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Dissonant Voices: Race, Jazz, and Innovative Poetics in Midcentury America

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Joseph Pizza. *Dissonant Voices: Race, Jazz, and Innovative Poetics in Midcentury America*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2023. ISBN 9781609389116.

The July 7, 2022 issue of the *New York Times Style Magazine* ran a feature article by Amanda Fortini on Black Mountain College. With the title “Why Are We Still Talking About Black Mountain College?” the article was the latest installment in a minor renaissance of twenty-first century interest in the experimental college located in the mountains of western North Carolina that shaped a generation of writers and artists. For all the “talk” about Black Mountain College, a critical and sustained assessment of the intellectual and aesthetic dialogue between African American artists and the legacy of Black Mountain College has failed to occupy center stage. That is, until now.

Joseph Pizza, an Oxford trained professor of English at Belmont Abbey College, has provided scholars, artists, writers, and aficionados of all things Black Mountain College, with a long overdue engagement between two of the twentieth century’s major arts movements – Black Mountain College and the Black Arts Movement. *Dissonant Voices: Race, Jazz, and Innovative Poetics in Midcentury America* is a watershed publication in the scholarship on Black Mountain College.

Dissonant Voices goes far beyond mere cataloguing of the names of African American artists and writers who spent time at Black Mountain College. Pizza excavates the shared aesthetic theories and strategies that influenced the poets of Black Mountain College *and* the poets of the Black Arts Movement. Pizza’s dialogic engagement – one that is often overlooked and, in some ways, is exemplary – with this rich literary and cultural history is anchored by textured readings and critical analyses of the aesthetic theories and strategies of Black Mountain and Black Arts poets. Navigating the musical and poetic avant-garde of mid-twentieth century America, Pizza offers readers “an integrated reading of the work of New American and Black Arts movement poets” (2). Over the course of five chapters, *Dissonant Voices* re/introduces us to a

conversation on art, aesthetics, music, poetry, and politics that is neither reducible to Black Mountain College nor the Black Arts Movement. Rather, *Dissonant Voices* charts the circuitous contours of an ever evolving and dynamic conversation that reflects the talent, tension, and temperament of a diverse and divergent set of conversation partners with a backdrop of the fractious politics of race in America.

Pizza's "integrated reading" is grounded in the creative and innovative jazz music and *sound* of Charlie Parker and the poetic and aesthetic translation of Parker's art by Black Mountain poets Robert Creeley and Charles Olson. What ensues is a deeply collaborative conversation that takes on signature geographic characteristics as it moves across Black Mountain, Boston, San Francisco, and New York. It will also take on distinct performative and textual elements in a dizzying array of cafes, arts venues, gathering spaces, and publication forums during this period. While the imaginative sympathies and possibilities of jazz and poetry form a significant axis of engagement by literary scholars and artists, it is the unique and innovative work between the poles of the two Charles – Charles Parker, Jr. and Charles Olson – that unfolds a new horizon for capturing the artistic vision fueling the quests of the Beats and the Black Mountain poets as well as the New American Poetry and the Black Arts Movement.

Dissonant Voices captures the dynamism of a sound infused poetry in the search of a form most appropriate to host its signature textual and imaginative content. The book examines the musically saturated poetic explorations of Robert Creeley and Charles Olson in search of form, the enigmatic artistry of Stephen Jonas, Bob Kaufman's determined dialogical wanderings between the Beats, breath, and the politics and poetics of race, Amiri Baraka's exploration of the sounds of Blackness, and the sympathies of Black Arts poetry and New American poetry by way of Jayne Cortez and Sonia Sanchez. To riff on Marshall McLuhan, for this generation of poets, the music is the medium and the message. But not in a simplistic and straight forward sense. It requires an artistic, aesthetic, and conceptual framework that moves beyond symmetry to a much more complex theory of resonance. This is gestured to by Pizza as he closes the introductory chapter by presciently quoting Nathaniel Mackey, "[B]lack music says, as does an allied, radically pneumatic poetics, that breath, especially imperiled breath, matters" (22).

The challenge and opportunity of *Dissonant Voices* is the critical elaboration of a sensibility and attentiveness that radically revises of our cognitive and aesthetic registers. New artistic and aesthetic movements often move at different temporalities and rhythms and *Dissonant Voices* recognizes this although, at times, the text finds this protean movement in the singular origin of an *Urtext* – Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse.” In some significant ways, the music of Charles Parker Jr. and the diverse tradition of Black arts form the very conditions of possibility of Olson, the Beats, and New American poetry. In so doing, an overlooked opportunity remains – a critical exploration and thinking of *Blackness* that is before and beyond resistance and subversion and that seeks to plumb the very act of creation. The multiple movements, peoples, places, and ideas captured in the proper noun, Dasein poets, gestures to such a thinking. In other words, we must confront a different question in an “integrated reading” of the arts and aesthetics of the avant-garde in America. In engaging Black Mountain and the Black Arts, a signifying question inspired by Stuart Hall is in order: “What is the ‘Black’ in Black Mountain College and the Black Arts Movement?”¹ To this question, *Dissonant Voices* offers a beginning and an ethic. Not one of integration, but of dissonance. Guided by an ethics of dissonance, we may trace the elliptical and reciprocal resonances that in/form the aesthetics of these complementary and divergent movements.

Dissonant Voices: Race, Jazz, and Innovative Poetics in Midcentury America is an important addition to the critical literature on the avant-garde in America. Joseph Pizza revises our artistic imagination while reminding us that there is much left to explore in the ongoing conversation on Black Mountain College. This is why we keep talking about that remarkable place and its legacy.

¹ Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ In Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20.1/2 (Spring-Summer, 1993), 104-114.