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Introduction

Everything that Acts is Actual
Denise Levertov

Antefacts

Quite *à la Black Mountain*, in accordance with the typically informal, yet intensely productive, style of the experimental College set in the picturesque scenario of the Blue Ridge Mountains (Asheville, North Carolina, 1933-1957), the idea of this “Forum” sprang forth out of a conversation at the dinner table. The project of a “Forum on Black Mountain College,” to be possibly hosted at *RSA Journal*, as a matter of fact, took shape during my visit at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies (KCUFS), Japan, in December 2015, under an international exchange scheme between KCUFS and Sapienza University, Rome. “Talk was probably the community’s most characteristic activity” Martin Duberman remarks (101), adding “it wasn’t talk sequestered to classrooms. . . . People constantly dropped into each other’s studies, staff and students interacting without planning or formality” (101).

In our case, the occasion of such constructive talking was favored by a lovely treat at a *sake* restaurant. During the meal, Matt Theado, Professor of American Literature at KCUFS, naturally enough started talking about American experimental poetry, an interest we shared. By pleasant and mutual surprise, we realized that both of us had been, and still are, Black Mountain College *aficionados*, and that Professor Hitomi Nabae too, of the same Department, also sitting at the table, had approached the movement

in her studies dealing with the influence of the American avant-garde in Japanese arts.

The unexpected convergence of interests seemed singularly propitious for a further engagement in the topic at an international level. The possibility that a fresh opportunity of renewed research on the historical College could arise just from the other side of the globe, during an informal gathering, had some kind of savory premonition in it.

Hence, the desire to organize a joint event on the Black Mountain College experience, with a special focus on poetry and visual arts, grew and consolidated. We soon got in touch with two outstanding scholars connected to the BMC poetics, Ann Charters and Mary Emma Harris, both of whom accepted our invitation. We are grateful to them for their participation. In addition, we were delighted to find out that the editorial board of *RSA Journal* had meanwhile granted such dedicated space.

Antecedents

Black Mountain College, now officially an academic discipline (Black Mountain College Studies), represents a lifelong attraction in my personal case. Please allow me to briefly go over the story of my intellectual engagement with it and of its fortune in Italy.

In 1975, late poet, translator, scholar, and professor Margherita Guidacci introduced me – a young student with a vivid interest in contemporary American Poetry – to the Black Mountain College Poets. Thanks to a 1976 Fulbright-Hays scholarship, my research on the topic continued at SUNY-Binghamton, the university where the editorial board of the post-modern literature journal *boundary 2* was established. At that time (1976-77) the bulky Creeley issue (published in 1978) was being prepared and edited, and I was offered the privilege of being involved in its making. My friendship with Bob Creeley began then and lasted until he left us in 2005 (meanwhile, he had visited Rome several times). Professor W. V. Spanos, my tutor at SUNY-Binghamton, at that time was lecturing on post-modernism and the American post-modern tradition, from Whitman to Pound, Williams, and Olson. His lectures were all memorable and ground-

breaking; not simply an impressive master, he was also a forerunner of theory in the US academy.

In 1987, Annalisa Goldoni and myself edited an anthology of poetry and criticism entitled *Black Mountain College: Poesia & Poetica*, comprising the first Italian translations, with original texts fronting, of the so-called group of Black Mountain Poets. The group was constituted by those writers who, according to Donald Allen's criteria, had been either teachers or students at Black Mountain College, or were authors published in the *Black Mountain Review*. As the first Italian book on BMC poetry, it also featured critical essays by George Butterick (the curator of the Charles Olson's Archives at SUNY-Buffalo in the '80s), Annalisa Goldoni, and myself. In addition, this publication contained the first complete Italian translation of the BMC poetical *manifesto*, "Projective Verse" (1950) by Charles Olson. In "Rivisitando lo scenario poetico del Black Mountain College: sessant'anni dopo," I revisited BMC and once again presented it to an Italian audience, but no further monographs on Black Mountain College have appeared in Italy so far.

Thirty years after this pioneering work, and sixty years removed from the official closure of Black Mountain College as a physical space (1957), its echo, with its propelling power, is once again resonating in these pages.

At present

This re-energized initiative was greatly inspired by the renewed interest in the field manifested in the US, along with the art exhibition "Leap Before You Look,"¹ which was first held at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston (from October 10, 2015 until January 24, 2016), to be then transferred on tour to the Hammer Museum, UCLA (February 21- May 16, 2016), and then to the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University (from September 9, 2016 up to January 1, 2017). The exhibition's catalogue, published by Yale University Press, features 318 color and 170 b/w illustrations, spanning 400 pages, definitely a massive publication collecting the most significant production of the artists who either taught or studied at BMC.

In her introduction, curator Helen Molesworth states:

In 1933, John Rice founded Black Mountain College in North Carolina as an experiment in making artistic experience central to learning. Though it operated for only 24 years, this pioneering school played a significant role in fostering avant-garde art, music, dance, and poetry, and an astonishing number of important artists taught or studied there. Among the instructors were Josef and Anni Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Karen Karnes, M. C. Richards, and Willem de Kooning, and students included Ruth Asawa, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly. *Leap Before You Look* is a singular exploration of this legendary school and of the work of the artists who spent time there. Scholars from a variety of fields contribute original essays about diverse aspects of the College – spanning everything from its farm program to the influence of Bauhaus principles – and about the people and ideas that gave it such a lasting impact. (1)

This volume, in which writings, musical compositions, visual arts, and crafts are also included, “convey[s] the atmosphere of creativity and experimentation that was unique to Black Mountain College, and that served as an inspiration to so many” (ibidem).

The same sense of “enduring legacy” pointed out by Molesworth emerges also from the simultaneous debate organized by the Modernist Studies Association 17th Conference – held in Boston in October 2015 and titled “Modernism and Revolution” – in which the relevance of the BMC experience in terms of cosmopolitanism and mixture of forms of art was energetically highlighted. The treatment of the BMC avant-garde stance was articulated in three different roundtables: “Conceptual Underpinnings,” “Interdisciplinarity,” and “Dispersed Publishing Networks.” Some of the most noteworthy scholars on Modernism and Post-Modernist theory from various universities across the US participated in the discussion. A similar focus was also achieved during the symposium organized by the Humanities Center at the University of Maine, in cooperation with the National Poetry Foundation (on October, 22-24, 2015), during which “presentations, roundtable discussions, readings, and open forums” fostered “a wide-ranging conversation about the people, ideas, artworks, social contexts, and conflicts that defined Black Mountain College during its relatively brief but highly influential existence” (*Symposium* n. pag.).

It is interesting to note how the “kick-off event” of this Symposium was explicitly dedicated to celebrating poetry: “The Poetry of Black Mountain College: A Celebration.” Concluding the three-day debate, the question was how to focus on “new directions for BMC-related research in the wake of *Leap Before You Look*” (ibidem). In other words, we would like to point out how the multifaceted creative soul of the BMC experience continues to manifest itself and thrive in renewed debate.

For obvious reasons, we cannot go through the whole history of Black Mountain College. Martin Duberman’s exhaustive classic *Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community*, 1972 remains an unobjectionable authority. However, we do want to remember how

[t]he teachers and students at BMC came to North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains from around the United States and the world. Some stayed for years, others mere weeks. Their education was unlike anything else in the United States. They experimented with new ways of teaching and learning; they encouraged discussion and free inquiry; they felt that form in art had meaning; they were committed to the rigor of the studio and the laboratory; they practiced living and working together as a community; they shared the ideas and values of different cultures; they had faith in learning through experience and doing; they trusted in the new while remaining committed to ideas from the past; and they valued the idiosyncratic nature of the individual. But most of all, they believed in art, in its ability to expand one’s internal horizons, and in art as a way of living and being in the world. (“Leap” n. pag.)

It is in this spirit of cosmopolitanism and free inquiry that we are honored to host the authoritative voices of the scholars here included: Ann Charters, Mary Emma Harris, Hitomi Nabae, and Matt Theado. To them, for their scholarship and generosity in sharing, we are deeply grateful and strongly indebted.

Anticipation

In the following pages, Mary Emma Harris, with her essay “Black Mountain College: Open Form in American Education,” concentrates on

the overall development of the arts and artistic curriculum at BMC, from its early period to its closure. Being the author of the pivotal book *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (first edition 1987, reprinted in 2002), she revisits the main events that forged the unique artistic experience which originated from and grew at Black Mountain College. For instance, it was at Black Mountain College that Merce Cunningham formed his dance company, John Cage staged his first “happening,” and Buckminster Fuller built his first dome. Harris claims that the

founders of Black Mountain College were cognizant that they were creating a new form in American education. . . . Black Mountain College was an evolving, conflicted, interactive, open form, nourished by an experimental spirit. This open form fostered challenge, constant redefinition, and change. It permitted a free exchange of ideas and an unrestricted flow of creative energy.

Harris also points out how “from the beginning it embraced experimentation, redefinition, and new thinking,” seeking “to educate the whole person – head, heart, and hand – through intellectual studies, community life, and crafts.” As a matter of fact,

[c]ompartmentalization, departmentalization, and curricular and extracurricular activities did not exist at Black Mountain. Learning took place in mealtime conversations, on construction projects, on the farm, and in informal gatherings.

The life of BMC, and its legacy, vividly expands from Harris’s account.

In her contribution, Ann Charters brings to the fore “the free-spirited atmosphere of creativity and independence at Black Mountain” and “the free-wheeling educational experience” that took place there in the 1950s.” However, she primarily focuses on her personal contact, mutual friendship, and professional comradeship with Olson: “[d]uring the hours I spent with Olson, we never stopped talking.” From her account, Olson’s stature emerges as both poet and educator. Charters confesses, for instance, that after witnessing “Olson’s raffish life style in his modest apartment in Gloucester, he seemed to epitomize the spirit of Black Mountain to me.” She also recalls his physical and intellectual stature:

Olson was physically a large man, a flesh-and-blood, exuberant Maximus figure, large and untidy enough to personify my romantic idea of what an experimental arts college might have been like in rural North Carolina.

Charters continues describing not only her first impact as a student but also her experience as a mature scholar and author herself, focusing upon their exchanges on poetry, the American tradition, Melville, and obviously Olson's "Special View of History," for which Charters wrote the Introduction. From her account, Olson resonates as

particularly adept at carrying on simultaneous multiple conversations with his visitors, focusing without apparent effort on whatever topic they brought to him. It was a skill he used more brilliantly than any professor who taught my classes at UC Berkeley or Columbia University. ... Olson's thoughts ranged freely and widely from subject to subject, beginning with literature and continuing into art.

While emerging as widely knowledgeable in different fields of learning, his style was totally informal and straightforward, reigning

over his kitchen table as if he were conducting a graduate seminar, offering endless big cups of black coffee and small glasses of Cutty Sark scotch to lubricate the hours we spent excitedly exchanging ideas. ... When asked about his theories of education before becoming rector of the college, Olson answered, "I came with no ideas; Black Mountain did it all."

Matt Theado, in his essay "The Arrival of *The Black Mountain Review*," devotes his attention to the editorial experience and poetical revolution created by the seven issues of *The Black Mountain Review*, the journal founded by Olson to spread the BMC poetic line and fame, in order to avoid the imminent closure of the College due to financial difficulties. Under the direction of Robert Creeley, the journal's artistic choices immediately reveal its commitment to innovation and experimentation. Detailed incursions into some of the most significant contributions in the journal display its capillary, intrinsic, and innovative power. Far from echoing the editorial establishment of the time, under the aegis of Creeley's famous statement,

“FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,” the *BMR* encapsulates the most exquisitely avant-garde choices of the period: “*The Black Mountain Review* announces itself as a vehicle for new forms, new expressions, and new poets” and is “one of the most significant publications in US literary history, challenging the contented sphere of New York intellectuals and East Coast establishment poets that held sway in the post-War era.” Theado’s essay shows how

{t}he Black Mountain Review served on the one hand as a cultural tool to funnel the poems that grew in such a space as this into the general reading community. On the other hand, the review was itself a space that nurtured poetry and demanded a nonconformist spirit of art. Out of this space, a theory of poetry arose that matched in intensity and originality the experimentation in the other disciplines for which Black Mountain College was known.

Finally, Hitomi Nabae presents her essay-interview where she recounts BMC’s influence on Japanese art:

A Japanese art journal, *Art Trace Press*, issued a special number in summer 2015 featuring Black Mountain College (1933-1957; BMC). As there has been no scholarly book published in Japan that examines the significance of BMC as a center for art and education as a whole, this magazine is truly pioneering. ... The “Round-table Discussion” by art historians, Masayuki Tanaka, and Michio Hayashi, and a critic and poet, Hisaki Matsuura, serves as a brilliant introduction of BMC to Japanese readers.

If, on the one hand, “it is well known that Japanese art and Zen philosophy were an inspiration to many artists in the US, especially the Beat Generation poets”, on the other, “the influence of Japanese craftsmanship” is less known:

In 1952, Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, along with the founder of Mingei (Folk-crafts), Muneayoshi Yanagi and the British potter Bernard Leach, gave a seminar at BMC. They had already been invited to give several seminars in other areas of America but especially added BMC.

Therefore, Nabae's contribution focuses on "such encounters between American and Japanese craftsmen." The interview with Douglas Kinsey, an American painter and print-maker, "will shed a light on the encounters, or trans-cultural, trans-lingual exchanges of these great spirits of the East and the West." Nabae suggests that "[t]hrough the conversation with Kinsey," it is possible "to trace the ripples and circles of BMC spirit and the involvement of Japanese craftsmanship in the American scene"; "[i]n such way ... the BMC legacies are carried on."

We would like to endorse these concluding words, with the hope that such revitalization of the BMC experience can echo further – in time and space – and truly become "projective."

Notes

¹ In the title there is an evident reference to the intentional reversing of the traditional saying "Look before you leap," adopted by W. H. Auden in his famous poem.

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