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Black Mountain College and the Practice of Writing
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Black Mountain College and the Practice of Writing

Jonathan C. Creasy

“The effort is definitely non-literary. Neither is the reading in ‘literature,’ like they say, nor is the writing “composition.” [...] The idea is to enable the person to achieve the beginnings of a disposition toward reality now, by which he or she can bring himself or herself to bear as value.”

—Charles Olson, “The Act of Writing in the Context of Post-Modern Man”

I.

When I think and write about Black Mountain College, several passages in its history come immediately to mind. First among them is John Andrew Rice’s statement to Louis Adamic, the author of a 1936 *Harper’s Monthly* article on BMC:

Nearly every man is a bit of an artist, at least potentially a person of imagination, which can be developed; and, so far as I know at this moment, there is but one way to train and develop him—the way discovered, not by me but by Black Mountain College as a whole.

Here our central and consistent effort is to teach method, not content, to emphasize process, not results; to invite the student to the realization that the way of handling facts and him amid the facts is more important than the facts themselves. [...]

There is a technic to be learned, a grammar of the art of living and working in the world. Logic, as severe as it can be, must be learned; if for no other reason, to know its limitations. Dialectic must be learned: and no feelings spared, for you can’t be nice when truth is at stake ... Man’s responses to ideas and things in the past must be learned. We must realize that the world as it is isn’t worth saving; it must be made over. These are the pencil, the brush, the chisel.¹

Here we see art—the *process* of art—placed at the center of the Black Mountain project. The philosophical and pedagogical dimensions of Rice’s statement extend to real practical concerns of democracy under threat: the world as it is versus the world as it can be remade, collectively by creative individuals. This expansive view of the value of art and education is part of what makes studying Black Mountain so endlessly regenerative and inspiring.

I’ve started with Rice’s premise on a number of occasions. This initial framing of the College is worth repeating, as it gets at the serious business of how we learn, why we learn, and what materials are useful in the process of learning. Rice’s “pencil,” “brush,” and “chisel” are both metaphorical and actual. They are the tools of the trade, not the products (the poem, the painting, the sculpture). As Anni Albers writes in a *Black Mountain College Bulletin* from 1938, “We use materials to satisfy our substantial needs and our spiritual ones as well. We have useful things and beautiful things—equipment and works of art.” The weaver’s conviction that “simplicity stands at the end not at the beginning of a work” is echoed in poet Charles Olson’s lines, “I have had to learn the simplest thing/ last, which has made for difficulty.”² Both artist-teachers would have agreed that teaching and learning is “a kind of researching made public”³— where teacher, student and medium meet in dynamic, collaborative process and possibility.

At Black Mountain, students learned by doing and by questioning. (In this way, all members of the College—whether faculty or enrolled pupil—were students.) The stakes could not have been higher, as the College’s founders saw it.⁴ A generation of young minds had to be trained in truth-finding and truth-telling if the world were to be saved from the philosophical excesses and political evils of the time. In the United States, the failure of education threatened to lead a confident, complacent population toward disaster. In Europe, the beginning of the end of civilisation seemed at hand. The method Rice laid out to *Harper’s*, and which European émigrés such as Josef and Anni Albers practiced at Black Mountain, puts faith in the active processes of art to spur inquiry and develop methods of living and being in the world, together and as individuals. In this sense, the Black Mountain experiment had definite political dimensions. It seems fitting (given its short life and the relatively transient nature of many of its students and faculty)

that the College often acted as a catalyst, sending its artists, thinkers and writers out to engage with the world and find their own means for effecting change. Rice continues,

The job of a college is to bring young people to intellectual *and emotional* maturity; to intelligence, by which I mean a subtle balance between the intellect and the emotions; not merely to an arbitrarily select amount of cramming [...] Now look at the people that come from our “best” and largest universities. Their heads are crammed with facts, but what knowledge they possess often does not include self-knowledge. Many of them are ailing children, sore with themselves and the world, ready to turn in a moment into “infantile leftists” (calling themselves communists) and even more infantile fascists.⁵

These philosophical ideals and practices place Black Mountain in the context of a larger defense of democracy, especially in the imperiled world of the 1930s and '40s. Mary Emma Harris argues that “if there was a single unquestionable assumption underlying the college’s structure and philosophy, it was a belief in democracy as a way of life.”⁶ Rice believed that arts at the center of Black Mountain’s curriculum could help create able citizens of democracy with the power of individual choice. Those citizens “are, when properly employed, least subject to direction from without and yet have within them a severe discipline of their own [...] that was the integrity of the artist. That should be the integrity of man as man.”⁷

Later, as the Second World War raged on, the Black Mountain College Bulletin of January 1943 read,

Black Mountain believes, and has for ten years attempted to realize its beliefs, that only through a truly liberal education can a young person come to any understanding of the complex and chaotic world in which he lives; that only by coming to see the world as a world of people, and by coming to know some of the reasons people agree or disagree, the ways in which they live and work side by side, can a student approach the ideal of a better society.

In the method discovered, as Rice says, by Black Mountain “as a whole,” artistic creativity is a means for imagining (and *realizing*) a better world. Those of us who study

the College and its history know that these high aims were not always achieved. Black Mountain was an idealistic experiment rooted in material and process, limited by financial means (which necessarily spurred creativity), and largely defined retrospectively by the achievements of a small group of artist-teachers and alumni. It was also a community riven by mistrust and acrimony, dominated at times by semi-authoritarian figures. Its various histories have foregrounded certain people and obscured others (often women). In short, it was not a perfect place without significant problems worth critiquing.

Yet the real achievements of the College—its attempts at true democracy, however imperfect; the general openness of its grounds, people and curricula; the example it set for a truly engaged liberal education—are worth revisiting, especially today. Moreover, we ought to examine how the methods outlined at the College’s founding (and maintained in some form throughout BMC’s brief life) may be integrated into our own lives, learning and education.

Years ago, I had the privilege of pursuing doctoral research on Black Mountain in Trinity College Dublin, under the supervision of Philip Coleman, a leading Irish scholar of contemporary U.S. poetry. Happy as this situation was, it threw up obvious contradictions and ironies. I was studying a short-lived, radical twentieth-century American institution from inside the gated, hallowed grounds of a university founded in 1592. Of course, I made many research trips to Black Mountain and archives in North Carolina, Connecticut, Germany and elsewhere. But, effectively, Ireland and Black Mountain became connected in my mind and in my work, however incongruous that may have seemed. I will never forget a meeting in TCD to defend early parts of my thesis in which the distinguished Head of School sincerely wished that he could live and work in an environment more like BMC. When I countered that most Black Mountain faculty were never properly paid, it gave him pause. Well then, why not try to incorporate elements of the Black Mountain experiment into the structures of our more conventional universities? How might that be done?

§

Rice's words would have been empty without the presence of artists who could deliver on Black Mountain's aims. Josef and Anni Albers were key in this regard. Having arrived from Germany and the Bauhaus at the start of the Black Mountain experiment, the couple stayed longer than almost any other figures associated with the College. What the Alberses had learned (and taught) in the Bauhaus would be modified and delivered as the core of Black Mountain's pedagogy across disciplines and fields of knowledge. No matter what one came to Black Mountain to study, the art and philosophy of Josef and Anni Albers set the tone during their long tenure (1933-1949). Their modified Bauhaus *Werklehre* became the foundation of Black Mountain's education. Students learned to see, to feel and to form elements of the world around them. This is useful in approaching any discipline, any human experience or correspondence. The aim, again, was not to create professional artists but engaged, critical citizens prepared for the challenges of the modern world. As Anni Albers writes in *Black Mountain College Bulletin* 2 from June 1934,

If we accept education as life and as preparation for life, we must relate all school work, including work in art, as closely as possible to modern problems. It is not enough to memorize historical interpretations and aesthetic views of the past or merely to encourage a purely individualistic expression. We need not be afraid of losing the connection with tradition if we make the elements of form the basis of our study. And this thorough foundation saves us from imitation and mannerisms, it develops independence, critical ability, and discipline.

The Black Mountain approach in strict terms might be incompatible with most of today's established institutions. (Anyway, how could Black Mountain ever be interpreted *strictly*?) It may even be that a Bauhaus-inspired program of design and visual form is not now the most relevant artistic process when applied to a liberal education (if only for the lamentable fact that training in arts, crafts and design has diminished rather than increased in education over time). Yet there is a place where Black Mountain ideas seem perfectly adaptable: in our teaching, learning and practice of writing.

II.

In December 2019, months before the global shutdown, New Directions published the anthology I edited and introduced, *Black Mountain Poems*. The pocket-sized edition is an attempt to put poetry from Black Mountain at close reach for readers. I also wanted to foreground some writers who have been left out of the critical literature on the so-called Black Mountain Poets, like M.C. Richards and Hilda Morley for example. The book aims to introduce the uniqueness and breadth of poetry written at and around Black Mountain, and by poets associated with the College. Rejecting (as Olson did) the idea of a unified “Black Mountain Poetry” or poetics, the selection begins (again) with Rice’s proposal for the College. It looks at Black Mountain poems for their conversation and correspondence—the common world of inquiry, artistic process and activity they create and inhabit.

To underline the significance of Black Mountain’s founding aims, *Black Mountain Poems* begins with pieces from Josef Albers’ *Poems and Drawings*, originally published in 1958, the year after Black Mountain College finally closed. The book was published to high specifications by Readymade Press, which shared an office with Yale University Press. (When Albers was teaching at Yale, he kept a basement storage room for his artworks, many of which went back to his Bauhaus days, and the Readymade office adjoined his room in the basement. The creation of such a beautiful book was a function of physical proximity.)

In his introduction to a 2006 reprint of the book (its third edition), Director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Nicholas Fox Weber, writes, “[Albers] was enchanted by the deceptiveness of words and the idea of multiple meanings—visual or verbal.” He continues,

The interplay of German and English caught his fancy; so did the balance of simplicity and complexity as one latched on to apprehensible details in a fluctuating world, opting for what was dependable—like the shapes of squares—as a stronghold amidst the infinite mysterious universe of colour, using few words and short lines as a handle to the vast worlds of form and language.⁸

Albers' concise poems share formal aspects with his paintings, and the messages in the poems echo his teaching philosophy:

There is no world without a stage
and no one lives for not-appearing

Seeing of ears invites to speak
knowing of eyes invites to show

Notice also, silence sounds
listen to the voice of color

Semblance proves it can be truth
as every form has sense and meaning

In poetry workshops, I often begin with these Albers poems—along with fragments of writing by Anni Albers, taken mostly from her articles in various issues of the official *Black Mountain Bulletin*. It is useful for writers to see how these two artists—native neither to English nor to poetry or prose writing—use the materials of language to create effects and meanings. When we write, we are working with “silence sounds” and “the voice of color.”

Black Mountain Poems includes an essential statement from Anni Albers that I share with my writing students on day one:

The difficult problems are the fundamental problems; simplicity stands at the end, not at the beginning of a work. If education can lead us to elementary seeing, away from too much and too complex information, to the quietness of vision, and discipline of forming, it again may prepare us for the task ahead, working for today and tomorrow.

As Olson insists, we must learn the simplest things last. By approaching language and writing this way, questioning even the simplest assumptions, we come to new ways of

thinking, seeing and feeling. We can access this new knowledge and perception through the common materials of language.

In his introduction to a 2014 event titled “Mastering Style: The Learning and Teaching of Writing” (which featured speakers Steven Pinker and Jill Abramson), Sam Moulten of the Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching (HILT) asks rhetorically, “Why writing?” He answers,

Writing is a, if not *the*, core competency that transcends our diverse landscape of departments, programs and curricula. Whether we are lawyers, doctors, artists, educators, scientists, humanists, public health professionals, policy experts, theologians, or just intellectually curious, we are all readers and we are all writers. Writing is not only a shared curricular goal or educational value, it is also a shared personal experience. None of us were born expert writers, and each of us has experienced transformative moments in our own evolution as writers.⁹

The practice of writing holds a special place in our education not just as professionals, but as individuals seeking common emotional and intellectual experience. The transformative nature of writing as a creative practice (whatever the discipline), using words as *material*, is useful in the same way as Josef Albers’ approach to the elements of visual form and relationships between objects and colors. As he writes of art instruction in 1934, Black Mountain’s “art instruction attempts first to teach the student to see in the widest sense: to open his eyes to the phenomena about him and, most important of all, to open his eyes to his own living, being, and doing.”¹⁰ In the absence of “fine” arts instruction, writing is an accessible form of creative practice reaching across and beyond disciplines of knowledge. It is a means not only to communicate, but to *create*—new worlds, new forms, new possibilities. All one needs to do is to pick up the pencil.

Moulten’s introduction at Harvard characterizes writing as common ground for any academic expertise. Pinker goes on to advocate for a clear, classic style of prose, which is exemplified in Abramson’s journalism. While the communicative act of writing is obviously a “core competency,” what may we take from Black Mountain’s model of a more abstract, material approach to the practice of writing? What can Mary Caroline

Richards teach us, who came from a conventional English department to Black Mountain, where she exploded her practice as a poet and modeled a new way through work in pottery? Olson claims in his essay, “The Act of Writing in the Context of Post-Modern Man,” written at Black Mountain, the approach to writing at the College (at least under his guidance) would not be “literary” and also not “composition.” Rather, in line with Rice’s and Albers’ early aims for the curriculum, writing practice for Olson was a personal challenge to find one’s point of view, and—going further—how that point of view might create value in relation to others and to society, realizing Olson’s own modern “*polis*”:

“It was a polis,” sd his friend, “no wonder
you wanted to take part in its
creation.”

Charles Olson, “Obit” (Unpublished poem at Black Mountain College)

Placing creative acts at the center of learning is transformational. These acts cut across schools and disciplines and bind them together. This *active* approach makes special demands on learners. As Olson writes,

Several things follow from these [...] base principles, so far as the instruction at Black Mountain College goes. One characteristic, from the beginning, has been the recognition that ideas are only such as they exist in things and in actions. Another worth emphasizing (it is still generally overlooked in those colleges where classification into fields, because of curriculum emphasis, remains the law) is that Black Mountain College carefully recognizes that, at this point in man’s necessities, it is not things in themselves but *what happens between things* where the life of them is to be sought.¹¹

I received an exceptional education in Trinity College Dublin, but it was an education still rooted in the separation of fields and disciplines. I studied English in the Humanities Building on one end of campus, while others studied sciences at the opposite end. We rarely, if ever, had occasion to meet. There was no centralized writing program and little interaction between areas of study. This was not for lack of effort on behalf of faculty,

students, administrators and researchers, whose work often challenged these conventional boundaries. But the university is, in many ways, set in its traditions. When the Head of School all those years ago longed for a place more like Black Mountain, he hardly meant the poverty, uncertainty and occasional acrimony. He wanted—I believe—a smaller, more dynamic environment where disciplines of knowledge and inquiry were free to interact. Black Mountain approached this problem by placing art at the center of its project. I suggest that the practice of writing can achieve similar aims. And I mean writing not just as “composition” or even “literature,” but as an active searching for *things* and the dynamic relationships between them.

There is another statement I bring to my students on the first day. Robert Creeley (a former Harvard student who left the institution, as he says, “one year short of the fatal approval”) asks in the preface to his *Selected Poems*, “Why poetry?” He answers,

Its materials are so constant, simple, elusive, specific. It costs so little and so much. It preoccupies a life, yet can only find one in living. It is music, a playful construct of feeling, a last word and communion. I love it that these words, “made solely of air,” as Williams said, have no owner finally to determine them. The English teacher all that time ago who said, “You must learn to speak correctly,” was only wrong in forgetting to say why—for these words which depend upon us for their very existence fail as our usage derides or excludes them. They are no more right or wrong than we are, yet suffer our presumption forever.¹²

If, as Rice claims, each of us is “a bit of an artist,” then we are poets as well. Poetry can be many things, but—in Black Mountain terms—it is always *active*. It requires going out into the world to seek and to find, forming perceptions, knowledge and information and arranging them in relation to one another. This is not the sole province of the poetry workshop; it is the heart of an education that aims to make the world over. I come back again and again to these Black Mountain facts and convictions because they remind us of the perils of our world, and they give us the tools to make something new.

¹ Adamic, Louis. "Education on a Mountain: The Story of Black Mountain College." *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 1936.

² All Black Mountain College Bulletins 1933-1949 are available from Mary Emma Harris' Black Mountain College Project:

<<http://www.blackmountaincollegeproject.org/PUBLICATIONS/PUBLICATIONS%20SERIES.htm>>

³ Letter to Creeley, March 23, 1953, describing Olson's background lectures for his Institute of the New Sciences of Man at Black Mountain in 1953.

⁴ See Black Mountain Bulletin January 1943, "Liberal Education Today as a Tool of War"

⁵ Rice quoted in Adamic 518

⁶ Harris, Mary Emma. *The Arts at Black Mountain College*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002. 7

⁷ Rice in Duberman, Martin. *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972, 53-54.

⁸ Albers, Josef. *Poems and Drawings*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 1

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYhjo5O-nfg&t=179s&ab_channel=HarvardUniversity>

¹⁰ Albers, Josef. "Concerning Art Instruction." *Black Mountain College Bulletin*. Series 1, Number 2. (June 1934.)

¹¹ *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archive*. George F. Butterick (ed.). Number 2, Fall 1974.

Storrs: University of Connecticut Libraries, Thomas J. Dodd Research Center. No 2, pg. 25

¹² Creeley, Robert. "Preface." *Selected Poems*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.