

# Black Mountain College

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**Editor's Note: Living with the land at Black Mountain College**

David Silver

*Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*

Volume 16: Living with the Land (Fall 2025)

Article URL: <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-16/silver>

Published online: September 2025

**Published by:**

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

**Editor:**

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**Production Editor:**

Kira Houston, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

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## **Editor's Note: Living with the land at Black Mountain College**

David Silver, Guest Editor

For over a decade, I have been researching and writing about the farm at Black Mountain College. To get the story, I went deep. I read about fifteen books about the dynamic, experimental college. I travelled to Asheville over a dozen times to the Western Regional Archives, which hosts the finest Black Mountain College collection in the world. There, with help from archivist Heather South, I buried myself in interviews, memoirs, and letters, and poured through farm-related minutiae like multi-year seed orders, planting calendars, and harvest logs. I made countless visits to the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, also in Asheville, where I was regularly wow'd by the themed exhibitions, wow'd by the staff's brilliance and generosity, and wow'd by their collection of photographs and other visual objects. And on numerous occasions I toured both Black Mountain College campuses – rented Blue Ridge and owned Lake Eden – mostly during the day, mesmerized by the surrounding natural beauty, but also in the night, when I'd search for ghosts willing to share a story or two.

What I uncovered – and what I share in my recently published book, *The Farm at Black Mountain College* – is a college community deeply connected with the natural environment around them. This connection happened all over campus and especially on the farm. Over the majority of the college's twenty-three year history, students, faculty, faculty families, and staff worked with and learned from local farmers and farm experts to start and sustain a farm. Actually, two farms – one at Blue Ridge, the other at Lake Eden. On the farm, the college, especially students, learned how to plan and plant fields, how to build a barn out of native lumber, how to transform forests into pastures and pastures into fields, and how to raise, breed, and slaughter livestock. Most importantly, they learned how to work together, to collaborate. At peak performance, they would gather their wastes – animal poop, kitchen scraps, fallen leaves – add water, air, and time, and make compost to feed the fields.

Early in my research, I came across a thing or ritual that Black Mountain College students did while working on the farm on a hot day. The more I researched, the more frequently this thing re-appeared. I soon learned that students performed this ritual during all eras of Black Mountain College – from the idealistic students who started a farm at Blue Ridge in the early 1930s, to the nearly all-female student body who built a new farm at Lake Eden during the war, to the handful of straggly students who no longer worked on the farm but sometimes gleaned from it in the mid-1950s.

The thing was this: At the earliest sight of one of those rolling sheets of rain, a student would holler “rain!” or “incoming!” or some such word or utterance that conveyed both glee and urgency. Immediately, everyone within range dropped any tool they were using. In one simultaneous swoop, shovels, hoes, rakes, and pitchforks hit the ground. At this point, the students opted for one of two positions: Some would stand straight, arch their necks back, and face the skies; others dropped down and laid on their backs. The showers lasted for a few seconds to a whole minute. They were always glorious. Showered, the students would shake off, chuckle, compare notes with others, and then pick up their tools and return to their tasks.

I was and am so smitten by this. As a professor who often integrates self- and collective-care activities into my classes, I love how quickly the students threw down their tools for a quick cleanse. At the same time, as a professor who has witnessed three decades of decreasing attention spans among students, I love how quickly they reclaimed their tools and tasks. I love how none of the students had to protect their phones from the rain. But most of all, I love the students’ gentle reminder to live with and within nature.

When Tom Frank and the *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* invited me to co-edit a special issue about the college and the environment, I said yes for multiple reasons. First, I always enjoy working with and learning from Tom Frank. Second, I am a huge fan of *the Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* and its fierce interdisciplinarity, its diverse author list of students, academics, artists, and activists, and its combination of prose and poems, painting and photography. But most of all, I was

curious to see what you – the BMC scholarly and creative community – would imagine, cook up, create, produce, and submit. I have learned so much from this BMC community, an international, arts-forward, curiosity-driven, progressive-minded, queer-friendly, super kind, super smart, and super creative network of folks, and was eager to see what you all would bring.

I wasn't disappointed.

Like the intellectual and creative diversity of Black Mountain College, the submissions we received came in all shapes and sizes. For convenience, I'll introduce them under three categories: articles, visual arts, and poetry.

Before Black Mountain College there was the Bauhaus, which included a garden. In "A Garden in the Landscape: Situating Micro- and Environmental Histories of the Early Bauhaus," Mats Werchohlad uncovers an understudied if not unknown garden at the Bauhaus and traces both its inspirations and applications. As its title suggests, Julie J. Thomson's "Mountains Ho! The Centrality of Experiencing the Blue Ridge Mountains at Black Mountain College," uses mountains to excavate and highlight the college's many meanings of and relationships to the stunning surroundings of the college. As she's done previously with photography and, with Michael Beggs, weaving, Thomson's singular focus across the college's history generates fascinating results. Finally, Tyler Emerson-Dorsch's lively "I'll Never Let You Go: The Forest and Jen Clay," explores the work and worlds of Jen Clay, a member of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center's inaugural annual residency program, Active Archive, on the Lake Eden campus of Black Mountain College, who makes soft textile sculptures of biomorphic monsters and then sets them free in a video game she created.

The list of Big Names who called Black Mountain College home is staggering, and three of our articles approach some of the biggest. In "It Takes a Village: Josef Albers and R. Buckminster Fuller at Black Mountain College," Jillian Lepek uses the model of the village to better understand how both long-term residents like Josef Albers and short-term visitors like Bucky Fuller created generative relationships within the social climate and physical setting of the college. Corey M. Loftus's essay, "Looking as

Seeing/Looking as Being: Hazel Larsen Archer & Photography at Black Mountain College,” is a deep dive of photography student-turned-professor Hazel Larsen Archer and explores her lessons from and contributions to the college, her relationships with Ruth Asawa and Robert Rauschenberg, and her inspirational pedagogical vision. In “The Pocket World: Intermedial Poetics in Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*,” Sean Lopez uses Olson’s *Maximum Poems*, begun at Black Mountain College, to explore the relationships between place and poetry.

In addition to words, we have images including Meredith Ahmed’s gorgeous and provocative works, collectively titled “Creature / Comfort,” which is driven by historical inquiry, social justice, and anti-colonial frameworks. Rooted in Appalachia, Meredith’s works examine how illustration and craft practices serve as living archives and their work extends Black Mountain College’s spirit of collaboration. In “Hôtel du Couvent,” Louis-Antoine Grégo blends words and photography to recount the patience and passion that poured into the rehabilitation of a 17th century convent in France. Along the way, the team discovered both a hidden garden (which they restarted) and connections with BMC’s community ethos, and eventually created the “Hôtel du Couvent,” a place where history, architecture, and contemporary hospitality coexist in harmony. Eleanor Conover explores the intersection between painting and landscape with “Before, Between: mediating land in painted abstraction.” Her statement takes us into her world, describing how physical reminders of landscape become elements of her paintings, reflecting the Albers’s drive to “work with material.” Bringing us to the present is “Perspectives: Chloe Moore of Southside Community Farm,” a video interview between Kira Houston and Chloe Moore, farm manager at Asheville’s Southside Community Farm. In the interview, Chloe discusses the Southside neighborhood, urban renewal, and food apartheid, as well as Southside Community Farm’s efforts towards reconnecting people of color with land and food in ways that feel empowering, restorative, and celebratory.

Late last September, as co-curator Bruce Johansen and I put the final touches on “The Farm at Black Mountain College,” an exhibition taking up the top level of the Black

Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, and as members of the experimental art collective Swannatopia finished their accompanying exhibition, “DEER FREAKS ... and decoys,” in the museum’s lower level, everything was immediately put on hold. Hurricane Helene hit followed by massive flooding, catastrophic damage, countless fatalities, and a deep feeling of unease and uncertainty that haven’t left the region. Prior to Helene, Swannatopia had been planning an “Ambient Farm Stroll” at Warren Wilson College, formerly the Asheville Farm School where eager Black Mountain College students and faculty visited to learn how to farm. Nearly two months later, at the request by Warren Wilson’s farm manager and countless other locals looking to heal, Swannatopia created “How do we mark the flood?” – a day of collective healing and community resilience that included over forty-five land-art installations across the campus of Warren Wilson College. The featured video of the day can and should remind us all of the healing powers of art and community.

Finally, some poetry. In “Threats,” Clint Bowman, who co-founded and facilitates the Dark City Poets Society, in Black Mountain, looks at the post-Helene mountains with both fear and hope for healing. In “Selections from *Listening to a Field through a Window of a Truck*,” Austen Camille combines poetry, prose, ceramics, and deep listening to land stewards to create poems seemingly harvested straight from the land. And who can resist Joseph Bathanti’s “Disciple,” a gorgeous poem about Michael Rumaker – BMC student, graduate, writer, seeker – and the many landscapes through which Rumaker travels and grows. Can we ask Joseph to write poems for *all* members of Black Mountain College?

For help with this special issue, I wish to thank Tom Frank, Kira Houston, Jeff Davis, and Diana Stoll. And finally, a thanks to you, for reading.

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