consequent omission and addition of phrases and pauses to the text of the original, which, in a larger sense, open the poem to the kind of improvisatory encounter that Larry Neal sought in advocating "the destruction of the text."<sup>54</sup> In all of these ways, then, the result is, much like Chano Pozo's drumming, a hybrid art that integrates both African and European aesthetics.

As even a brief consideration shows, Black Arts Movement poets like Baraka and Cortez refashioned and developed the Black Mountain poetics of breath and voice in significant ways. Following from Olson's foregrounding of the body in the force field of projective verse, a larger tradition of performance poetry emerged, one which gave serious consideration to social and political concerns affecting the writer's material situation. Like Hannah Arendt, Olson's conception of polis imagined embodied voices crisscrossing in open fields, sounding their opposition to forces that would otherwise subdue and silence them. Such conceptions appealed to a young Amiri Baraka, who took up the mantle of Black Mountain through his writing and organizing in late 1950s and early 1960s New York. As his engagement with Olson's poetics developed, however, Baraka steadily refashioned key principles of projective verse, developing them to their logical ends through his formulation of the charm of embodied performance. As the example of Jayne Cortez demonstrates, Baraka was not alone among Black Arts Movement poets in adapting and reimagining Black Mountain poetics. His expansion of projective verse beyond the typographic innovations of the typewriter and into the drama of embodied performance was adopted by poets like Jayne Cortez, whose poetry and work with her band The Firepitters would take Baraka's approach one step further. In creating a dissonant performance art, Cortez's accomplishment, like Baraka's theoretical innovations, offer new perspectives on the legacy of Black

Mountain. In fact, in overlooking these encounters, scholars have for some time misunderstood the College's enduring significance for later generations of African American writers and poets alike.

Ultimately, though, Cortez's approach to performance poetry was even closer to Olson and Creeley's poetics than she may have known. In the multi-volume correspondence completed and published more than a decade after she composed "I See Chano Pozo," Creeley's letters to Olson detail on multiple occasions the significance of Pozo's drumming, even pointing out that the latter's poem, "La Chute," borrowed its rhythms from Pozo's example. Like Charlie Parker's playing, Creeley found Pozo's approach to rhythm exhibited precisely the innovations in poetic technique that "Projective Verse" sought and that poets of their generation could learn from. As he insisted, in words that would prove equally true for Black Arts poets like Cortez and Baraka: "The drums, so, are incredible teachers . . . one *can* learn a hell of a lot [just] listening."<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2000) 201.

<sup>2</sup> Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 98-106.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 180.

<sup>4</sup> James Edward Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 135.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose: Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Olson, "Projective Verse," 242, 247.

<sup>7</sup> Olson, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Olson, 239-40, 243-4, 245-6.

<sup>9</sup> Olson, 249.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Olson, "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]," March 1966, Gloucester, MA, MPEG-4, 02:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAYxpSjkyAg>.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Olson, "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]," in *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 184-45.

<sup>12</sup> Olson, "Letter 27," *Maximus Poems*, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Olson, "Letter 27," *Maximus Poems*, 185.

<sup>14</sup> Olson, "Letter 27," MPEG-4.

<sup>15</sup> Olson, "Letter 27," MPEG-4.

<sup>16</sup> Olson, "Letter 27," *Maximus Poems*, 185.

<sup>17</sup> Raphael Allison, *Bodies on the Line: Performance and the Sixties Poetry Reading* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014), xv.

<sup>18</sup> Allison, *Bodies on the Line*, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 15-16.

- 
- <sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 184; Hélène Cixious, *Entre l'écriture des femmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 32; Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 143.
- <sup>21</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 200.
- <sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198; Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 204.
- <sup>23</sup> Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 200-1.
- <sup>24</sup> Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley, CA: Oyez, 1970), 25.
- <sup>25</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley, and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 116.
- <sup>26</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.
- <sup>27</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 12.
- <sup>28</sup> See note 26 above.
- <sup>29</sup> See note 26 above.
- <sup>30</sup> See both LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963; and his "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)" in *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1967), 180-211.
- <sup>31</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 85.
- <sup>32</sup> See note 29 above.
- <sup>33</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 228-9.
- <sup>34</sup> Baraka, *Autobiography*, 282.
- <sup>35</sup> See note 1 above.
- <sup>36</sup> Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973), 28-30.
- <sup>37</sup> Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 29-30.
- <sup>38</sup> See note 33 above.
- <sup>39</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Technology & Ethos," in *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1971), 156.
- <sup>40</sup> See notes 1 and 2 above.
- <sup>41</sup> For the biographical details of this section, I have drawn from the account of Pozo's life in Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 205-7.
- <sup>42</sup> Jayne Cortez, "I See Chano Pozo," in *Coagulations: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984), 65, 67.
- <sup>43</sup> Cortez, "I See Chano Pozo," 65.
- <sup>44</sup> Cortez, "I See Chano Pozo," 66.
- <sup>45</sup> Cortez, "I See Chano Pozo," 66-7.
- <sup>46</sup> Cortez, "I See Chano Pozo," 67.
- <sup>47</sup> The Firespitters, "I See Chano Pozo," recorded July 1982, track 3 on *There It Is*, Bola Press, vinyl LP.
- <sup>48</sup> The Firespitters, "I See Chano Pozo," vinyl LP.
- <sup>49</sup> See note 42 above.
- <sup>50</sup> See note 44 above.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Cortez, "I See Chano Pozo," 65-7; The Firespitters, "I See Chano Pozo," vinyl LP.
- <sup>53</sup> See note 47 above.
- <sup>54</sup> Larry Neal, quoted in Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973), 30.
- <sup>55</sup> Robert Creeley, *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, vol. 10, ed. Richard Blevins (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1996), 250.