

**The Creative Writing Pedagogy of Black Mountain College**

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Bethany R. Gareis  
August 2024

### **Acknowledgments**

I am very grateful to my thesis advisor, Dr. Ben Lee, for all of his advice, hospitality, and enthusiasm throughout this writing process. Dr. Hilary Havens and Dr. Stan Garner have similarly provided the cordiality and expertise that has encouraged me to keep up with my work, and I am so glad for their presence on my thesis committee. From the Western Regional Archives, I am indebted to the inspiration and assistance of Heather South, Sarah Downing, and William Brown. Additionally, I could not have completed half of my research without the assistance of the Hodge's Library ILIAD team. And to my husband Reece Kelsch, I am very grateful for the trips we took to Bynon Park to walk in nature between my writing sessions.

### **Abstract**

This essay relies on archival evidence and first-person accounts to study the development of creative writing pedagogy at Black Mountain College. Early accounts of creative writing at Black Mountain College reveal that it was initially an extracurricular activity driven by student interest, but over time, creative writing became a central part of the curriculum, aligning with the broader philosophies of art education at the college. I examine the pedagogical practices of key figures like Richards, Olson, and Wunsch alongside the progressive educational ideals that underpinned Black Mountain College's approach to learning, drawing on the philosophies of thinkers like Porter Sargent and John Dewey. The emphasis on critical thinking, community welfare, and the rejection of traditional educational practices in favor of experimental observation and reasoning shaped the approach to creative writing at Black Mountain College.

## Table of Contents

|                                                  |    |
|--------------------------------------------------|----|
| Chapter One Introduction .....                   | 1  |
| Pedagogical Contexts.....                        | 4  |
| Early Inspirations for the Arts Curriculum ..... | 7  |
| Josef Albers.....                                | 12 |
| Chapter Two Creative Writing Teachers .....      | 17 |
| Bob Wunsch.....                                  | 17 |
| M.C. Richards .....                              | 25 |
| Charles Olson.....                               | 33 |
| Bibliography .....                               | 38 |
| Vita.....                                        | 40 |

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Black mountain was the people who were there, which explains its sudden changes. [...] With its lake, farm, mountains, shingled lodges and buildings, in its community way of living a lot like camp, in both senses, but as Dan has said, the school was the people who were there. It had an organic understanding of itself being transient. People came and went. The list of famous names of students and faculty (that I am sick of), gives a false—wrong—impression, that leaves, however, a lasting mark. Too bad, because there were all kinds of people there, and all those are ignored.

—Fielding Dawson, quoted in *Sprouted Seeds: An Anthology*

Looking back, it is hard to believe that creative writing was not initially considered part of the arts curriculum at Black Mountain College, particularly since poetry workshops from the school's last decade generated some of its most memorable and significant associations. Few accounts of Black Mountain College fail to mention classes taught by the poets Charles Olson, M.C. Richards, and Robert Creeley, and the inclusion of a section on Black Mountain poets in Donald Allen's remarkably influential anthology, *The New American Poetry* (1960), cemented several poets from the College as important figures in contemporary literature.<sup>1</sup> This then makes it all the more surprising to hear that the founding faculty at Black Mountain College insisted that the college did not intend students to become professional artists and actually discouraged students from attempting to publish their creative work or otherwise attempt to professionalize themselves in the art world.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if we want to trace the development of creative writing at

---

<sup>1</sup>Allen's Black Mountain poets included Olson, Creeley, Ed Dorn, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Larry Eigner, Joel Oppenheimer, Jonathan Williams, Paul Blackburn, and Paul Carroll. M.C. Richards was not included, a notable absence. The members of Allen's Black Mountain school, as presented in his anthology, had not all been instructors or students at the College; some were, while others were grouped with them because they had published in the same small magazines.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Adamic. "Education on a Mountain" *Harpers Magazine*, (April 36) 521. Hereafter cited as Adamic, "Education On A Mountain."

Black Mountain College, we need to think of it first as a student-led activity that grew from its place on the peripheries of the community to its eventual prominence in the College's curriculum and reputation. Black Mountain College's writing curriculum, we might also say, developed alongside the faculty's broader philosophies about the applications of art education.

We know that creative writing had been part of the student body's extracurricular interests from the very beginning. One example of the earliest accounts of creative writing workshopping comes from a letter from Will Hamlin, a BMC alum who wrote to Martin Duberman about his early experiences as a Black Mountain College student:

(T)he years I was there...poets were largely working on their own, meeting informally in someone's study, sometimes with a faculty member invited, to read and criticize each other's work, or just working hard at it off by themselves. This was not for publication in any immediate sense. Except as one made carbon copies for one's friends. There had been a small mimeographed publication one year, but it was felt most of the work wasn't ready to be published. It was work in progress.<sup>3</sup>

From this recollection, it seems that at least in Hamlin's years, creative writing as an extracurricular activity followed the general expectations of the school in terms of pursuing creative work for the sake of the process of the work more than the finished product.<sup>4</sup> We also know that the students themselves were interested in distributing their work and eventually publishing it, given the right circumstances. Something must have changed intrinsically about the approach to creative writing at Black Mountain College after it became a regular part of the curriculum.

---

<sup>3</sup> Will Hamlin, letter to Martin Duberman from *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972) 107-108. (Hereafter cited as "Duberman, *Black Mountain*.")

<sup>4</sup> Duberman's *Black Mountain* also informs us that in the first year of Black Mountain College, there was a creative writing seminar involving students as well as teachers. 38.

In order to better understand Black Mountain College's approaches to creative writing, this essay begins with an overview of the school's early inspirations and the educational philosophies that grounded curricular decisions. As opposed as the college founders were to the idea of their students pursuing professional art careers, their foundational ideas about arts education line up well with those orienting the creative writing seminars that eventually became a primary draw for student enrollment in the College's later years. Terms such as "perception"; "imagination"; "self-knowledge"; "the individual" and "individuality," all taken from Louis Adamic's famous early essay on BMC, become keywords throughout my project as useful means of drawing these instructors together and examining the similarities and differences in their opinions and practice.<sup>5</sup>

While the majority of my essay centers on the pedagogical practices of Richards, Olson, and Wunsch, my treatment of these primary figures necessarily includes discussions of the ideas of John Dewey, John Rice, and Josef Albers, the educational theorist who most influenced the College at its founding, its founder, and its most influential art teacher. All these figures provide essential context for the origins and development of creative writing at Black Mountain College. Additionally, by centering our understanding of creative writing at BMC on the students and faculty who played crucial roles in the history of the school's creative writing curriculum, we gain a better idea of the culture of creative writing that eventually fostered and supported the famous names we now associate with the school's writing workshops. By focusing attention on the figures and ideas that introduced and sustained creative writing at Black Mountain College, I believe that we can further develop our conception of Black Mountain College's educational

---

<sup>5</sup> Adamic, "Education On A Mountain." Adamic's description of Black Mountain College made the school famous when it was published in 1936. The students who enrolled in the college after its publication would have first understood the College's proposed philosophies on work, art, community, and education through Adamic's representation.

principles as a whole and begin to see how this environment developed to cultivate the writerly atmosphere and achievements it did. My discussion leans on published memories combined with original archival evidence. A primary goal of my essay, in other words, is to provide firsthand accounts of daily life at BMC and of the College's foundational ideas about art and education, some of which have not been widely considered (or in some cases, even available) before.

### **Pedagogical Contexts**

On the one hand, nothing could be more constrained than the modern American school, which, never mind the plight of émigré authors, is anchored K--through--Ph.D. in the unbeautiful realm of social needs, hemmed in all around by budgets and bureaucracy and demography. On the other hand is the shimmering vision of self--realization--through--learning toward which it bends. We go to school, or are made to go, to become richer versions of ourselves, however that might be defined. This doubleness is readily apparent in the educational endeavor called creative writing.

—Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*

Black Mountain College represented a notable experiment in the *application* of a range of ideas associated with progressive education in the first half of the twentieth century. In his 1967 essay “Black Mountain College—The Total Approach,” John Evarts writes that BMC attempted to “realize a many-sided dream.”<sup>6</sup>

This dream of a reformed education was shared among many educational philosophers, including the educational critic Porter Sargent. Porter, who began teaching in 1890 and spent a

---

<sup>6</sup> This dream was of founding “...an ‘ideal’ college, educating the whole person, giving the arts their rightful place as formative, sensitizing elements, bringing out latent but untouched talents, emphasizing the individual rather than the mass. In furthering the concept of ‘total education’, it was felt that every aspect of life in the community had important bearing on education.” John Evarts, “Black Mountain College—The Total Approach,” *Form*, (No. 6, 1967), 20-28. Hereafter cited as Evarts, “Total Approach.”

decade of scientific training at Harvard University before “escaping with his life” and spending the next decade preparing young men for college by traveling with them and introducing them to religions, art, and culture from around the world.<sup>7</sup> Sargent called these trips and teaching his “real education,” a re-education which for him lasted until the interruption of World War 1. His important collection *Between Two Wars: The Failure of Education* (1940) provides detailed critiques of each year of Western education theory starting eighteen years before the founding of Black Mountain College and through the first seven years of its existence.<sup>8</sup> In the first chapter, Sargent claims that the American education system is in part to blame for the country’s present state of “war and waste,” and that if students had been tutored in the arts of perception, understanding, and awareness, rather than the memorization of “ancient precepts” and the practice of “tradition,” war might have been avoided. Sargent argues that because of the style and substance of education leading up to the war(s), people did not have the skills and training to find solutions: “When imminent crisis was upon us fear paralyzed instead of stimulating creative thought.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout his collection, Sargent calls for the removal of nationalistic histories and profit-driven education, demands the replacement of traditional dogmas and handed-down-information with experimental observation and critical reasoning, and implores parents and educators to examine the past twenty years of educational development before creating educational plans for the future. Indeed, he urges readers to think seriously about what changes need to take place in higher education for humanity’s “continued existence,” stating that without knowing where education must be adjusted to secure the survival of the human “species.”<sup>10</sup>

---

7 Porter Sargent, *Between two wars; the failure of education, 1920-1940*. (1945; Boston: MA, P. Sargent) Hereafter cited as Sargent, *Between two wars*.

8 Jonathan C. Creasy, *The Black Mountain Letters*. (Victoria: Dalkey Archive Press, 2016) Hereafter cited as “Creasy, *Letters*.” Creasy writes, “Between Two Wars is a Detailed, year-by-year critique of educational practices in the United States from 1920 to 1940. It draws a vivid picture of the pedagogical landscape in which Black Mountain was founded and finds in the failures of general education the root causes of world wars and authoritarian misrule” (141).

9 Sargent, *Between Two Wars*, 18.

10 Sargent, *Between Two Wars*, 18.

Also extremely influential for John Rice at the founding of Black Mountain College were John Dewey's philosophies on progressive education.<sup>11</sup> Like Sargent, Dewey petitioned for youth to be trained in critical thinking, the application of reason and observation, and to these skills, the added concern for community welfare: "Unless [the] end is placed in the context of services rendered to others, skills gained will be put to an egoistic and selfish use, and may be employed as a means of a trained shrewdness in which one person gets the better of others." Grading and school-sanctioned educational competitions were also of significant concern, as Dewey blamed the cycle of competitions and awards for training students to leave school as individuals ready to use their "special talents and superior skill to outwit his fellows without respect for the welfare of others."<sup>12</sup>

Another important, though later controversial, influence on the educational ideals at BMC was the experimental pedagogue and poet Ezra Pound. Pound had founded his own "Ezuversity" around his dining room table, with letters and conversation (along with an occasional lecture from Pound himself) constituting the main source of "education," and with occasional payments collected for room and board in place of tuition. The emphasis on conversation and the belief that "the [education] system could be changed by radical revolution of literature and the arts," were two Poundian principles that also found expression at Black Mountain, particularly in the writing and teaching of poets like Olson.<sup>13</sup> Pound believed that education had a direct national influence on the wellbeing of society. Similarly, Rice and the early faculty members at BMC believed that their pedagogical practices had broader

---

11 Creasy's *Letters* discusses this influence, among others. See 120-140. Duberman's *Black Mountain* also discusses Dewey's influence. See 24 and 94.

12 John Dewey, *On Education: Selected Writings* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 11 .

13 Creasy, *Letters*, 137.

responsibilities and offered the possibility of healing social rifts and renewing confident, independent, socially minded thought among students.

### **Early Inspirations for the Arts Curriculum**

While Black Mountain College shared progressive ideals concerning the roots of learning, its founders continually struggled to define the boundaries of freedom, to instill responsibility, and to establish habits of discipline. They hit upon the idea of placing art central in the curriculum for just that purpose. Headed by Josef Albers and eventually becoming the icon by which Black Mountain College was best remembered, the art program was envisioned primarily as a route to disciplined processes, and only secondarily as development in creativity or aesthetic appreciation.

—Katherine C. Reynolds, “Progressive Ideals and Experimental Higher Education: The Example of John Dewey and Black Mountain College.”

Black Mountain College, while unquestionably influential, can also be difficult to classify. It changed frequently over the course of its history, and its educational approach was just as often a subject of debate as it was a matter of consensus, a fact particularly true of the question of incorporating the arts into the curriculum. As Anne Dewey states: “In the context of the arts, ‘Black Mountain’ evokes diverse meanings. While all of these meanings trace their origin to the small, experimental college in existence near Asheville, North Carolina, from 1933 to 1956, the communities and esthetic principles associated with the college vary widely.”<sup>14</sup> “Experimental pedagogy” meant very different things to different students and faculty members, and over the course of the school’s short but vibrant life, it saw many variations on experimental arts education.

---

<sup>14</sup> Dewey, Anne Day *Beyond Maximus : the construction of public voice in Black Mountain Poetry*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) 3.

Two aspects of the school's founding educational philosophy remained consistent, however: alongside experimental practices in more traditional college subjects, students would study the arts and, alongside their instructors, they would participate in the shared labor of running the college. This "holistic" approach would help students develop as "individuals" in a world that the faculty saw as increasingly "individualistic."<sup>15</sup> By engaging students' imaginations and observational capacities through art training and by designing a cooperative community which would draw on the talents and aptitudes of both students and instructors, students would come to know themselves as individuals relative to the community in which they partook.<sup>16</sup> This holistic approach is reflected in the 1936 BMC Catalog:

Naturally, each individual differs in his capacity both for perceiving where his responsibility lies and for assuming it when he does perceive clearly; for distinguishing what affects him alone and what affects other people; for recognizing those areas in which he is competent to have an opinion and those in which he is not. This placing of responsibility upon the members of the group individually and collectively carries with it the implication of a minimum of rules: for the abiding by an externally imposed rule may or may not be an act of intelligence or responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

Freedom and observation were thought to be instrumental in guiding students to think for themselves and act for others (the characteristics of an "individual") rather than acting for themselves and thinking merely of presenting themselves to others (the character of an

---

<sup>15</sup> Adamic, "Education On A Mountain," 521.

<sup>16</sup> The distinction between "the individual" and "the individualist" is explained nicely by Lucy Burns, who discusses it in the context of debates over an individual's relationship to their community and over the difference between (the deeper work of) cultivating experiences and (comparatively shallow) acts of "self expression. Burns writes, "This differentiation between individual and individualist was not only based on one's relationship to a community or group, but on a distinction upheld by Rice, Wunsch, and Josef and Anni Albers—the key pedagogues at early Black Mountain—between the individual's valuable cultivation of 'art-experience,' and the individualist's inauthentic act of 'self-expression.'" From Lucy Burns, "Creative Writing [...] has a place in the curriculum": Robert Wunsch at Black Mountain College, 1933-43." *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* (Volume 11, October 2020.) Hereafter cited as Burns, "Creative Writing."

<sup>17</sup> From the Black Mountain College 1936-1937 and 1937-1938 catalog, courtesy of the Theodore Dreier Sr. Document Collection, Asheville Art Museum.

“individualist”). By engaging students in the shared, daily labor of the community, and by ensuring that students had the freedom to select their own coursework each semester, the College hoped to make students more aware of themselves and more engaged with society. By placing students in close quarters with their classmates, their teachers, and the faculty families and hired workers on campus, they would be given the opportunity to discover either their own flaws or their own potential gifts. Because the College needed their help around the farm, to build new buildings, or in the kitchen, students would find what talents they possessed in responding to the needs within their community. “All aspects of community life were thought to have a bearing on an individual’s education,” writes Duberman, including on “his growth, his becoming aware of who he was and wanted to be.” “The usual distinctions,” Duberman adds, “between curricular and extracurricular activities, between work done in the classroom and work done outside it, were broken down.”<sup>18</sup>

Community life was central to the pedagogical concerns that formed Black Mountain College. It was a general belief among the early faculty members at Black Mountain that within the previous hundred years, young people had lost two vital sources for their early formation: large families and small communities.<sup>19</sup> Without the gradual process of learning how to navigate complex family relationships and intimate community interactions, young people were too often left to blindly engage with the wider world without the practice and confidence necessary for authentic and effective interpersonal communication. Moreover, the educational system had become systematically oppressive to creative thought, personal expression, and interpersonal generosity. Therefore, the first step for the college would be to form a small, interactive, and

---

<sup>18</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> In Adamics “Education On A Mountain,” he condenses the ideas of several unnamed faculty members and refers to these lost developmental communities as “the big family” and “the village” 522-523.

interdependent community wherein students would learn to become more adaptable and considerate. Where a community suffered from a student's personal flaws, the student would be made aware, one way or another, of the negative effects of their failures, and would therefore become more likely to amend their flaws as needed.

Another crucial step the College would take to remedy individualistic tendencies would be to teach students to become artists. As Rice argued, BMC would be designed to produce,

[P]eople who will have the artistic approach to life as a whole and to everything in life; whose values will be qualitative, not quantitative; who will be eternally modern and as such distinguished not by what they will know, but by what they will do with what they will know; and who will know and feel that life is essentially not competitive but calls for co-operation everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

Teachers at Black Mountain College wanted their students to study art to learn to collaborate and to think creatively. Art classes would engage deeply and meaningfully in the world around them and would overlap with the experience of living and learning in community. Indeed, simply living together in close quarters was believed to be one of the primary factors in the students' formation. Being surrounded by the same small group with whom one learned and toiled would allow students to develop a deeper measure of social understanding and reach a higher level of personal authenticity.<sup>21</sup> The belief was that, through working side by side, paying attention to one another, and studying the benefits of such cooperation, conversation, and shared experience, BMC would recreate the formative elements of family and community that society had lost through a century of war and urbanization.<sup>22</sup> In pursuit of this goal, the founding members of

---

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Adamic, "Education On A Mountain," 518.

<sup>21</sup> Adamic, "Education On A Mountain," 527.

<sup>22</sup> Adamic, Education On A Mountain, 521.

Black Mountain College especially valued opportunities to expand the perceptions and experiences of their students. In their own ways, the founding faculty believed that these two pillars of education would develop students, as well as teachers, into individuals who would, to quote Rice again; “function as working artists in the teaching world, . . . cease being passive recipients and handers-out of mere information; . . . become productive, creative, *using* everything that comes within their orbit, including especially people.”<sup>23</sup> This goal would be pursued by the creation of an intentional community and an arts-based curriculum.

Another common approach among early Black Mountain teachers was to reintroduce opportunities for young people to understand themselves and others through a process called “group influence.” Group influence, as explained by early members of the BMC faculty in Adamics’ article, was the idea that a person who living in close quarters with fellow community-members has nowhere to hide his “true self,” as he is no longer isolated even in his spare time, and can thus no longer edit his outward self-expression as a means of avoiding the necessary process of coming to self-consciousness and self-improvement. This process, though often painful, was thought to help students as well as their communities.<sup>24</sup> While not everybody agreed with this theory of group influence, most endorsed the overlapping idea that the arts were meant to assist students in gaining self-knowledge and self-control. “The first step in the process,” as Adamic notes, “is to make the student aware of himself and his capacities, and a beginning is often best made by persuading him to submit himself to the discipline of one or more of the arts.” The curriculum was therefore designed so that, while students had complete freedom as to

---

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Adamic, “Education On A Mountain,” 519.

<sup>24</sup> “A common saying in Black Mountain is that nearly everyone who comes here has to go through hell. The hell he goes through is the desperate attempt to preserve this superficial self, and the most awful moment in the process comes when he says to himself ‘Now they know me:’ [...] This happens to nearly everyone who comes here. This college is the village with a touch of the old big family. It gets to work on the student a little late, at eighteen or later; so the experience is drastic, and he suffers and in his agony wants to hide or escape.” Adamic, “Education On A Mountain,” 523.

the courses in which they enrolled, no classes in the schedule were allowed to conflict with introductory courses in music, fine arts, or drama.<sup>25</sup> These art classes, from Albers' drawing classes to Wunsch's theater workshops, aimed to prepare students to enter society as creative, disciplined, and well-adjusted individuals who would come away from their experiences at BMC better equipped to find creative solutions, effectively communicate ideas, and make better decisions for the communities they lived in.

The next two sections of this essay describe some of the specific methods of teaching that were rooted in the endeavor to lead students to a distinct sense of themselves and to help them reorient themselves, with a newfound sense of skills and self-knowledge, back towards their surroundings and communities. "Self-realization through learning" at Black Mountain College meant that students could discover, even in the work of plumbing or cleaning, the "artist" in themselves. These were also the practices and ideas that eventually led to the prominence of creative writing at Black Mountain.

### **Josef Albers**

When I came to this country, I found that you had one general term which included the instruction part of teaching and the purely educational part, which means the development of will. [In German w]e have two words: one for the real giving of methods or facts (information), and another for the development of character. I do not know whether the English language has words for these two things. These two things have, in this school, definite weights. I think the main weight should go on the part of teaching the will and character.

---

<sup>25</sup> Adamic, "Education On A Mountain," 521

–Josef Albers, quoted in Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*

Josef Albers' teaching style was concerned with leading students to engage in and learn from their own experiments. His learning objectives for the exercises he assigned grew out of desire for students to see the world more clearly, through their own eyes, and to avoid habitual, undisciplined ways of interacting with the world. Additionally, Albers was a deep believer in the importance of cultivating experiences in community, in work, and in class, before ever making any final decisions about one's artistic expression. The entire campus was valuable to Albers' pedagogical theory; he was drawn to BMC as much for its work program as he was for the freedom it allowed its instructors to pursue their own pedagogical practices and theories.

In *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (2014), Eva Díaz reflects on Albers' teaching style:

[Albers] proposed an ordered and disciplined testing of the various qualities and appearances of readily available materials such as construction paper and household paint samples. . . .He stressed the experience, rather than any definite outcomes, of a laboratory educational environment and promoted forms of experimentation and learning in action that could dynamically change routine habits of seeing.<sup>26</sup>

For Albers, the work program at BMC was also an important laboratory environment where, between classes, students were free to make their own decisions as to how they would contribute to building the school's buildings, tilling its fields, or voicing their own ideas about the school's management.<sup>27</sup> Another good exhibition of Albers' teaching philosophy is provided in this quote

---

<sup>26</sup> Eva Díaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014) 18.

<sup>27</sup> To be fair, Albers was not always as interested in student leadership in the governing of educational concerns as some other members of the faculty were. See, for instance, Duberman's *Black Mountain*, 108.

from Duberman: “I would like to have professors of carpentry, but I would say ‘let the freshman make all the mistakes and then let the professor show him how to do it....’ Give them freedom first. The instructor is necessary later.”<sup>28</sup> Albers believed students should learn by doing, but that this method of learning only went so far. While the classes and extracurricular work at BMC offered students the necessary opportunity to cultivate their learning through experience, the guidance of a well-versed and highly experienced instructor was another important factor in the balance of BMC education.

Though known for his position as a central art instructor at BMC, Albers was not concerned with forming his students as successful artists. When asked if he thought his pupils would become successful in the world, Albers doubted the possible accuracy in making such predictions almost as much as he doubted there was any purpose in trying. Throughout his interview in *Sprouted Seeds*, Albers explains different teaching techniques that he designed to disrupt students’ habits and make them more aware of their actions.<sup>29</sup> “Awareness” was central to Albers’ teaching philosophy; he valued students’ independent awareness of both the inner understanding and outward motions they needed to engage to make intentional choices about drawing. Albers was a very systematic teacher, although his teaching methods themselves were experimental; he had a detailed process through which he trained his students. If the end results of this process should provide students some tools for becoming an artist, Albers was more concerned with teaching students to pay attention to their surroundings. He asked them to be self-conscious about their motions in drawing and in their reflections on the exterior world. He

---

<sup>28</sup> Albers quoted by Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 103..

<sup>29</sup> Mervin, Lane, ed., *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds: An Anthology of Personal Accounts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990) 33-41. Hereafter cited as Lane, *Sprouted*.

hoped to teach them to make their own individual choices about line and color, freed from the habits they had been brought up with and from their own preconceptions.

Albers described his teaching at BMC as “practical work” that trained students’ eyes to see the world more clearly. He used any opportunity at the school, such as the carpentry work the students and faculty undertook together while building their own buildings, as an opportunity to further train students to complete their work carefully and independently, studying the smallest details while making decisions—even, for instance, when simply hammering nails through shelves. Whether in class or across campus, Albers wanted students to find things out for themselves rather than to be told the correct answers.

He elaborates on this approach in his interview from *Sprouted Seeds*:

If you have experience and have done wrongly and know why it is wrong, and have done it rightly—that sticks with you. And not by reading printed matter. You have to watch. . . .All this practical work is of thinking in situations. And I made that statement once at a faculty meeting; thinking in situations. Two of the professors were grinning. I said, “What do you smile around? . . . “It doesn’t exist thinking in situations.” I said, “No, not for bookworms.” This is just a little sample of how I developed here, and handling of the youngsters by making them excited to see that experience is the most exciting and the most lasting way of study. And not spoiling your eyes with constant printed matter.<sup>30</sup>

This skill for self-evaluation was one Albers also applied to himself. As he goes on to explain in the interview, he too grew at Black Mountain College; by teaching his students in new and experimental ways, he evolved in his own understanding of study.

---

30 Lane, *Sprouted*, 38

While Albers valued personal experience as the primary factor in student education, he did not mean “personal” in the sense of being uniquely individual. His definition of “personal experience” would be synonymous with “first-hand experience” or “practical experience.” Albers’ students would learn to use their individual faculties to draw meticulous shapes and discern specific shades of color, and their lived experience of practicing these forms would build their character and competence. Indeed, Albers warned that self-expression “in young people. . . encourages artistic conceit but hardly results in a solid capability.”<sup>31</sup> As Burns notes, Albers’ pedagogical philosophy was as pragmatic as it was personal, its emphasis on “functionality and rationality” aligned with the pedagogical philosophy of John Dewey, who valued practical personal experience in education for its formational properties and veered away from encouraging students and teachers to dwell on *emotional* experiences in education.<sup>32</sup>

Through the inclusion of the arts as well as the work program, Albers thought education at BMC could help students to develop not their personal expressions of self, but also their characters alongside their personal vocations. Albers approached these ideas through his teaching practices and even through spirited discussions about the philosophy of his pedagogy in BMC faculty meetings:

Let us take a dentist school—a real professional school. You cannot stop personal development in a dentist school... I would like a dentist to learn about decency....I think it would be better for every school if the development of character was considered also. Every school should include what we call at Black Mountain “education.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Albers, quoted Burns, “Creative Writing,” 7.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 103.

Albers was concerned with guiding students to grow in decency and character, and he very much believed in the power of the *individual* instructor to form decent individuals in the student body. The individuality and experience of the instructors themselves was as much or perhaps more important to Albers and his pedagogical views: “You can have great influence not through the words you use in the lesson, but (and this is important) the personality. The personality is the main thing and has again the greatest influence. We are back in the educational business ... teaching must come from experience.”<sup>34</sup>

True to his ideas, Albers himself had a reputation for teaching from his own experience, and for teaching individuals as a strong individual himself. Rice, in a faculty meeting that can be found transcribed in the Black Mountain College Archives as well as in Duberman’s notes, describes the most “effective teachers” as teachers who are able to entirely direct their attention at one student at a time, who teach the class one individual at a time. He then uses Albers as an example of such teaching: “His is the most individualistic teaching I have seen. There is a certain dramatic quality in teaching which you see illustrated there. When he is talking to Nancy Ferrell, he is teaching her. Yet the others learn at the same time...by seeing the direct relation between the teacher and the person he is talking to.”<sup>35</sup> While Albers did not value personal *expression* within education, he clearly valued personal interaction within his teaching practices, and his commitment to the work program at the college as well as to training students through their individual work in class exhibits his emphasis on allowing individuals to learn from experience and within the surrounding community.

---

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 104.

<sup>35</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 106.

## Chapter 2

### Creative Writing Teachers

#### Bob Wunsch

Early handbooks and anthologies like *Studies in Creative Writing* (1933) and *Thicker Than Water* not only codified the early experience-and-craft-based creative writing pedagogy, but they maintained a sense that the practice of creative writing was a personal, psychological endeavor.

–Lucy Burns, “Creative Writing”

Archival evidence from North Carolina’s Western Regional Archives (WRA) indicate just how central a figure Wunsch was during the first decade of the College’s history (1933-1943). Wunsch led extracurricular reading groups every week for years and led the drama program to theater festivals in North Carolina. His students won accolades every year. Wunsch’s files in the WRA are filled with fundraising appeals, pragmatic plans, and an evident passion for Black Mountain College and its students.

Further, Wunsch’s theater classes and thoughts on teaching literature offer important glimpses into the culture of Black Mountain College and its thoughts on social formation and the relationship between individuals and community. His correspondence with George Zabriskie, who Wunsch welcomed in specifically to teach creative writing, shows Wunsch’s enthusiasm for the school and documents his efforts to introduce creative writing as a pillar of the arts education at Black Mountain College.<sup>36</sup> Wunsch’s belief in the therapeutic and instructional effects of theater and literary reading combine ideas about group influence, the importance of perception

---

36 The extensive correspondence between Wunsch and Zabriskie focuses more on Zabriskie’s creative pedagogy than Wunsch’s, though throughout Wunsch’s letters there are snapshots of the activity and community life. “We’re in the midst of great activity at Lake Eden trying to get the buildings and grounds in order before the arrival of the Summer Quarter people. There is much construction work going on, particularly in the studies Building; so we’re assailed on all sides by the sound of hammers and saws.” Wunsch to Zabriskie, July 1, 1944. And, after a letter describing Rice’s split from the College: “There is every reason to believe that life here will be richer and more deeply exciting, yet not so destructively so. I hope if you have any questions about the family quarrel and its dramatic climax, that you will write me frankly and fully.” Wunsch to Zabriskie, August 19, 1944. (English Faculty files/ Zabriskie. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.)

and self-knowledge, and the predicament of the individualistic student. Wunsch's thoughts on pedagogical practices for creative writing, as Burns argues, "offe[r] a vital insight into the early aims and aspirations of the college as a whole."<sup>37</sup> The same may be said for many of Wunsch's archival artifacts: the letters he wrote to promote the school; exchanges between Wunsch and potential English hires; comments on his student's work in dramatics class; and selections from his co-authored anthology for the Progressive Education Association.

Wunsch's thoughts on group influence in theater performance and his ideas about the formational influence of reading literature were notable influences during the early years of Black Mountain College. Wunsch believed that group influence was one of the greatest benefits of community life at Black Mountain College, and he planned his courses intentionally to increase the formational influence of the arts in the development of his students' self-understanding. He wanted to improve their personalities, a thought that might seem invasive today but was accepted among Black Mountain students and colleagues at the time.

Wunsch's pedagogical philosophies for the theater program, as recorded in Adamic's article, included a casting process in which students were placed in personally corrective roles, such as "an arrogant person in an arrogant role, in which his own arrogance stands out even more clearly than otherwise, so that not only the audience, which is the community, see it, but he himself." Wunsch continues, "We try to find roles for boors, for the autocratically inclined. . . .for persons who want to 'play god,' for ultra-individualists, so that the place sees them, and they see themselves."<sup>38</sup> Wunsch claimed that this process aided the "successful-corrective processes" in the individuals who were cast in his plays, and that this method had helped even the least amiable "characters" on campus to become better aligned with the community and better liked

---

<sup>37</sup> Burns, "Creative Writing," 3.

<sup>38</sup> Adamic, "Education On A Mountain," 527.

among their peers. The sometimes-painful process of self-reformation through theater that Wunsch describes also worked with an opposite approach to type-casting: “The wealthy boy is induced to play the part of a poverty-ground tenant or worker; the poor girl is the part of the miserable rich woman. We cast a young cynic in a role that helps him know—and feel, for a while—what it means to fight and die for a cause.”<sup>39</sup>

These quotes from Wunsch are included in a section of Adamic’s article that covers the “series of hells” that early faculty members at Black Mountain College called “group influence.” The theory of group influence was important to the College’s ideas about community and self-awareness, but Wunsch’s inspiration to cast a “young cynic” in a role meant to provide the cathartic experience of acting out feelings of hope provides an additional insight into the importance of personal experience for the Black Mountain College approach. Where Albers’ students learned by trained practice that built their skills of perception through cumulative experiences in drawing class, Wunsch’s students were meant to develop skills in personal perception and corrective experiences through their participation in the theater program.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the 1943 course catalog introduces Wunsch’s Dramatics course, which describes drama as “the meeting place of all the arts” and advertises its experimental and self-educational nature as well: “The work in dramatics is of a laboratory nature. In it, the student develops imagination and sharper psychological and artistic perception. Through coordinating his efforts with the demands of a dramatic work, he may become more fully aware of himself as a person.”<sup>41</sup> It is little wonder, given this course description, that curiosity, sympathy, and, where needed,

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Evarts writes: “Bob was passionately interested in theatre and writing and people. He was a great idealist and something of a sentimentalist. He was not exactly a ‘sophisticated scholar’ but he was an ardent, sensitive humanist. He used theatre as Albers used his art classes to ‘educate’ the whole person—to bring out, develop confidence in the shy and to cut down the angles, tone down the brash or arrogant. His writing classes tried to develop observation and sensitivity as intense as Proust’s—or Thomas Wolfe’s.” Evarts, “Total Approach,” 21.

<sup>41</sup> Black Mountain College Course Catalog, 1943. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

discernable efforts to overcome shyness seem to be among the leading criteria in Wunsch's end-of-semester student evaluations.

As we see from his grading notes, drama for Wunsch was about the imagination and the will, and could never be reduced to the mere imitation of a character or the memorization of lines. A studied, introspective understanding of the characters in question was demanded and then tested in the individual decisions students made in speaking for their characters. In memorizing lines, students were to learn more about the character and themselves by engaging the inner faculties of perception, introspection, creative interpretation, and sympathetic imagination. In presenting the lines, students were to portray confident commitment to the characters they represented. Additionally, students' willingness to engage with their peers in class as much as with the characters in their plays was another essential requirement for Wunsch's desired learning outcomes.

Wunsch's grading notes relied on observable behaviors: engagement between students, openness to conversation, active participation, and especially the expression of sympathy, curiosity, and confidence. For a student who received an "A" in Dramatic Production, Wunsch stated: "His acting in both parts was highly intelligent, coming out of a sympathetic understanding of the characters and a growing sense of the value of the use of the whole body in acting."<sup>42</sup> For a student who received a "B-," Wunsch stated: "Lacks intellectual curiosity. Seems preoccupied with social interests. May develop in time into a highly satisfactory student."<sup>43</sup> And for a student who received an "A-," "Needs more confidence in herself. This confidence will come when she has experienced the approval of her peers in some successful project. During the

---

<sup>42</sup> Box 14 / Departmental Files Drama and Dance / File Drama Curriculum 41-56. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Quarter, she played a dramatic role. . . .with understanding and with power.”<sup>44</sup> The key words “sympathy”; “understanding”; and “curiosity” from Wunsch’s grading notes reinforce the vital role perception and experience played in BMC pedagogy. Nor was Wunsch’s pedagogical interest in the formative properties of literature limited to directing plays. In fact, his grading comments from theater portray many of the same qualities he wished his students to cultivate in his two-semester creative writing seminar.<sup>45</sup>

The description of Wunsch’s creative writing course for the 1936-1937 catalog states that the coursework was meant to develop in its students a “keenness of perception,” “[f]reshness of expression,” and a “capacity for intellectual and emotional enjoyment.” The course focused on the student’s development of the use of words, sense impressions, character analyses, and observations from daily life alongside effects of the individual imagination. This development would culminate in the latter part of the semester, when students would attempt specific literary forms, with an emphasis on playwriting. While the course outcomes included practice writing in specific forms and genres, the material for each student’s learning would be gathered from their own perceptions and “unique experience in...everyday life.”<sup>46</sup> Wunsch’s co-authored book of creative writing exercises aimed to teach not form, but the practice of perception through “exercises in word selection, sense impression, poetic insight, and creative thought.” These skills would help the student to “describe and interpret his environment, see beauty in the commonplace, understand the higher meanings of life, and to use and enjoy his leisure time.”<sup>47</sup>

As I have suggested above, Wunsch’s pedagogical emphasis on the transformative power of

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Wunsch taught Journalism and Creative Writing in the 1936-1937 school year. A note on these courses in the BMC catalog reads: “In the belief that writing should be taught wherever things are written, no special course is offered in composition or in the mechanics of English. Such instruction falls upon each teacher in his own field, and students are expected to write a paper on economics as carefully as one on Milton. Creative writing, however, as well as journalism, has a place in the curriculum.” Black Mountain College Catalog, 1936, Courtesy of the Theodore Dreier Sr. Document Collection, Asheville Art Museum.

<sup>46</sup> Black Mountain College Bulletin 1936-1937. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

<sup>47</sup> William Robert Wunsch and Mary Read Smith. *Studies in Creative Writing* (New York: Henry Holt, 1933) 4.

group-influence-through-art did not stop with the Black Mountain College theater or his creative writing classes. He encouraged students to mingle in their everyday lives as individuals in community and proposed that the simple act of reading the *right* literature in the *right* way could aid individuals in the pursuit of the leadership skills and self-awareness that the BMC faculty felt would be an antidote to America's increasingly individualistic society.

Two years after leading his creative writing seminar at BMC, Wunsch co-edited a short story collection which was designed for the Commission on Human Relations in 1939.<sup>48</sup> The purpose for this anthology, titled *Thicker Than Water: Stories of Family Life*, sounds strikingly similar to the Wunsch's approach to theater direction. The editors of this anthology hoped to give individuals the opportunity to engage with literary characters in order to better understand themselves and others, to encourage them to develop, through intentional observation and psychoanalytic reasoning, the sympathetic perspectives that aid authentic human interactions. "The literary experience," Wunsch and Edna Albers, his co-editor, wrote, "helps us develop the kind of imagination most needed in our intimate human relations." They continue: "It dramatizes for us the meaning of cultural pressures in shaping behavior. At the same time, it shows us the diversity and complexity of human behavior in our own heterogeneous society and in other cultures."<sup>49</sup>

The introduction to this anthology similarly expresses the dangers of relying too much on *quantitative* modes of study and offers artistic study as a necessary and enriching counterbalance for contemporary trends in culture and education. It is also an excellent resource for approaching

---

<sup>48</sup> The Commission on Human Relations, according to the preface of *Thicker Than Water*, had been charged "with the responsibility of helping people with the urgent problems of personal and social living today." William Robert Wunsch and Edna Albers, eds, *Thicker Than Water: Stories of Family Life* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939) v. Hereafter cited as *Thicker Than Water*.

<sup>49</sup> Wunsch and Albers, *Thicker Than Water*, xv.

Wunsch's pedagogical philosophies and the Progressive Education Association's approach to teaching literary analysis:

It is not too much to ask of educators, whatever their form of activity, to use every means at their disposal to increase insight, understanding, and sympathy between men. The contribution of literature towards these ends can be great. . . .The artist's awareness of the complexities of human personality, his understanding of human behavior, his presentation of the situations we actually find in life, can give us insight into problems that, in other contexts, remain abstract."<sup>50</sup>

This approach to literary pedagogy seems to echo Wunsch's ideas about group influence and theater, as well as his priorities expressed in his drama grading notes. Drawing once more from the introduction to *Thicker Than Water*, Wunsch and Albers describe the qualities of the "leaders" that were needed in society and the ways that literature informs such leaders, who "would guide others in understanding human behavior to study carefully what he has done; to know his medium, the story; and to try to be aware of the subtle meanings that lie behind his presentation."<sup>51</sup>

Eventually, the time came for Black Mountain College to begin dispersing the work that students produced within Wunsch's creative writing seminars. Throughout his time at Black Mountain College, Wunsch had encouraged students to join voluntary reading circles and to cooperate with one another to build classroom libraries for creative coursework.<sup>52</sup> After years of encouraging communal reading experiences, Wunsch began to encourage the community to

---

<sup>50</sup> Wunsch and Albers, *Thicker Than Water*, x.

<sup>51</sup> Wunsch and Albers, *Thicker Than Water*, xi.

<sup>52</sup> Wunsch led a weekly after-dinner reading group in his study at BMC over the many years he was there. An early selection was "Shadows of Nothing" by Erik Haugaard; the last reading group he organized was planned for June 4, 1945. That play was *The Trojan Women*, by Euripides. These two examples exhibit Wunsch's community-oriented approach to reading. (WRC Box 14, File: Drama – Curriculum, 133-1940/41, Folder: Drama – Dramatic Readings.) Additionally, in his correspondence with George Zabriskie, Wunsch gave the advice to encourage the creative writing students to share their preferred poetry with one another: "It just occurred to me to suggest to you that the students in your writing course establish a classroom library." (English Faculty Files/ George Zabriskie. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.)

share their own literary creations with the world outside oBlack Mountain College. A year after the publication of *Thicker Than Water*, Wunsch laid plans for the students and faculty of Black Mountain College to share, via a public-facing magazine, the fruits of their introspection and narrativized experiences. The seventh installation of the Black Mountain College Newsletter announced the publication plan, an important precursor to *The Black Mountain Review*: “students and teachers have been active in collecting this work and organizing a magazine-type publication that would contain photography, both as artistic expression and as a means of reproducing artwork, as well as fiction, poetry and articles.”<sup>53</sup> The first edition of this magazine included examples of “certain stories and poems which seem to have a common quality of spontaneous freedom in the individual’s experimentation with words and literary forms.”<sup>54</sup> Through his introduction of the creative writing seminar, his pedagogical focus on individual freedom and perception in creative writing, his conviction that the reading and writing of literature could improve society, and his instrumental role in producing Black Mountain College’s first literary magazine, Wunsch laid the foundation for creative writing to play a central role at BMC in the following decade.<sup>55</sup>

### **M.C. Richards**

“Besides trying to live together decently and well, and trying to do that by bringing to bear what we learn in classroom and tutorial and what we can make to furnish our world anew and how we can cheerfully do the tasks of daily housekeeping, without losing track of ourselves—besides living together in these ways, we do try too to extend our energies

---

53 Black Mountain College Newsletter No 7, 1940 pp. 1-2. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

54 Quoted in Burns, “Creative Writing,” 18.

55 Wunsch’s magazine, writes Burns, represented “the pervasive influence of the progressive model of creative writing for the self-development of the individual, as well as Wunsch’s writing exercises and model of writing as craftsmanship.” She continues: “Unlike the college’s later literary magazines—M.C. Richards’s *The Black Mountain Review* (1951) and Charles Olson and Robert Creeley’s *The Black Mountain Review* (1954-57)—Wunsch’s creative writing magazine exclusively published Black Mountain students.” Burns, “Creative Writing,” 17.

into the larger communities of which we are a part. . . .I think it is good to give what you have. The education at BMC I interpret as being that: learning how to take and how to give. This beginning is an emblem in that process.”

– M.C. Richards, *The Black Mountain Review*, June 1951

The same philosophies on life and pedagogy that led M.C. Richards and her students to revolutionize creative writing at Black Mountain College are the same aspects that make her influence difficult to satisfactorily describe. Richards is often described as a link between the old faculty and the new faculty; an initiator for Charles Olson’s move to the College; a scholar who became a teacher, and then a poet, and then a potter.<sup>56</sup> These characterizations are not wholly representative of Richards’ dynamic involvement and complex relationship with the College, and they do not capture the depth of her influence on the school as we now remember it. I think any attempt to tell the story of M.C. Richards at Black Mountain College will encapsulate the difficulty of undertaking a satisfactory account of the school at any given point of its existence. Richards approached the College and her students with a sense of freedom, innovation, creativity, curiosity and experimentation. She was never static, it seems, in her approach to literature, writing, art, or other people. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to characterize Richards by listing the concrete, chronological details of her own artistic development, or by counting the notable faculty members she invited to campus and the famous theater events in which she partook. While this approach does give Richards some credit for her influence on Black Mountain College, it falls short of that goal, as Richards’ approach to Black Mountain College was geared much more towards productivity than products. As Jenny Sorkin puts it, “Richards devoted herself to the growth and enrichment of the Black Mountain community as a whole, relishing the intense convergences

---

<sup>56</sup> For examples of these characterizations of Richards, see Jenni Sorkin, “M.C. Richards,” in Helen Molesworth, ed., *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 274 (hereafter cited as Sorkin, “M.C. Richards”) and Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 354.

between art and life that a radical live-work environment fostered.”<sup>57</sup> A quantitative approach to describing a person whose approach to life was so thoroughly qualitative will almost certainly miss crucial details in the story of her life at Black Mountain College and the development of the most radical shift in creative writing that Black Mountain College had experienced up to that point.

Like Albers and Wunsch, Richards incorporated her teaching philosophy into the college work program and lived experience of community. According to the many student memoirs recorded in *Sprouted Seeds*, her students learned equally from her instruction in the classroom and her playful presence in the community. Lyle Bonge is one of many students who remember her impact on their daily life and learning: “She was also willing to play endlessly with the language. . . . I remember the richness of those crazy times, the sense of play and fun that added so much to the learning that for me went on every waking minute.”<sup>58</sup> Richards also embodied the perceptive qualities that the early BMC faculty had sought to imbue in their students: “The intellectual poet M.C. Richards fascinated me. She seemed to experience life deeply and intensely—sensitive to the slightest happening.”<sup>59</sup> Many students also remember Richards’ manner of applying literature to everyday life. For instance, she would often fold Shakespearean dialogue into everyday conversation.

However, while she is often mentioned as one of Black Mountain’s notable instructors of creative writing, and while she continues to attract attention as a poet, little has been said about Richards’ pedagogy as a poetry instructor. In an effort to piece together her approach, I offer an archival description of one of her classes, memories from many of her students, and her forward to the first volume of the *Black Mountain College Review*. While a static portrait of Richards’

---

<sup>57</sup> Sorkin, “M.C. Richards,” 275.

<sup>58</sup> Lane, *Sprouted*, 236.

<sup>59</sup> Lane, *Sprouted*, 209.

energy and collaboration may not be possible, by looking at the combination of these archival documents and student memoirs, we can gain a fuller idea of how she approached writing instruction and further clues to the development of creative writing at the College.

In her literature courses, Richards had a sometimes strict approach to student writing. Long after the school had closed, students remembered her as being “rigorous in her criticism.”<sup>60</sup> In the margins of Henry Bergman’s paper on *King Lear*, Richards offered compliments and pointed out areas in need of work: “I need more explanation on this phrase” she writes on page 12 of Bergman’s essay, “Elaborate!” and “Don’t be cryptic!” on page 17.<sup>61</sup> Her summary comments for the paper noted how interesting she had found the writing and offered elaborations on her critical commentary. In Richards’ 1946 class, “Reading Literature,” student Stuart Atkinson wrote a character analysis on Kolya Krassotkin, a character in Dostoevsky’s *The Brother’s Karamazov*, prefacing it with a note delineating his concerns about reading literature in her class. He seemed to feel, alongside his classmates, that they did not have enough agency within the class discussions and the methods in which they approached reading: “I should like to briefly mention a general reading problem . . . the danger of ready acceptance as compared to being critical. . . . Could we have a more critical approach to literature? One in which critical evaluation would be encouraged and expected and not one only of emphasizing why we can accept the content, style, etc. of the author.”<sup>62</sup> The margins of Atkinson’s papers (he donated four in all) reveal a gradual decline in the number of question marks, grammatical corrections, and phrasing recommendations left by Richards as the quarter went on. In the overarching comments

---

60 Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 307.

61 Henry Porter Bergman “King Lear.” (WRC Box 69: Class Notes / Mary Caroline Richards, Shakespeare, Spring 1947. BM Doc#31b-Bergman. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.) 12, 17.

62 BM Doc #35p-Atkinson “Paper on Brothers Karamazov.” (WRC Box 69: Class Notes / Mary Caroline Richards, Reading Literature, Spring 1946-47 / BM Doc. #35p Atkinson. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.) 1.

Richards wrote at the end of each paper, she noted where Atkinson's writing was improving, and where he might continue to progress. Without the proposal of her "Year Round Plan" and the written memories of her students, this evidence would suggest that Richards' classes were not so different from the lectures and composition courses in other universities. Student Arthur Penn commented on the balance Richards offered her students regarding the value of self-expression and exploration, stating that she also "felt it was well to measure one's own feelings and experiences against those of others who had gone before. One of her favorite expressions was 'Now leave us observe the amenities.' . . . there was a body of grace, of rhetoric, of formulation, that is not to be dispensed with without an acquaintanceship with it at least."<sup>63</sup>

Whatever her reputation for literary tradition or marking papers, Richards was as progressive as anyone at Black Mountain College. In her "Year Round Plan," Richards stated that school quarters should be decreased, rather than increased; that vacation ought to be made part of the curriculum; that grades as well as credits ought to be discontinued. Stating that the curriculum should remain flexible, she said: "Since I regard any class I teach as both 'background' and 'fundamental,' I wouldn't wish to give one specially designated as such. I would like the content, duration, and style of courses left to the judgment of the persons involved."<sup>64</sup> Richards felt that the college had become too risk-averse, and that efforts to formalize education at BMC stifled opportunities for student leadership and obscured the importance of the community and "creative impulse" that made BMC the remarkable place it was.<sup>65</sup> True to her word, Richards did leave her courses open to the judgment of her students, and

---

<sup>63</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 307.

<sup>64</sup> Richards, "Year Round Plan." (Box 6 / Faculty File M.C. Richards.) Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

<sup>65</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 339.

her approach in this area was fundamental to the development of creative writing that took place through her guidance and participation.

Richards' creative writing classes seem to be somewhat of a departure from her earlier literature classes, which were designed with a more guided structure. They were certainly a departure from the creative writing classes described by Wunsch. However, perhaps because she simultaneously encouraged so much collaboration and independence in her classroom, and because she made so little distinction between the curricular and the extracurricular learning processes, there are fewer recollections of her poetry workshops than of her literary courses. Her approach to creative writing was so student-focused and student-led that it seems likely no two of her workshops were alike in anything but their open-ended opportunity for students' interests and the celebration of experience and creativity in as many iterations as there were students ready to experience and create. In her letter for *Sprouted Seeds*, Richards briefly recalls the six years she spent teaching "creative reading and writing" at BMC. Aside from sharing that she put her own poetry into circulation for class discussion with student work, illustrating her characteristic attitude of being more of a fellow student than an instructor, she shares little of her individual pedagogical process.<sup>66</sup> She instead goes on to share the collaborative learning experiences that she experienced alongside her students, memories of group work and examples of individual student creativity: finding a "stash of type" and working together to clean it up, the visit from Anaïs Nin who taught them how to set up the shop, a special music program printed by a student, Tommy Jackson, on cigarette paper. Reflecting on these shared experiences, Richards remarked, "A philosophy of education began to form: imagination as fundamental to all learning; artistic making as a model of integrating vision, materials, structure, and imagery."<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Lane, *Sprouted*, 172.

<sup>67</sup> Lane, *Sprouted*, 173.

The collaborative process of learning and creating that Richards describes is a departure from Wunsch's thoughts on progressive education and creative writing. Instead of reading, writing, and learning being employed to train students' imaginations, for Richards imagination guides learning and leads the creative process. Instead of presenting creation as a guided process and tool for societal instruction, Richards sees creative work as collaborative and open to new and unexpected juxtapositions of materials.

Richards' democratic approach to classwork was one of the hallmarks of her teaching, according to her students, who remember her being free and generous. Rather than lecturing, Richards allowed students to find new information gradually and by themselves—one of the many facets of her teaching which aimed for students to have some guidance but also encouragement to learn on their own.<sup>68</sup> Mary Bowles remembers Richards' teaching in this way: "M.C. was excellent at making people clarify themselves or clarifying an idea herself...she wasn't teaching in the sense that she knew and she was going to let you in on it. It was a kind of joint pursuit of what was there."<sup>69</sup> This "joint pursuit" of knowledge and experience was a pillar of Richards' pedagogical style, and the sense of autonomy and inclusion her pupils felt earned at least one recruit from across the country: UCLA student Mary Miller, who transferred to BMC largely on account of Richards' reputation as a writing teacher and a harbinger of community and enthusiasm. Miller recalls the scene of her first meeting with Richards, an informal literary class: "When I did get there and took a class with M.C., we sat around the floor in a study and decided what the class would be. Each student taught one piece of literature, and class time was spent discussing it."<sup>70</sup> This was not the only class in which Richards encouraged her students to select

---

68 Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 294

69 Quoted in Alice Sebrell and Julia Connor, *M.C. Richards, Centering: Life + Art – 100 Years* (Asheville: Asheville Museum & Arts Center, 2016) 39.

70 Lane, *Sprouted*, 242.

the topic. In the spring of 1949, she posted, not so much a course offering, but a course opportunity, an individual writing seminar in which students would determine the style of writing they would practice and whether they would receive official credit: “I would like to work individually and informally with persons interested in writing (any kind of writing). Also I want to help elaborate a relationship between writing and the print shop, and to develop further the possibilities in the informal writers’ group. (If anyone wants to list his work in writing as a ‘course’ for ‘credit’, he should arrange with me).”<sup>71</sup> When Richards’ said “any kind of writing,” she meant it: two years later, she and her students published the first *Black Mountain College Review*, which included poems of various form, a journal entry, an essay, a playscript, and an introduction to the 1951 Summer Session, introducing Olson’s “Possibilities in Writing and Music.”<sup>72</sup>

The Black Mountain College Printing Press was discovered by student Jim Tite in the spring of 1946. He learned how to use the printing press and suggested that he and another student co-teach a course in printing, after which the printing class became part of the established curriculum.<sup>73</sup> This was the beginning of the printing shop at Black Mountain College, where Richards printed her first (hand-stitched) book of poetry, and where she, Hazel Larsen-Archer, and Alex Kemeny produced the first edition of *The Black Mountain Review*, the only one which was printed on-site. Richards once said of Black Mountain College that, “[t]he aim is to train ourselves so that we can produce acts, objects, and relationships which feed the stream of coherence and happiness in the world.”<sup>74</sup> Introducing the issue in her foreword to the first issue of *The Black Mountain Review*, she notes that, “One of the things we try to do at Black Mountain

---

71 M.C. Richards, (N.C.D.A.&H., Raleigh, BMC Papers, Vol. II, Box 6, “Course Descriptions, 1948-1949, Second Semester). Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

72 *Black Mountain College Review*, June 1951, Col. 1 No. 1 accessed via JSTOR, All use subject to <https://about.jstor.org/terms>. Hereafter cited as *Review*.

73 Lane, *Sprouted*, 197.

74 Sorkin, “M.C. Richards,” 275.

College is to make productivity possible. The idea for this publication is: to make available some of the writing and thinking and other works that are being made here.”<sup>75</sup> The *Review* offered no specific form of writing as a preferred form for the delivery of coherence and happiness. Form was implied, but on the basis of the author’s creativity with their chosen medium, as the editorial committee explained: “The principle we went by was, in general, some interesting bias of treatment, some adventure in form.”<sup>76</sup> Among the selected literature was a “lively” traditional sonnet by Joel Oppenheimer, and an “important and reassuring” journal entry by Mary Fitton: “an encouraging wedge in the door which has been held fast by fictional forms; why not woo the journal, the diary, the familiar essay back again, why not the frank expression of direct experience, the thrust and switch of the mind, the courtship and the anger.”<sup>77</sup> One of the most transformative experiences that Richards offered the College and its students was the freedom she encouraged in student writing. She delighted in the individuality of each of her students, promoted individual imagination and experience, and defended the individual freedom to choose the form of writing with which to share those experiences. Through her openness to the interests and perspectives of her students, Richards encouraged a communal attitude of autonomy, imagination, and collaboration, which laid the foundation for the culture of creative writing we most often associate with Black Mountain College.

### **Charles Olson**

From the beginning, Black Mountain developed practice-based pedagogies that owed equally to American progressive education models and the Bauhaus influence brought by the Alberses and others. The only constant was experimentation. In the college’s final

---

<sup>75</sup> Richards, *Review*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

phase—Charles Olson’s Black Mountain—there was a marked turn towards poetry as pedagogy.

—Jonathan C. Creasy, *The Black Mountain Letters*

When studying Olson’s time at BMC, it is helpful to remember that at BMC’s origin, many of the faculty members and students felt there was no clear sense of direction among them aside from the shared desire to begin something revolutionary in education in response to the shortcomings of the institutions they had left.<sup>78</sup> In many ways, Olson’s Black Mountain College rectorship brought the school full circle. In the 1930s and early 1940s, revolutionary education was approached through goals and methods set against the perceived educational deficiencies of the moment. It took into account as well the abilities of the present teachers and the needs of the students enrolled.<sup>79</sup> In the mid-to-late 1940s, moments of reorganization at BMC created the need to redefine the goals of the college and community—and created tensions between those who wanted to formalize the administration and curriculum and those who wanted to create more room for innovation, with no clear resolution in most cases.<sup>80</sup> Where Olson, as rector and especially as teacher, boldly reinterpreted some of the pedagogical goals of the early days, he excelled in pushing forward the core aspects of the College from its inception, with some notable changes. Where the early pedagogues renounced “self expression” in their arts curricula, Olson demanded it. However, Olson’s definition of “self expression” hinged on the process-based cultivation of students’ imaginations, personal experiences, and self-knowledge, aspirations not unlike those expressed by the inaugural BMC faculty.

Furthermore, Olson’s ideas of “composition by field” and “objectism,” described in his

---

<sup>78</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 18-25.

<sup>79</sup> Chapter 1 of Duberman’s *Black Mountain*, and Adamics “Education On A Mountain,” both describe these conditions at the school’s founding.

<sup>80</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain* 338-347.

famous “Projective Verse” essay as well as in his workshops, seem in many ways to get to the same points described by faculty in Adamic’s article, such as the delineation of “individuals” vs. “individualists,” and Rice’s objective, as quoted above, that students ought to “cease being passive recipients and handers-out of mere information; to become productive, creative, *using* everything that comes within their orbit, including especially people.” Joel Oppenheimer’s summation of Olson’s creative writing pedagogy denotes a similar intention: “The main function of the workshop was to turn people on to the possibility of using all the areas around them.”<sup>81</sup> The poetic pedagogy described by Oppenheimer aligns with Olson’s “composition by field,” which calls on the poet’s perceptions of the world as directly experienced by the poet, and the recognition of “energy” located therein which is “immediately” conducted from the poet to his reader through the creation and reception of the poem.<sup>82</sup>

While the centrality of the poet’s personal experiences and individual perceptions may seem to reflect the “individualism” that was discouraged by early BMC faculty, Olson was not at all reversing the College’s stance on the undesirable quality of “individuality” in arts education. In fact, he revolutionized this position through his “objectism,” or “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul.”<sup>83</sup> This idea proposed that poets themselves were equal to the other “objects” that provided content—and therefore form—to their poetry. What this meant for his teaching was that he urged his students to write from their own daily experiences, to become aware of themselves and their particular voices, not to better learn how to express themselves, but to become more accurate and productive in their depiction of the world, using everything in their orbit including especially *themselves*.<sup>84</sup>

---

81 Quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 399.

82 Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” *Human universe, and other essays* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1967), 51-62. Hereafter cited as Olson, “Projective Verse.”

83 Olson, “Projective Verse”, 52-53.

84 A paraphrased version of Rice’s earlier quotation to reflect the subtle yet significant difference between Rice’s “humanism” and Olson’s “objectism.”

While Olson reinvented the arts curriculum laid out by his predecessors, he also did much to fulfill their most unifying purpose, which was to teach students to draw from their experiences in order to better understand themselves and their communities and how to use that knowledge to make more informed decisions. He was consistent in his goal of bringing out the individual voice and style of his students: “[The writer] is not free to be a part of, or to be any, sect...the poet cannot afford to traffick in any other sign than his own, his self, the man or woman he is.”<sup>85</sup> The goal was that his students’ writing would be informed solely by their unique perceptions and experiences and so prompt new cultural formation and expression via the personal and experiential discovery and creation of form.<sup>86</sup> In his recollection of workshops with Olson, Joel Oppenheimer remembers Olson’s disposition towards imitative students: “One thing that Charles would not stand for, was another Olson in the class—like, ‘either you write Joel Oppenheimer poems, or Ed Dorn poems, or whoever you were, or you’re not working in my class.’ . . . So that he was a profound influence in forcing you to find out where your poetics were.”<sup>87</sup> Olson expanded the values BMC placed on personal experience in education, stating that “good expression is not a quality of language but of the experience that initiates it. . . . The problem is how to restore yourself into a state of clean experience, how to open the latch unto the outside world which makes feeling and involvement possible.”<sup>88</sup> Indeed, one of his more significant departures in his approach to creative writing at BMC was his rejection of literature as a guide for students’ experiments in writing.

---

<sup>85</sup> Olson, quoted by Francine du Plessix Gray, in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 309.

<sup>86</sup> Towards the end of his “Projective Verse” essay, Olson states that Projective Verse, if practiced long enough, would likely usher in a new period of art that would allow for greater subject matter and essentially usher in a period of creative and intelligent expression that had not been seen since the Elizabethan era. Olson, “Projective Verse,” 61.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 378.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 398. Duberman’s notes reveal that this quote was provided by Francine du Plessix Gray, who recorded it in her diary.

While Olson's description of his 1952-1953 class included his own selection of "modern masters" (Melville, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lawrence), he stresses that the person, i.e, the student who enrolls in the course, is the material for the class, and that their own history provides more content than their reading might: "The effort is definitely non-literary. Neither is the reading in 'literature,' like they say, nor is the writing 'composition.' . . . The proposition is the simplest: to release the person's energy word-wise, and thus begin the hammering of form out of content."<sup>89</sup> His topics in class could nonetheless be difficult to predict, perhaps due to his fondness for the idea that one should seize whatever seemed most generative in the present moment. Some of the few students who remained at Black Mountain College during its final years remembered Olson as an "iconoclastic" teacher who would often change the workshop up at a moment's notice depending on his interests that day. However, he was consistent in this approach to literature and form: he all but quotes his reading list for his Black Mountain College class in the closing statement of his essay "Present is Prologue":

That is my profession. I am an archeologist of morning. And the writing and acts which I find bear on the present job are (I) from Homer back, not forward; and (II) from Melville on, particularly himself, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lawrence. These were the modern men who projected what we are and what we are in, who broke the spell. They put men forward into the post modern, the post humanist, the post historic, the going live present, the "Beautiful Thing."<sup>90</sup>

This non-literary approach to reading and writing characterizes the overarching goal of BMC throughout its twenty-four-year existence: to form students, through the study of the arts, to become self-aware individuals capable of independent thought, who would use their power to

---

<sup>89</sup> Charles Olson, Black Mountain College Bulletin Newsletter X No 4, 1952-1953. Pp. 14-15. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

<sup>90</sup> Olson, Charles. "Present is Prologue" *Prose works. Selections; Collected Prose*. (United States: University of California Press, 1997) 207.

improve the well-being of their communities and promote a more intentional and cooperative society. Joel Oppenheimer's summation of Olson's pedagogy sounds most in line with BMC's foundational philosophies: "[T]his is what I learned in the poetry workshop at Black Mountain College, that the one value a poet can have to his society aside from the ones we know about, like the gadfly and the illuminator, and so on, is the man who finds the juxtapositions that makes sense for him and possibly for society."<sup>91</sup> While early pedagogical figures at BMC did not imagine that creative writing would become an integral component of the college's curriculum or reputation, creative writing at BMC certainly upheld many of college's early objectives for the social and cultural formation of its students. Olson's pedagogy gathered these aspirations and placed poetry at the helm of the college and its work.

---

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 399.

## Bibliography

- Adamic, Louis. "Education on a Mountain," *Harpers Magazine*, April 1936, pp. 516-529.
- Atkinson, Stuart. "Profile of Koyla Krassotkin." Box 69: Class Notes / Mary Caroline Richards, Reading Literature, Spring 1946-47 / BM Doc. #35p Atkinson.
- Bergman, Henry Porter. "King Lear." Box 69: Class Notes / Mary Caroline Richards , Shakespeare, Spring 1947. BM Doc#31b-Bergman.
- Burns, Lucy. "Creative Writing [...] has a place in the curriculum": Robert Wunsch at Black Mountain College, 1933-43," *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*, Volume 11, October 2020, pp. 2-25.
- Creasey, Jonathan C. *The Black Mountain Letters*, Dalkey Archive Press, 2016.
- Dewey, Anne Day. *Beyond Maximus : the construction of public voice in Black Mountain Poetry*, Stanford University Press, 2007.
- Dewey, John. *On Education: Selected Writings*, University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Díaz, Eva. *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Evarts, John, "Black Mountain College--The Total Approach," *Form*, No. 6, December 1967, pp. 20-18.
- Lane, Marvin. et al. *Sprouted Seeds: An Anthology of Personal Accounts* United States, The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1990
- McGurl, Mark, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Olson, Charles. "Writing," *Black Mountain College Bulletin Newsletter X*, No 7, 1940, pp. 12-13.
- "Projective Verse," *Human universe, and other essays* New York: Grove Press Inc., 1967, pp. 51-62. — "The Present as Prologue" *Prose works. Selections; Collected Prose*. University of California Press, 1997, pp. 203-217.
- Porter, Sargent. *Between two wars; the failure of education 1920-1940*, P. Sargent, 1945.
- Reynolds, Katherine C. "Progressive Ideals and Experimental Higher Education: The Example of John Dewey and Black Mountain College," *Education and Culture*, Vol. 14, no. 1, 1997, pp. 1-9.
- Richards, M.C. "Year Round Plan." Box 6 / Faculty File M.C. Richards. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.
- "Course Offerings" N.C. Museum of Art, BMC Research Project, Series II, Box 24, Research Files, Files about Individuals.
- "Foreward." *The Black Mountain Review*, June 1951 Vol. 1 No. 1. Accessed via JSTOR, April 23, 2024. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28034129>
- Smith, Mary Read and William Robert Wunsch. *Studies in Creative Writing*, Appleton-Century Company, 1933.
- Sorkin, Jenni "M.C. Richards," ed. Helen Molesworth, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*. Yale University Press, 2015, pp. 274-277.

Wunsch, William Robert, Edna Albers. *Thicker Than Water*, D. Appleton-Century Company 1939.

–“.....toward a projected College magazine” [ca. 1941] (506.2, 6), n.p., BMCR, WRA.

–“Grading Notes” Box 14 / Departmental Files Drama and Dance / File Drama Curriculum 41-56. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

–“Zabriskie Correspondence” English Faculty files/ Zabriskie. Courtesy of Western Regional Archives.

### **Vita**

Bethany Gareis was born in Raleigh, North Carolina. She graduated from Belmont Abbey College in May 2020 with a BA in English and a minor in Classic Languages. She entered University of Tennessee, Knoxville's English Masters program in Literature, Criticism, and Textual Studies in August 2022 and anticipates graduating in May 2024.