A NEW ART OF LIVING: THE THREE ECOLOGIES OF BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis engages the historical site of Black Mountain College through the lens of Félix Guattari’s *Three Ecologies*. In this study, I appropriate Guattari’s tripartite ecosophy as a means through which to engage the environmental life and environmental being of Black Mountain College. Read in this way, the College—more than the mythic and near-utopic idea that preoccupies its image today—becomes a grounded illustration of Guattari’s ecological vision, thus providing us entrance into the historical actuality of Guattari’s lamentably unexplored ecosophy. By examining particular instances of Black Mountain’s communal, artistic, and environmental processes, I am able to show how Black Mountain College created a structure of environmental life that afforded its participants entrance into a seemingly nascent form of environmental being.
Figure 1 Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, *The Studies Building*, ca. 1949.

“*Take it through the mountain. Not over.*”

- Fielding Dawson
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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Martin Duberman, Gerald van de Wiele—a student at Black Mountain College during its final years—describes approaching the campus for the first time on a cool autumn morning:

There was a thick fog, very thick, and just sort of milky white, everything was milky white…So as I walked up the road, the sun began to come up a little bit more and this mist burned off, and it was the first of two or three autumns I saw there, I don’t think I saw anything quite as impressive as that first impression. The trees suddenly just began to emerge from this mist, and they were the most ungodly colors I’ve ever seen, in autumn. It was—you know, it was just mystical…by the time I got up to the school, all the mist had cleared, and it was just one of the most dazzlingly beautiful autumn days I’ve ever seen. The color was unbelievable.¹

More than a beautiful description that sets the scene for all that follows, this particular passage—specifically as it externalizes the image of a mystical place—prefigures the kind of legacy the College holds today. Indeed, the life of Black Mountain has, in no uncertain terms, taken on a kind of mystical quality, much like the milky white fog that takes up the morning. Much of this can be attributed to the quasi-factual history of the school. As it is noted by Mary Emma Harris—one of the first researchers to conduct a full gathering of the Black Mountain story and its materials—beyond the college records that are little more than basic information “such as who was there and when,” the history of the school rests mainly in the “memories of its students and faculty and in their...notes, photographs, correspondence, journals, and other materials.”²

¹ Gerald van de Wiele, interviewed by Martin Duberman, March 20, 1968, transcript.
At times contradictory and at other times misted over, this wilderness of documents and memories can appear more like a series of palimpsests, where later recollections and uncovered journals efface earlier impressions of what happened and how they happened. As a result, Black Mountain arrives at the modern reader as this blurred layering of reminiscence and memory, which readers of the school then tend to romanticize, filling the loose gaps of its narrative with our own imaginations of its success and actuality. The first ever “happening,” which occurred during Black Mountain’s 1952 summer institute, is an excellent example of that effect. Detached from the space of evidentiary history and positioned amid a world of blurry and confused remembrances, “The Event,” or Theater Piece No.1 as it was later known, first began as a number of competing accounts from journals or diaries written that night or an interview some years later. Fast-forward to our present moment, and what those accounts now resemble is something more akin to a story of art, a kind of origin myth for the practices of contemporary performance and mixed media art. To this extent, the Event’s cultural and critical heritage can be read as representative of the evolution of thought surrounding Black Mountain as a whole: once stemming from a collection of competing and loose memories, the event (or similarly, the College) becomes its singular and collected “happening,” i.e., its legend for today. As Joseph Bathanti suggests, this sense of subsequent fabrication can often result in “an imagined idea of perfection.”

To be sure, the school, looked at from afar—what with its unique and impressive collection of people and events—does seem possibly magical, something that to the modern reader is more of a fever dream enacted in the mid-desert oasis.

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Even just the names themselves result in this kind of mystical property. Even though these people—at the point of their association with the school—had yet to become the big names of later years, the way in which we read their association with the school today is through their collected life achievements. Names like Josef and Anni Albers, Ruth Asawa, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Walter Gropius, Merce Cunningham, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Robert Creeley, M.C. Richards, Arthur Penn, Susan Weil, Ray Johnson, Russell Edson, Ed Dorn, and Charles Olson each connote a high level of artistic and cultural success. As a result, we, as readers of the College, attribute a sense of mystique to their brief, yet incomprehensible gathering on the mountain.4

In a way, though—more than the large names and stories—its station as the mystic mountain5 results just as much (if not more) from its quality of presentness, i.e., its position as a thing through which we still attempt to live. One need only look at Martin Duberman’s personal and emotional interaction with the college and its history in order to understand the relevance of this claim. For even though the school was situated in a distinct moment in history, and even though the traditions of the historical genre demanded his “nonexistence” in the text, Duberman, in a radical turn, introduced himself within the historical space of the college, projecting his mind and heart back into Black Mountain itself.6 For Duberman, the college became something of “a father of [a] new

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4 Though it should be re-emphasized that these people, at the time of their stay at Black Mountain, were not yet the national and international artists they would eventually become. Perhaps it was because of their interaction at the College that resulted in their later success. Not simply that they were each already gifted and destined artists in their own right.
5 Or “Mythic Mountain,” as Bathanti titles it.
6 Even going so far as to introduce his name and voice into the notes transcription of a faculty meeting. Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (Evanston, Il: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 102-113.
communal lifestyle.” And it became, in the space of its story, a kind of present parent, pushing his thinking beyond the ideas of how one learns and into the ideas of how one lives. Bathanti, through the course of his narrative on the College, postulates a similar sense of presentness to the life of the school. In his piece “The Mythic School of the Mountain,” he suggests that “Being in such proximity to the sites of the legendary college enchanted me...I wandered the endless corridors, the voluminous rooms and sequestered chambers with the same furniture the Black Mountaineers had used, the same oxygen they had breathed still secreted in the ether...the sound of the past, in all its uncanny falsehood, an imagined idea of perfection, was hauntingly palpable.” Given these treatments, it is easy enough to see that the College is possessed of a spirit that provides readers, thinkers, and participants a space to inhabit presently. There seems to be something about its aura in history that allows it to become a space that generates new modes of thinking and new ways of seeing oneself in the world. In this way, Black Mountain College, as Bathanti posits, is more like “an opus still unraveling as the endless labyrinth of influence that is Black Mountain branches off into tributary after tributary.” And it is, to Duberman’s keen eye, more like a story that defies end. Indeed, the College, here, befits a mantra that Duberman announces by his book’s conclusion: “Now Arise.” It becomes, through their reading, a place of continuous emergence. It lives on in spirit.

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8 Bathanti, “The Mythic School of the Mountain,” Our State.
9 Another, more Black Mountain-like term for its presentness. Fielding Dawson, a prominent member of the Black Mountain community during its later years, would sometimes sign his published work with the following phrase: “in the spirit.” Joseph Bathanti, a close friend of Dawson’s and a former mentor of mine, communicated to me how prevalent that phrase was in the after-lives of the College.
10 Ibid.
11 Duberman, Black Mountain, 440.
It is this quality of the College—this ability to live at once in the haze of a storied mystique and extend beyond space and affect our present moment—that often pervades treatments of the school. It is a romance all too frequently gleaned. And even though I find this quality of the College extremely interesting and certainly warranted, my aim here is to read against this mystifying tendency and instead materialize the place in such a way as to illustrate critically an often neglected aspect of the school—that is to say, its environmental life. Of course this is not to say that Duberman or Bathanti or even Harris are guilty of bloating their research with romance and mysticism. Indeed, much if not all of their work materializes the place to such a degree that it allows others, like myself, to study its world. I only mean to suggest that typically the end result of these histories leaves the reader with a sense of that “imagined idea of perfection.” And consequently, little to no critical treatment has been given to that idea. The critical possibilities and avenues of the College’s life and art have been somewhat lost to the mystical gloss that shrouds our remembrance of the school and its near-mythic history. For this reason, this project hopes to move past the mythic status of Black Mountain in history, and enter critically into its particulars of life and art. In other words, it hopes to engage the College as a site of inhabitance, to see its environmental life (or rather, its ecology) as a constellation of factors—stemming from its production of and within art, community, and landscape—that gave rise to a new form of ecological agency (i.e., subject, Being, or even what has often been called the Black Mountain spirit). Reading the College in this light will structure it both as an instance of environmental life and environmental being.

12 I myself am guilty from time to time of falling into romance.
13 Eva Díaz’s The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College is one among few exceptions.
On the one hand, we will see the particulars of how the college was inhabited, and on the other, we will see the kind of being produced by that habitation.

Thus, what I’m proposing is a critical study of the College—through an examination of its communal, artistic, and environmental particulars—that digs into the mystique surrounding the College and its spirit, and attempts to illustrate and constellate the factors that led to its profound, and, as I’ll argue, nascent form of environmental life.

In other words, this is an attempt at an ecological study that examines the systems of interconnection, interdependency, and balance, as they can be read through the College.

Here, I will examine the school not only as an artistic and communal paradigm, but also as an ecology that interconnects those two subjects within a greater web of interdependency that includes, at its macro level, the environment itself, thereby producing a structure of environmental life that allows its occupants access to a new form of ecological agency. In order to read the College in this way, I will appropriate the language of Félix Guattari’s *Three Ecologies*, a philosophy and praxis that provides a framework that is especially appropriate for this line of thinking. Though before I do, it is important to note Black Mountain’s political and artistic origins. By seeing just where the revolution of the school began and what is was actively working against, I will demonstrate how the institution was a place already primed for a reading of this particular hue. Here, I will show how it is not much of a stretch to inlay a decidedly environmental philosophical ethic to an institution already engaged in what might easily be considered an ecological practice.

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14 As Martin Duberman and Mary Emma Harris did in their respective studies. Harris, to her end, was primarily attentive to the arts programs as they were played out over the course of the college’s existence. Martin Duberman, on the other hand, explored aspects of the community experience. Both illuminated quite well the concerns of their project: art and community.
Black Mountain began as a rebellion against the traditions of a lockstep and strict academia, specifically an academia typified by its “often anemic curricula,” which “allowed little in the way of independent thought and engagement.”\textsuperscript{15} John Andrew Rice, the prominent founder of Black Mountain College, had been ousted from what he considered to be a version of that academic stricture at Rollins College. Following his dismissal, he, alongside a few other rebellious compatriots, decided to open a school that would work against those tired ways of a strict and limiting system. The result of that effort was Black Mountain College, and from its conception the school worked toward emancipating its participants from those tired traditions. As it was communicated in the school’s first Catalog, “Black Mountain College was founded in order to provide a place where free use might be made of tested and proved methods of education and new methods tried out in a purely experimental spirit,” but with the “full realization...that experiment is, for the individual, also experience.”\textsuperscript{16} Many of those “tested and proved” methods were either selected directly from John Dewey, or, at the very least, were variations on his work. Dewey was both a strong influence on the communal and academic structure of the college and a (somewhat fair-weather) participant in the school’s on-goings. His work on democracy, aesthetics, and experience were all foundational ideals for the life of Black Mountain.

Perhaps most important among those was his philosophy of aesthetics, which suggested that the individual art object was inextricable from the experiences of local culture that generated it. As Dewey writes it in the opening pages of \textit{Art as Experience}, “the task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience

\textsuperscript{15} Bathanti, “The Mythic School on the Mountain,” \textit{Our State}.
\textsuperscript{16} “1933-34 Black Mountain College Catalog,” \textit{Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center Collection}, UNC Asheville, Special Collections.
that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”  

17 The importance of this philosophy to the Black Mountain community is a thesis in and of itself, but for my purposes here it is enough to say that the process of art this particular philosophy emphasizes is the same process that provided the engine for Black Mountain’s artistic and communal revolution. Seeing as Black Mountain was first and foremost an arts centered school, it was the reorientation that followed from an attention to experience as art—instead of the finality of the art object—that afforded the College space to pursue other modes of seeing, being, and feeling. By way of an attention to continuous process, participants in the Black Mountain experiment were afforded a vision of the world that didn’t, to use Dewey’s image, simply see the flower. Rather, they were taught to see the flowering.  

18 Art, for these Black Mountaineers, was both living and learning. It was not some final object.  

19 From here, it is not much of a stretch to inlay the practices, events, and objects of Black Mountain with a decidedly eco-philosophical ethic. As we’ll see, the attention to process and making that these ideas inspired are intimately wed to Guattari’s articulation for a new ecosophic ethic, an ethic and philosophy that I will elaborate on here.

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18 Ibid., 4.
19 It should be noted that Dewey’s articulation of art as experience also highlights one of the greater difficulties involved in the kind of reading conducted here. Generally speaking, what this project is attempting to do is study the process of art in static art objects. In other words, it is attempting to extract the ephemeral process of an artist’s subject transformation from an otherwise static archive. Certainly, the complications of this kind of reading are several, but, if the hope of this project is to identify and illustrate a new kind of environmental life resultant from those ephemeral processes of art making, I will do my best to read them here. In order to do so, I will buttress my examination of these static art objects with the events, philosophies, and remembrances from the everyday Black Mountain experience. As a result, I will be able to collect a vision of Black Mountain that speaks to a kind of art greater than any one object—that is, an art of living.
Our survival on this planet is not only threatened by environmental damage but by a degeneration in the fabric of social solidarity and in the modes of psychical life, which must literally be reinvented. The refoundation of politics will have to pass through the aesthetic and analytical dimensions implied in the three ecologies—the environment, the socius and the psyche. We cannot conceive of solutions to the poisoning of the atmosphere and to global warming due to the greenhouse effect, or to the problem of population control, without a mutation of mentality, without promoting a new art of living in society...The only acceptable finality of human activity is the production of a subjectivity that is auto-enriching its relation to the world in a continuous fashion.\(^{20}\)

I quote the above passage at length because it gets at the need for Guattari’s articulation for a new kind of subject, a new kind of being. And it provides the kind of reinvention of subject required if we are to actually live with this world. Effectively, he is depicting a need for a new kind of environmental life, one that reimagines and reinvents the subject’s relation to the world. In this quotation, he refers to the “three ecologies,” which were developed at length in another essay (an essay that will figure prominently here). These three ecologies are what he suggests we need to recognize or “pass through” in order to “promote a new art of living in society”—that is, a new way of being commensurate with the earth.

As he makes clear in his essay *Three Ecologies*, only an “ethico-political articulation—which [he calls] *ecosophy*—between three ecological registers (the environment, social relations [viz. *socius*] and human subjectivity [viz. *psyche*]) would be

likely to clarify the questions”\(^2^1\) of environmental responsibility and crisis. Separately, these three “ecological registers” are rendered as mental ecology, social ecology, and environmental ecology. Together, and through his ecosophic articulation (i.e., the collected vision of the three ecologies interwoven and intertwined), they form what is ultimately an assemblage of subjectification that, as he suggests, serves to clarify the questions surrounding our being in the world. In the text, he constructs certain praxes that—when performed within and without each ecological register—will inevitably result in the production and management of the whole of subjectivity, thereby rewriting the very contract from which we render our subjectionhood. In this sense, no longer are we strictly individuals. Rather, we are assemblages of a tripartite world, each ecological part revolving within and without our being.

As Guattari writes it, “Vectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a ‘terminal.’” Instead, “interiority establishes itself at the crossroad of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and, if need be, in open conflict.”\(^2^2\) This kind of thinking, especially as it relates to our usual ideas about the individual, is somewhat stirring. What it suggests is that our idea of interiority is constructed through vectors, or exterior forces (vis-à-vis, ecologies), that pass through and around us. The consolidation of subject, then, is only achieved temporarily as multiple components come to reside in the same “terminal,” or rather the self. Thus, the make-up of our interiority—our Being—is constantly becoming with the changing and shifting particulars of our circumstantial ecologies. In this way, there is no definite and rigid individual moving


\(^2^2\) Ibid., 36.
about the earth. Instead, there are sites of becoming that are composed by the particular energies and forces that are of the earth. The environmental, social, and cultural ramifications of this alteration are quite profound.

Typically, in most ecocritical conversations there is some sense of binarism (e.g., subject | object, nature | culture) that pervades our thinking, even if that thinking is deconstructive in scope and meant to be read against those binaries. Consequently, ecocriticism usually begins from within an ontology that either accepts or actively works against those binaristic structures. The power of Guattari’s thought stems from the fact that it is working outside of this ontology entirely. Instead of predicking his philosophy on dichotomy, he establishes a form of thinking that is entirely dynamic in nature—that is to say, it evades the tired complications of binaristic and dichotomous thinking and instead proposes a reading of the world that is always in process. In other words, rather than a consideration of the human (or subject) in relation to the world, Guattari’s philosophy is attentive to how the material and sensory world can coalesce and consolidate, via its interconnecting ecologies, into junctions, or terminals of Being. These ideas—developed in part from earlier philosophic articulations on being and becoming from the likes of Baruch Spinoza, Alfred North Whitehead, and Martin Heidegger—effectively reverse the usual process of ontological thinking. Once we thought from the interior out. Now, by way of Guattari, there is the possibility of thinking and acting from the exterior in. As an answer to the ontological question—specifically as it relates to our relationship to the natural world—this articulation seems to be quite valuable and constructive, if only for the fact that it begins with the world.
In addition to its value as a philosophical articulation, Guattari incorporates into his *Three Ecologies* certain praxes that he hopes will achieve this new conception of being; this, in effect, is his *ecosophic* ethic, and this is largely what sets him apart from his philosophic predecessors. As he suggests, the way that we as human beings can come to grab at those passing vectors and thus realize our situation as interconnected subjects is by participating in these praxes. Structured from each ecology, these praxes take on different forms, different methods. His mental ecology is directed at a reinvention of “the relation of the subject to the body,” wherein the subject feels itself closer to its “phantasm, to the passage of time, and to the ‘mysteries’ of life and death.” Social ecology, on the other hand, is figured through a reconstructing and a restructuring of “the modalities of group-being.” Similarly, an environmental ecology is achieved through a reexamination of the nature-culture divide. As he sees it, nature, as we find it today, is inseparable from culture. To illustrate this point, he calls on an experiment performed by Alain Bombard wherein the scientist produced two glass tanks: “one filled with polluted water—of the sort that one might draw from the port of Marseille—containing a healthy, thriving, almost dancing octopus. The other tank contained pure, unpolluted seawater. Bombard caught the octopus and immersed it in the 'normal' water; after a few seconds the animal curled up, sank to the bottom and died.” This, he proffered, is the only symbol necessary for our comprehension of the intricacies and interconnections that work between ecosystems. Effectively, we are living in a world that demands we think “transversally,” across and through ecologies. These ecological praxes, born from within their ecology, provide Guattari, and by extension anyone who takes up his project,  

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23 Ibid., 34-35.
24 Ibid., 43.
the capability of devising not only a better, more ecologically sound subject, but also a blueprint from which to actually build it in the world.

More than these formulations, Guattari observes the necessity and responsibility of art, which is especially enticing for the literary/art eco-critic, or for anyone attempting to render his philosophic frame through a decidedly artistic culture. In fact, as Gary Genosko shows, Guattari’s “real innovation,” and thus why he is of particular interest here, “was to develop the relationship between art and ecology through the question of the formation of subjectivity.”

Similar to the academic and artistic efforts of Black Mountain College, “art,” for Guattari, “begins with the expressive features of a territory that become for its inhabitants flight paths beyond its borders. Art begins not with a home but with a house, not with inner-directness, but with outer-directness.” This follows from Guattari’s reversal of ontological thinking. The images/concepts of house and home and inner/outer directness are both instances of how Guattari’s thinking begins from an exterior mode. The house is the unoccupied home, existing as a structure that is necessarily open and more concerned with the notion of structure than it is with any type of presumed occupation; in this sense, the “house” is far more akin to the aforementioned notion of “terminal.” Likewise, outer-directness concerns itself with exteriority before it attends to any presumed notion of interior being. Art, therefore, is the vehicle through which we manage this reversal. It allows us a way out of the enclosed and interior individual and into the tangled and non-heirarchical vision of a tri-ecology. “Artists,” in this way, “provide the means for these creative forward flights, these breakaways” into a

different form of subjectivity and being, and in so doing the possibilities for “new valorizations, new social practices, [and] new subjectivities” emerge.26

Though for all of its political promise and ontological capability (viz. its reversal), not much critical attention has been given to Guatarri’s ecosophy, and consequently very little has been done with it.27 It has remained absent from the field of ecocriticism, which, some might say, begs the question of its validity or use. I, however, believe that it is more than useful, especially given the present circumstances of our relationship to the natural world. Undoubtedly, the human-nature relationship is at crisis, and for how much philosophic and critical analysis results from the usual modes of ecocritical thinking (i.e., the binaristic and dichotomous study) so much of it exists only in theoretical space. Indeed, we spend a good many hours approximating the theoretical distances between an “I” and the forest, and yet so little time has been spent finding a way to actually land the “I” in the forest, and to do it favorably, responsibly, beautifully. To this end, it can be argued that ecocritical scholarship is very much in need of the actual world. It needs praxis; in other words, it needs something to ground its project in literal space. This is the benefit of Guattari’s thinking. It is praxis, and it is ethics—each directly in service to the world.

And this, too, is the benefit of reading Guattari alongside Black Mountain College. As an entity of space, place, and event (and indeed as an entity of process) the College provides us the opportunity to read beyond texts and examine the blueprints of a broader architecture (specifically an architecture of environmental life) as it was

27 Bernd Herzogenrath, An (un)likely Alliance: Thinking Environments(s) with Deleuze/Guattari (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 192.
actualized in history. The College was, and is for us now, a realization of Guattari’s project in actual space. I think that if we were to look at the particularities of the crucible that was Black Mountain College (and the “expressive features of its territory”) we might begin to see the roots of what potentiates Guattari’s eco-subject; we might begin to see how it has come to life. Here, if we look closely, we might see a “new art of living,” specifically as it was born from the institution that wrested itself from the ecologies coursing through it. As such, Black Mountain—as an artistic and communal center—was, for all those involved, one such “forward flight,” and because of this each of its participants were flung forward into new possibilities of life, of living in and with the world.

In the pages that follow I will break down certain events, objects, conditions, and structures of the school in order to show how the experience and enactment (within and) of those things engaged its participants in an activity (or process) of subject transformation, a transformation not altogether different from Guattari’s proposed reinvention. In doing so, I will show how the conditions of the school (i.e., its congruity with its three ecologies) provided for this reinvention.

First I will conduct a detailed study of Black Mountain’s two campuses. This will allow for an understanding of the greater natural arena and its affect on the social and mental psychologies of its inhabitants. In essence, it will be something of a zoomed-out look at the greater environmental conditions/experiences of the school, reading it in light
of its *natureculture*. Broadly construed, this section forms the base landscape for the study of Black Mountain’s environmental life. Next I will turn to the Black Mountain Test. I will examine closely a number of questions that were administered to students upon the occasion of their transition—be it between divisions or graduation. The questions engage the kind of subject that Black Mountain projected itself to be—that is to say, the citizen. Reading the questions in this light will not only show them as instances of the school’s mental ecology, but it will also show the ideal process of their response, thus affording me access into the perceptual and intellectual experience they are meant to garner. Thirdly, I will explore the Black Mountain Classroom. In particular, I will be looking into two exercises of Josef Albers: the figure|ground study and the *matière* study. Looking closely into his teaching practices, as well as a number of student work from those classes, I’ll be able to show how the prototypical Black Mountain education assembled into art the processes of self-reinvention. Fourthly, I will analyze one of the more memorable and profound moments in Black Mountain theater and performance: namely, *Theater Piece No. 1*. In doing so, I will engage the ecological convergence of the performance and highlight its importance as a reconditioning of social and psychic life. What is more, the Event itself serves as a scaled-down rendition of the greater ecological processes conducted at Black Mountain’s macro-level (i.e., its environmental life). As a final point, this performance will provide us a local image of the greater ecological forces being depicted throughout this project.

Taken together, what these events, conditions, and structures will show is that Black Mountain was already imbued with an attention to the reinvented self, especially as it could be achieved through a material, relational, and experiential (i.e., ecological)
understanding. And even though the College ultimately met its end because of a somewhat unassimilable and slightly destructive artistic process, it was still a place for which being meant something entirely different. In the space of that school, being was not something that you definitively were. Rather, it was something that you realized was happening all around you. That, for them, was the spirit. And art, alongside community, was the way of attaining it. I hope that by documenting that spirit here, I can begin to show that—more than a school of great historical and artistic import—this tiny, explosive, and “mythic” College provides us an altogether new conception of living, one that sees art, community, and nature as integral to the process of self-reinvention.
I. THE BLACK MOUNTAIN ENVIRONMENT: THE COLLEGE AS NATURECULTURE

Leon Lewis, in a review of Duberman’s *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, suggests that one of the main glaring omissions of the book is the environment and locality of Black Mountain. Duberman, he submits, “avoids the subject of place almost entirely. His disregard of setting,” he goes on to say, “tends to cut things loose so one can never tell whether Black Mountain was ever home ground to anyone.” And where this is mostly true for Duberman—he did, in fact, provide some amount of textual space for a discussion of the school’s environment—it has also remained true for any attempt at

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28 Ibid., 118.
29 Though, to defend Lewis’s point, Duberman’s environment and locality were discussed mainly through the language of space, specifically as it concerned community formation and the production of a uniquely Black Mountain reality. What is more, much of what was said about this “space” was delivered via quotations from students and faculty. Take, for instance, Duberman in conversation with John Wallen, a faculty member at the college during the middle 40s: “‘at any moment,’ Wallen said to me, ‘you are some place in time and some place in space. And it seems to me your experience ought to somehow reflect this and also manifest concern for that environment you inhabit…but Black Mountain was almost as if it wasn’t any place in time and space’” (Duberman, 250). Never really reaching into his own words and analyses, environment, for Duberman, is constructed through quotations. And even then it is discussed through the
critical study of the college since. The environment and locality of Black Mountain have
been absent for too long in the critical discourse surrounding the school. Here, I intend to
fill that void. In order to do so, I will look to the greater natural area of the College and
read it through Guattari’s environmental ecology, particularly as it affects the social and
mental ecologies of the school and its inhabitants.

To understand these effects, though, one must first grapple with Guattari’s style of
environmental ecology. More generally, his style of environmental ecology can be read
as an erasure of the divide between nature | culture. To borrow a term from Donna
Haraway, the Guattarian environment is more aptly characterized through the linguistic
meld of “natureculture.” For Haraway, the concept “natureculture” is a way to construct
linguistically and philosophically the necessary complex of nature and culture, and, by
extension, the physical (or material) and the mind.GUATTARI’S CONCERN IS MORE ALIGNED
WITH THE LATTER DIVISION—that is, of the environment and the psyche. Thus, for a full
expression of Guattari’s natureculture, one need examine the imbrication of the mind
with its surrounding environment. Black Mountain, as it was seated in two campuses,
provides us an illustration of this imbrication. Looking into how the two campuses
affected (both similarly and differently) the mental and social dynamics of the College
will ultimately show its position as an instance of natureculture—that is, as a
successfully undivided space of co-consitution. In this way, we can read the College, at
its macro-environmental level, as a kind of microcosm of natureculture, built from its
interwoven ecologies. Though before I enter into a more theoretical discourse on the

language of space. Thus, to align with Lewis, there certainly is a void when it comes to the
college’s environmental discourse, especially as it concerns the particularities of place.

30 Donna Haraway, The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness
College’s environmental ecology, I’d first like to conduct some historical foregrounding of the College’s two campuses.

Even though Black Mountain College only lasted for a relatively brief twenty-three years, it split that time between two campuses. The first, The Blue Ridge Assembly complex, was a ready-made rental property seated somewhat high in the Western North Carolina Mountains. Henry Miller, upon his visit to the school, described the view from Robert E. Lee Hall (the main white-columned building that dominated the campus):

“From the steps of Black Mountain College in North Carolina one has a view of mountains and forests which makes one dream of Asia.”31 Not long before his visit, the recently acquired Alberses applied a similar description to the school and its landscape. To Anni Albers especially, Black Mountain “just as well could be the Philippines.”32

Even though it would be safer to keep from making too much of this coincidence, I do think it suggests something about the environmental situation of this first campus. Conjurings of Asia aside, this first campus was seated high enough that, upon looking out, one saw distance. So much of it, in fact, that one could see the Blue Mountains disappearing into sky. There, one could visually engage in the space between oneself and any far-distant cultural clue. Any sense of other people, besides those who occupied the college, was dissolved in the view. It was, in this sense, a place and space apart.

Surrounded by the stimulations of the immediate nature and the far-reaching vistas, the occupants of this first campus were privy to a level of isolation that was visible in the vast mountains rolling just beyond their station. Because of this, Black Mountain, as its own reality—the kind of experimental democracy as lived through individual and

communal practice—was allowed a kind of blank, culturally-unencumbered ground for testing and cultivation. There, they would build the loose foundation for what would eventually become their “Eden.”

In 1937, the college acquired its own property, mostly as a back-up plan in case their current lease at the Blue Ridge Assembly was terminated. Fittingly, this new property was known as Lake Eden, and, as Duberman notes, it “had formerly been operated as a summer resort; it consisted of 667 acres of land, a small, man-made lake, a dining hall with a porch that sat over the water, and two nearby lodges and a dozen smaller cottages scattered over the grounds.”

Thinking they had some years before they would need to move, the college began developing plans for an elaborate complex of buildings, a complex that would fit alongside the center lake. They contracted Walter Gropius—founder of the Bauhaus school, and recent Black Mountain friend—to draw up plans for the new site. What he developed was large, eager, and idealistic, certainly indulgent and fitting to the Black Mountain disposition. The plans were “designed to reflect and reinforce the communal aspirations of the college and to accommodate the needs of 120 students.” They would be “connected by covered walkways and situated around the south side of Lake Eden to take advantage of the views across the lake toward the west and east.”

Unfortunately, however, what time they thought they had for fundraising and construction was cut drastically short by their premature eviction. In 1940, the owner of the Blue Ridge Assembly sold the property out from under them, forcing the college, along with its few occupants, to move shop to the unconstructed and

33 Ibid., 153.
34 Harris, The Arts at Black Mountain, 56.
undeveloped site of Lake Eden. The only buildings available were the resort cottages and
the dining hall that, to a yearlong school’s disappointment, were not fit for winter use.

Consequently, the college had to spend its first couple of years at the new campus
retrofitting older buildings and developing plans for a new construction that could be
built much more quickly and cheaply. Thus they abandoned Gropius’s plans in favor of
simpler buildings that could meet their needs. In this way, the famous ship-like studies
building that so many have come to associate with the Black Mountain image was born.
Designed by A. Lawrence Kocher, constructed mainly by the students and faculty, and
built, in part, from natural materials (locally sourced), the building would come to occupy
the center of Black Mountain life.35

The two campuses, of course, shared similarities. Located only three miles apart,
they held the same raw beauty. And both, though in different senses, were still isolated
from “the outside world.” This did not, however, alleviate some of the worries that
resulted from what seemed like a drastic change. It is here, amid the transition and
comparison between the two campuses, where we begin to see some of the social and
psychic effects the environment had on the minds of the students and faculty.

At the time, many students saw the move to Lake Eden as potentially detrimental
to their community and its life of centrality. “Lee Hall, some argued, had been
architecturally—and therefore, emotionally—unified; with only a few exceptions,
everyone had been housed under one roof. Lake Eden, on the other hand, consisted of a
scattered collection of some dozen buildings, many separated by considerable distances,
the new environment thus encouraged a diffusion and categorization of enterprises which

35 See the image that opens this thesis.
once had been integrated and fluid.”36 Add to this the psychological effect of moving from above the valley to within it, and what you have are different environmental conditions (or rather naturecultures) that dictate an altogether new kind of individual, one that would need to be found in the space of a second Black Mountain. In an interview with Duberman, Will Hamlin, a student during both eras, described the psychological effect that resulted from this movement:

   Psychologically this made a very big difference to some of us. One came up out of the world as it were to Lee Hall; it was an act of decision to go back down to it. The hillside isolation forced people to look at each other, as did the physical unity.Existentially you were faced with yourself and your companions, to make a life. In the valley, on the other hand, it was easier to get away; you didn’t have that sense of being apart from others so much; you weren’t so much—therefore—faced with the I-thou questions; aloneness was less a fact and certainly less an evident or symbolized fact.37

As Hamlin describes it, the sense of “aloneness” that forced the “I-thou questions” was much more of a factor in the “physical unity” and “hillside isolation” of Robert E. Lee Hall. At first glance, this seems to be a somewhat contradictory statement. Aloneness as a fact would seem to follow from the place that separated its individuals and afforded them space to be alone, much like it did in the valley of Lake Eden. This, however, neglects Hamlin’s notion of facticity. At Robert E. Lee Hall, as much as it was “an act of decision to go back down” into the world, it was just as much of a decision to be alone. On the hillside you had to choose your aloneness, whereas in the valley it was already a given state. Thus, as an environmental architecture, students had to move from a consciousness of “being apart” to a condition of being apart. And because of this move, Black Mountain life was forced to find itself through an emotional, architectural, and

36 Duberman, Black Mountain, 161.
37 Ibid.
spatial difference. The college and each of its constituents needed to find again the spirit that motivated and vitalized their first community, and they needed to do so within an incommensurable and wild valley—a place that, though resolutely as beautiful, was decidedly more rugged (and more conditionally alone) than the airy enclosure of the upper slopes.

Here, at Lake Eden, as far as the documents show, there were rarely evocations of Asia. There were, instead, the invasive and seemingly ill-intentioned kudzu vines, the coarse weeds and tall grass, and the proliferation of wildlife (including a never-ending charge of snakes). There were the wildflowers that D.H. Corkran (a faculty member in the later 40s) found by tracing the ground. And there was the rhododendron that, as Fielding Dawson describes it, afforded,

the experience of being surrounded by, to be within the rhododendron is lifelong, for the color, texture and effect is as close to reverie as we can get: beckoning toward and embrace on its syllabic chanting name or a call across some mythic river by a half-naked figure, hands cupped around mouth in a call that is the expression of that fact: rho-do-den-dron: leaves so green, as smooth as the bellies of frogs.

These things, plus an added sense of enclosure—the fact of the valley as interior space—attributed an earthliness to this second campus, a kind of groundedness that wasn’t as easily found in the higher elevations. Of course, this is not to say that the first campus lacked wildness or any sense of its being a part of the earth. Indeed, as I’m sure

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38 As Michael Rumaker notes, kudzu “swarmed and invaded everywhere, its tentacled and sturdy tendrils like rapidly-growing green octopi that yet managed to pinch through even the narrowest slits in the screens, and once inside, coiled around the walls of our living quarters.” Rumaker, *Black Mountain Days* (Asheville, NC: Black Mountain Press, 2003), 314.
41 Quite literally, one lives in the valley.
numerous accounts can attest, the upper reaches of the mountains are just as easily wild and “of the earth” as the forests and valleys below. I only mean to suggest that the valley, by way of its containment and enclosure, has a way of recalculating one’s presumed proximity to those wild and natural features. To use Dawson’s term, they surround you. And perhaps because aloneness was less a fact in the valley and more of a given condition, the proximity of your being (as it was removed from the closeness to others) to nature was even more prominent. In a word, here in the valley you were perhaps more alone with nature.

Earlier on in Dawson’s Black Mountain Book he provides an image of the second campus that highlights these notions of enclosure, wildness, and the space apart. Coordinated into a single image (the “crystal”), these qualities of the Lake Eden environment begin to sound a lot like the Guattarian natureculture formation:

Within the crystal there was an outside, its air almost tangible. In the south, to go out at night was to enter it, leave one place was to enter another. In the real world this would be a terrifying thing...But at Black Mountain, walking down that road at night, barefoot, like an artist, or athlete, I didn’t think. Of course this could be said of young men out in the wilds, much has been made of the mystery of desolate lakes, mountains and unbridled nature day and night. I’m saying that the transparency—the air—of Black Mountain, was the form of its containment, and we learning that once inside the crystal, there were many places, insofar as we related to these places, moving from one to another, we moved in a feeling of being within something already within, and as the vast wilds with lakes and mountains and animals are dreamlike, evoking similar images, Black Mountain verged to a dream-state. Within the crystal.42

It is this notion of the crystal that I think best illustrates the environment (most especially as an instance of the Black Mountain natureculture) of the second campus. The way in which Dawson describes it—as an interior and contained atmosphere that held a kind of

42 Ibid., 11-12.
tangible air—suggests that the sense or spirit of Black Mountain was something directly tied to its environment, something contained there even through the movement between the supposedly far-separate buildings, those “places.” As we saw earlier, Lake Eden—as it was described during the moment of transition\(^{43}\) (c.1940)—was presumably in danger of a diffusion or loss of spirit, of “centrality”—a spirit that was supposedly best contained within the four walls of Robert E. Lee Hall. Dawson, however, shows us that whatever fears students and faculty may have had regarding the “distant” and “separated” environment of Lake Eden were largely unjustified. In truth, it was the movement between these “places”—these far separate buildings in the valley—and the feeling of “being within something already within” that achieved this sense of the “Crystal,” of feeling oneself inside a collected entity. In this way, the Crystal that was Lake Eden achieved its crystal\(n\)ess through the compression of the surrounding nature, i.e., the “lakes and mountains and animals,” and the spirited culture of Black Mountain. Together they solidified into one sensuous entity, “something you can’t see, knowing it’s there. All around you.”\(^{44}\) That is the Black Mountain environment, and that is the sense of being it circulated through its atmosphere.

\[^{43}\text{See note 22.}\]
\[^{44}\text{Ibid., 12.}\]
western North Carolina are beautiful beyond description, and it is as if the atmosphere of the College was consciously a part of the living beauty. It made one sensitive to everything. “Here, as with the earlier quotations, we find Black Mountain’s environment as intimately wed to its society. This, if we can re-engage in philosophic thinking for a moment, is clearly a deconstruction of the binaries of nature | culture and self | environment. In truth, the social and psychic alterations that attended the college’s movement between campuses (from fluidity to feared separation, from above to below, from distance to “crystal”) speak to a different kind of negotiation between the human and environment; the negotiation in this sense is dynamic in nature. In this way, it is reminiscent of Guattari’s environmental ecology, specifically his natureculture that merges ontology with environment thereby circumventing those former separations. Looking at the college and the locality in this way, we are able to see the environment’s deep affect on the psyche and the social organization of the school, its group-being so to speak. What we see is that within the space of the school, nature is inseparable from culture; it affects organization at the psychic level.

It is fitting then to look at the school and its art as an attempt to produce new modes of being—new forms of ecological agency—from the generative interaction of these interconnected ecological planes. From the environment and locality at large to the mental landscape of the subject living in it, the school, and by extension its art, has a way of traversing these imbricated planes and producing, from their interaction and interrelation, new modes of being and value. Just look at Michael Rumaker’s arrival at Black Mountain. In its sentiment is a notion of this interrelation as producing of new

modes: “In those early months at Black Mountain, I was so caught up in getting used to not only the wildness of the terrain but to the equally wild ideas of creation and thought that were also new exciting ground.” As far as Rumaker was concerned, Black Mountain was a place of two grounds—that of the wild terrain and that of the equally wild ground of creative thought. These two grounds, as environment and psyche, were largely co-constitutive. Their interaction and interrelation were, in part, what provided Black Mountain College the space to explore the processes of new art and new artistic making. And as we’ll see in the chapters that follow, these new modes of being and value were communicated through several different types of artistic and intellectual processes, be they questions, matières, or theater. For the purposes of this first section, however, it is important to remember that the only constant undergirding each of these processes was the place itself, and that the conditions of inseparability of its culture and environment were what enabled the processes to occur.

Finally, as a brief historical note, it should be acknowledged that in the artistic practices and historical set pieces that follow, many, if not all of them, occurred on the second campus. Given that only around 180 students ever attended the college during the 30s (i.e., the Blue Ridge Assembly years), and Lake Eden was finally their “own ground,” it seems best to pull from the space that, following history’s narrative, became the Black Mountain College we know and think of today. Within that Crystal.

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47 Ibid., 159.
II. THE BLACK MOUNTAIN TEST: THE MENTAL ECOLOGY OF CITIZENRY

Figure 3 “First Day of Senior Division Examinations (April 1946).”
Even though the college typically avoided tests, grades, and any kind of formal evaluation, they did have a rigorous exam process for any student interested in 1) moving from Junior to Senior Division or 2) graduating. Although several students found themselves on the second-tier of the Black Mountain system, very few over the course of the college’s history actually graduated. Partly this was a result of the loose classes structure; students were never really responsible for the completion of any set curriculum, so many either left before they entered into the graduation process or they simply stayed on, moving from class to class without very much consequence. As long as you were seriously practicing your craft, developing good work, and were a stable, contributing member of the community (indeed, social responsibilities and social practice were heavy emphases from the very beginning), no one pestered you with leaving or graduating.

The few number of actual graduates can also be attributed to the difficulty of the “comprehensive examinations” administered during those times of transition—from junior to senior, from student to graduate. As the first Black Mountain catalog put it, these were “comprehensive tests of his failure or success in meeting responsibility.” As such, they were in place to test the development of the individual as citizen, as much as they were the artist as thinker. One example of their difficulty and comprehensiveness—from one of the college’s first graduates—shows the level seriousness and scrutiny prospective graduates were put through; supposedly, he “had to take written exams lasting twenty-one hours and orals that lasted a whole day—conducted by his outside examiner before anyone from the college who wished to attend, a shifting audience which stayed at about a dozen throughout the day.” Exhaustion aside, it speaks to the truly

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49 Ibid.
extensive nature of Black Mountain’s intellectual and experiential reach. In order to test
the so-called Black Mountain knowledge, one needs days of writing and speaking. That is
a large capacity.

It seems pertinent, then, to examine more closely the language of these exams, to
find in them the type and quality of subject being examined and bolstered. By looking at
a selection of test items from a single exam, I will show that ultimately the kind of
individual one was expected to be—as a Black Mountain citizen—was, for all intents and
purposes, ecological in scope. Selections from the “First Day Senior Division
Examinations (April 1946)”50 in particular will illustrate the ecological dimensions—as
they exist mentally, spatially, and communally—any one member was expected to
uphold, to pass through. These questions, more than anything, construct an instance or
projection of Guattari’s mental ecology—that is, the attempt to reinvent or re-
conceptualize the mind, or subject, in relation to the body, history, and any extended
sense of life.51 Here, the ideal Black Mountain citizen is projected from the responses this
examination is meant to procure.

1. “In the beginning when the world was young there were many truths and all
were beautiful. The people came along and each one snatched one of the
truths. But the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself,
called it his truth and tried to live his life by it, the truth he embraced became
a falsehood.” Comment.

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50 Questions pulled from “First Day of Senior Division Examinations (April 1946),” from the file
of Mary Caroline (M.C.) Richards, the Black Mountain College Miscellaneous Collection,
Western Regional Archives, Asheville, NC. See Figure 3.
51 Guattari, Three Ecologies, 35.
This first question—already aware of its nascent and self-reflexive position (one can only assume that the college saw itself in this genesis story)—gets at the predicament/tension often incited at Black Mountain, and, by extension, any attempt at ecological thinking and agency. The tension is a consequence of the push and pull between two poles: the individual and the community. On the one hand, there is an imperative for “each one” to snatch up a truth, thus supposing an individual holding, a way of achieving an individual differentness. On the other, there is the detriment and falsehood that results from a singular possession of that truth, a taking for oneself and oneself only. This we might call an effort in individuation, that is, a complete separation from the world of many truths. This separation, the question would suggest, is what leads to a world of singular truth, which, to the detriment of the possessor, leads to a life of falsehood—ignorant, as it were, to the manifold beauties of the once shared world. The question, then, is attempting to engage the student in this quandary: how does one manage the singular efforts of the artist and the individual (as it attempts some kind of unique expression) with the responsibilities of a shared communal life, especially as these ventures are conducted simultaneously?

Martin Duberman, in a moment of journalistic inquiry, elucidates the questions circling this tension: “Is there a conflict between ‘individualism’ and community? Can an ‘artist’ survive—would he want to survive—the innumerable petty issues and responsibilities that come with communal living? Can one live fully and well with others and at the same time ‘produce’?”52 These questions that engage the tension between the individual and the community—especially as they are found “in the beginning” (“beginning” in the sense of Black Mountain’s characteristically new life)—highlight the

52 Duberman, Black Mountain, 238.
conflict students at Black Mountain were asked to resolve. How does one balance the production of the individual—as he or she seeks truths—with the production of the community—as it explores and upholds many truths? These same questions are asked of ecological models, too. Balance, after all, is the trait of all successful systems.

One of the most telling examples of this balance/tension can be found in the controversial “community” efforts of John Wallen, a member of the Black Mountain faculty during the mid-40’s. For Wallen, community meant both “what went on within the college, and between the college and its neighbors.” Concerning the community in the college, Wallen felt that too much attention was centered on an individual reality, a reality preoccupied with the growth of the self and whether or not “November’s drawings show an advance over September’s.” Because of this fact, Wallen felt that “Black Mountain was almost as if it wasn’t any place in time and space.” It was, to his understanding, removed and isolated from the directly local setting, and as such was at risk of losing itself to solipsistic thinking. His antagonism to the “narcissistic” artistic endeavors of the school ultimately lead to a polarization within the community. Especially when pushed against Albers’s urging for artistic and intellectual development, Wallen’s push for “community” involvement led many students at the time to believe that the two—community and art—couldn’t coexist. During this tumult, the choice was either to remain with art and the individual as it floated in some nonlocalizable time and space, or engage with the community (both as it existed interiorly and exteriorly) directly.

Of course students fell on either side of the pole. Some students followed Wallen’s urgings and increased their experience of the surrounding world, making

\[53\] Ibid., 250.
\[54\] Ibid.
“concrete commitments to it.” For example, “one student volunteered to serve as a companion two afternoons a week to a ‘schizophrenic’ girl of about her own age who was a patient in a nearby mental hospital...Other students got involved with the Southern Negro Youth Congress, took petitions around the region, and attempted to work on voter registration.”⁵⁵ Though however many students fell to the side of action, still other students fell on the side “art.” Using Kenneth Noland as an example, it was the supposed “time and space apart” of Black Mountain that allowed him “to conceive of himself as an artist at a time when he was not—thereby helping him to become one.”⁵⁶ As the “art” argument goes, without that affordance perhaps Kenneth Noland wouldn’t have turned out the painter and cultural figure he is today. Similarly, and perhaps more broadly, in communicating the dangers of pragmatic community thinking (i.e., the simplicity of political action), Albers argued that Wallen’s ideas “narrowed [the] appreciation of humanity,” effectively “pigeonholing all the mysteries of experience and creativity”⁵⁷ into tiny, compartmentalized efforts of action.

Even though these were certainly exaggerated stances that heightened even more the antagonism felt from both camps, their prolonged infighting was perfectly emblematic of the tension residing in the heart of every Black Mountain member, and indeed the tension engendered within this test question. There were times for everyone when it felt as though the pull of the community detracted from the process of artistic growth, and vice-versa. Ultimately, it became, in the verbiage of this test question, a competition of truths and presumed “falsehoods.” It was, to this end, a dichotomous competition, split between the two poles (or truths) of self and environment, or rather art

⁵⁵ Ibid., 254.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 252.
⁵⁷ Ibid., 259.
and community. And in the space of this debate, to take up one (be it art or community) for the neglect of the other, was to live in a complete falsehood. It meant to exist through binary, which, to Black Mountain’s eventual understanding, was a falsehood; it was, to this question’s language, a taking up of one truth. As it can be seen from how the situation resolved itself, Black Mountain as a community (finally) became attentive to the true nature of their existence, which is to say the “right” answer to this question, which Duberman articulates here:

The challenge is to create a time/space configuration never quite seen before, one representative of our own unique fantasies, needs and talents. For people to concentrate their energies on reality as defined by the local social milieu (to picket the Lucky Strike plant, for example, because of its labor practices—an actual issue at Black Mountain during Wallen’s stay), is perhaps to jeopardize their chance at developing that special configuration—one that needn’t result in any product (like a painting or a poem) other than themselves, one that might make their own days richer and eventually, indirectly, depending on the force of that configuration, even end up by changing local ‘reality’ as well.58

Here, the answer is dynamic in nature. It isn’t directly attentive to any one object, be it “art” or community (viz. Lucky Strike Plant). Instead, the attention of Black Mountain—and perhaps what might be considered the more “correct” response to this first question—was developed around a notion of a new “time/space configuration,” one that would result in an alteration of the self, which might then, hopefully, affect the configuration of the surrounding world, too. This seems to be the mutation of mentality and of subjectivity that Guattari was after: a recognition of the greater “configuration,” or what we might call ecology, that ends up changing the self in unknown ways and hopefully, because of that, changing the “reality” as well. That, for Black Mountain, was true citizenship. That was its process.

58 Ibid., 251.
Using this community-art debate as an example, it is clear to see how a student’s response to this test question speaks not only to his or her capacity to negotiate and recognize the dilemmas of shared life, but also to their capacity as agents of new ecological bearing. To answer to certain falsehoods of singularly possessed truths and recognize the beauty of the multiplicity of shared truths (à la democratic life), the student becomes a knowing participant in the Black Mountain ecology, a citizen to the new venture that is constantly negotiating between the efforts of the individual and those of the community. Here, in the words of Guattari, the student is engaging in a process of continuous “resingularization,” where “individuals must become more united and increasingly different.”

2. \textit{Tell about an experience of any kind which has been meaningful to you. This may be a book read (or avoided), a conversation engaged in (or overheard). A relationship examined, a glance outward (or inward), et cetera. (The choice of experience is less important than the account you give of its significance.)}

Though it reads somewhat like an application question, it is easy to say this question is about awareness, meaning, and the exhibition of significance. It seeks to engage the respondent in a world built from relations and intimacy, specifically an intimacy as it is bred through an attention to significance. What is more, the parenthetical qualifications that serve to open the possibility of what experience can mean\footnote{Guattari, \textit{Three Ecologies}, 69.} assist the respondent in reconfiguring the shapes of significance the world might take. As such, the question is

\footnote{I.e., experience can extend beyond your own participation, into books not read and conversations “overheard”; in this way, the world of \textit{experience} isn’t directed by the individual, but rather by his or her relationship to everything else. Experience, in this way, is relational, not personal.}
meant to investigate the respondent’s ability to intimately engage with the world and identify its significance; though, not as the experience is significant to the individual, but rather how it is significant in and of itself.

It is also a question of access—how and when one is capable of perceiving or accessing the significance of the world and its experience. As I have suggested, it is not strictly a matter of assessing one’s experience in the world, but rather it is about how one recognizes the significance of their relationship to the world, and, by extension, how they come to communicate that fact. The process of thought that would lead a respondent to a successful answer is quite similar to the process of creation that Albers espoused in his material, design, and color studies (a study I’ll discuss in the next section). That process is primarily concerned with realizing the subject’s position in its relationship between things, thus coordinating a vision of the self and the world as manifestly co-constitutive. One must, in this sense, literally and concretely engage the world if one is to understand its, and by extension, their significance.

Because this question engages one’s thinking in the manner of reorganization—that is, the reorganization of experience—the respondent ultimately engages in what Guattari and Deleuze (in their earlier articulations) would call “the new.” In this articulation, “The new…involves a recombination of already existing elements in and of the world.” In this way, “The new is an outside that exists within this world, and as such it must be constructed.” After all, where would the new come from if not from the world?

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61 As an equation it reads as follows: BEING=BECOMING.
as it already exists? This idea of the new is what is being tested here, and so the question, alongside the one before it, is an attempt to engage the student in thinking that pushes them into “the new.” An example of this reorganization of thought is this slip of paper that was once tacked on to a Black Mountain Bulletin Board sometime during the mid to late thirties:

![Figure 4 Black Mountain College Scrapbook, 1937-1938. Compiled by Theodore Dreiser.](image)

The slip of paper reads: “Please Give the Roses and other Flowers Time to Get Adjusted to Black Mountain College Life.” Certainly, there is some amount of playfulness in this statement, perhaps resulting from too many crushed flowers. But all the same, as an instance of the “glance outward (or inward)” that this question poses, this slip of paper and the sentiment it contains seems to be an intriguing instance of the kind of reorientation to “the new” the question is meant to engage. For one thing, the statement is aware and attentive to the larger collective process of Black Mountain life. It recognizes the need for a process of incorporation that works to include a greater notion

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of agency to the often neglected and presumably dormant features of the mountain scenery. In this way, the slip of paper gestures toward an experience of seeing that situates these natural features as a kind of recently arrived citizen to the life and country of Black Mountain. It can be read as a reconsideration of nature as working into the process of this one, collected life. Here, nature (the roses and other flowers) is as much a citizen of Black Mountain Life as the students themselves. Whoever typed this note and tacked it to the columns outside did so from a place of mind that was engaged to an altogether “new” perspective. And had they answered the question rendered above, they might have written of this glance outward, of seeing the many features of the natural world as participants and citizens of this greater “Black Mountain College Life.”

This, though, is one small example. Thought of more broadly, question No. 2, like the one before it, is a generative question that provides the student the opportunity to think of experience and the world differently, thus imbricating them in the folds of a new ecology, and engaging them in a new vision of the world.

3. How would you like your children to be?

At first glance, it might seem odd to think that a college would include this question on an examination that is meant to determine whether or not a student is ready to graduate. But, recalling Black Mountain’s original aim—to develop the whole individual, as citizen—it comes as less of a surprise. Given that the college was primarily attentive to this project of being, an examination of how the student imagines their progeny becomes an altogether fruitful enterprise. For one thing, it engages once more this idea of “the

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64 Interestingly enough, the columns of Robert E. Lee Hall were made of wood, and so consequently many students used the columns as make-shift bulletin boards.
new,” both literally and figuratively. In a literal sense, the respondent is being asked to articulate an entirely new form of life, one that is the composite of his or her desired form of being. In this sense, this question attempts to engage the respondent in a projection of their own life as it might be received and reflected in the lives of their children. This, in many ways, is a more literal form of becoming, and it approaches the world as a vessel of both difference and repetition—the two facets of Deleuze’s formulation that occur prior to identity formation. The children are both a repetition of the current subject, and are made different by the present subject’s articulation of the desired form—how they would “like” them to be. In a more figurative sense, this question asks that the respondent articulate their vision of a potential “new” way of being, one that could be reflected back on their own subject.

Ecologically speaking, the construction of new social and subjective realities occurring in the process of this question are par for the course when it comes to an inter-ecological existence. For even though the environment isn’t directly included in this question, its ideal response would activate the mental and social actions that could result in a new form of ecological agency—one that could be signified as the Black Mountain subject, or spirit—concerned, as it is, with the desires and qualifications for being. For one thing, the question is clearly a processing of “the new,” suggesting its relationship to new formulations of being in the world. For another, it is clearly engaged with a political

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65 “The new,” as I’ve shown, is created by a reorganization of already existing forms and materials because there is literally nothing else to the world. It is these forms and materials. The subject, then, as it is possibly “new,” is only new in so far as it is created through repetition, but with difference. For more in this, see either Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) or Simon O’Sullivan’s discussion of it in his chapter “The Production of the New and the Care of the Self,” in *Deleuze, Guattari and the Production of the New*, eds. Simon O’Sullivan and Stephen Zepke (London: Continuum, 2008).
ontology—how the children are “to be”—which is both a critical engagement of the present, and a projection into new states of being, those new “nascent states.”

These remarks made by Bob Wunsch as he welcomed in the fall semester of 1943 speak to how the College, as a collective force, engage in the thinking of this question:

I want to say now, at the beginning, that while we declare we are beginning the eleventh year of Black Mountain College, we are really beginning a new college. I think we must say this to ourselves each year, lest we begin to let the past become the dominant force in our lives, and already there are too many institutions throttled by the dead and the departed. Many of the people who helped to make last year what it was have gone; most of the people who started the College have left. On the other hand there are here this year many new people...I do not mean to belittle the people who have gone before us, nor to infer that we should throw them into the discard. What they did and what they said are woven somehow into the texture of the campus, into the texture of the lives of us who are still here...But there should be new planning; and everyone should be in on the planning...Now I am not pleading for eternal change, nothing today as it was yesterday; but I am earnestly challenging myself and all of you to look at things anew, to examine critically.

It is clear to see that the College itself was engaged in a collected form of “the new” and the political ontology of developmental process. Each year was something of a new life, though not entirely removed from the vestige of its earlier tenants; in other words, repetition, but with difference. The school, in this sense, was engaged in a continuous process of reimagining itself, of always looking “at things anew.” And for each of its members, each of whom held the shared responsibility of “new planning,” this process was intimately wed to their own development; whichever shape the year took, it would ultimately be the force through which their own lives were guided. Collectively, this force might be examined as another instance of the College’s mental ecology—that thing.

through which the psychic conditions of each subject are shaped and ultimately formed, each in relationship to one another as they enact the larger motion of beginning anew.

Of course I might be making too much of these questions. They are after all just questions, and the level of analysis I’ve accrued here is predicated on the ideal Black Mountain student formulating the ideal response. In all likelihood, many students fell short of this mark. However, this is not the point of my analysis. It is not meant to engage what were most likely the average answers. What my analysis is meant engage is the subject these exams were postulating—the subject (or rather, whole individual) as it could be collected through the artistic, communal, and environmental climate of the college.

Ultimately—as it is articulated in Guattari’s *Three Ecologies*—these questions, like Albers’s classroom exercises to follow, were transversal tools with which the subject could install “itself simultaneously in the realms of the environment, in the major social and institutional assemblages, and symmetrically in the landscapes and fantasies of the most intimate spheres of the individual.”68 These questions required that the student think this way—across the ecologies that assembled their campus. In doing so, they experienced the potential for a nascent subjectivity, one that was, to the space of the world, entirely new. This was their mental ecology: a projection of the ideal citizen from an intellectual and emotional stimulation that resulted from considerations across the folds of Black Mountain’s *crystal*, its three-part ecology. Taken together, these questions

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engage their respondent in a larger vision of “Black Mountain Life,” one that is decidedly ecological—or rather, environmental—in scope. After all, at Black Mountain even the flowers are afforded time to become as citizens as each year begins anew.
III. THE BLACK MOUNTAIN CLASSROOM: JOSEF ALBERS AND THE ART OF PERCEPTION

-- After the “beauty of the extraordinary world we’d learned to ignore.”69

Josef and Anni Albers arrived at Black Mountain College in the December of 1933. Forced from their life and work at the Bauhaus School by Nazi storm troopers, the two artists found refuge in the Black Mountain Community. Acquired as teaching artists, the couple sought out a space and place apart, somewhere to begin life and art anew. Luckily for them, Black Mountain proved immediately available for such an enterprise. Josef took on the role of resident painter, and Anni took on the role of weaver. The two remained in those roles until their eventual departure in 1949. Over the course of that time they developed a practice of art that to many students (including, among others, Ruth Asawa and Robert Rauschenberg) changed their way of not only making the world, but of seeing it, too. Peggy Bennett Cole, whose quote adorns the opening of this section, highlights this kind of transformation. Their practice of art, if it was to result in a form of self-transformation, was necessarily mediated by a keen vision of the world. In this way, the world, and its material, played an integral part in the artist developing his or herself. It was only through seeing that one finally found their place, their sense of how and where they were in the world.

Of course the two—Josef and Anni—had slightly different approaches to this practice. For one thing, there was the difference of media. For another, there were slight variations in how they articulated this practice. But differences aside, both were deeply

69 Peggy Bennett Cole, quoted in Martin Duberman’s Black Mountain, 58.
committed to the one thing Josef Albers’s first communicated to his students: “To open
eyes.” That, he said, “was probably my first conscious answer and connection with my
aims, with my job. To open eyes. And I think I have stuck to this…” Even though it
might not seem immediately clear, these teaching practices are and were deeply
ecological. To borrow Guattari’s vocabulary, they, as artistic practices, are “transversal
tools,” tools that work across the environment and our psychic experience of it. In other
words, they are a materialistic approach to a spiritual development—seeing that informs
being, and vice versa. This, more than anything, is an instance of Guattari’s praxis—a
way for the artist to participate in an activity that engages simultaneously the three
ecologies of our world, and to produce a different kind of subject; one that is nascent and
processual, in tune to an extraordinary world that was otherwise lost.

To expand on this ecological reading, I will focus in on two of Josef’s classroom
exercises: the “figure/ground” and matiére. By illustrating those teaching practices here
and examining the process of their art, I will show how the most prototypical of Black
Mountain classrooms aimed its efforts toward the processes of self-reinvention, and in
doing so provided the space for a new form of ecological agency to emerge.

The “Figure|Ground”

This exercise was mainly concerned with the relationship between materials. Drawing, in
part, from Gestalt theory, Albers believed that “two elements…must result in more than
just the sum of those elements; the result [of which] yielded at least one relationship. The

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70 Josef Albers, “March 1965 Interview,” In Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds: An
Anthology of Personal Accounts, ed. by Mervin Lane (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee
Press, 1990), 34.
71 Guattari, The Three Ecologies, 69.
more these elements strengthen each other, the more valuable the result, the more effective the project.” The exercise itself could be understood by the image of a checkerboard pattern: “Is it white on black or black on white, he would ask? Which is the ‘figure’ and which the ‘ground’? Clearly the checkerboard could be read either way: the figure as ground, or the ground as figure—which meant that ‘whatever is figure or whatever is ground is interchangeable.’” The confusion Albers introduced to what are typically distinguished objects, destabilized and ultimately undermined the traditional divisions of subject-object, a division that is often extrapolated to the man-nature divide. As we’ll see in the art projects that follow, the confusion of these once pronounced disconnections is what ultimately generated the possibility for a new kind of agency, one rendered through the prism of ecological thought and action.

As practice, the students would conduct this exercise by juxtaposing materials, colors, and objects. They would, for instance, make “a gloomy raw sienna look as alive and shining as gold by ‘working on its neighbors,’” thereby reconfiguring the relationship/boundary between the two color/materials; essentially, it becomes about potentiality rather than division. By deconstructing the boundaries that once existed between an object and its particular context—be it a chair, a color, or a person—the practitioner of this exercise is taking part in the blurring of once separate designations. Students would thus participate in the potentiality of a subject that eclipses the old delineations of man | nature and self | other. They are, in effect, occupying a space that implicates multiple ecologies: the direct materials (as environment) and the psychic

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72 Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 55.
73 Ibid.
experience of those materials as they are reconsidered in actual space (a mental ecology).

Consider this color study made by Margaret Balzer Cantieni for one of Josef Alber’s 1945 classes:

![Color Study](image)

**Figure 5 Margaret Balzer Cantieni, Color Study, 1945.**

What’s perhaps most directly apparent about this piece is its simplicity. Following from Albers’ attention to basic design and the expression of form, this simplicity is not
altogether surprising. However, for how simple the form and construction might seem, the piece is engaged in a deeply complex “ethic of perception,” as Eva Díaz terms it.\textsuperscript{75}

For Albers, the world had been made tired by old forms and a tendency to teach through tradition, history, and historical fact, rather than process, innovation, and experimentation. The old forms, he felt, subtracted from the student’s process of discovery, which would inevitably result in a loss or abandonment of spirit. As he would often suggest, “‘only dynamic possession is fertile—materially as well as spiritually.’” Here, Albers “distinguished between the usual possessiveness or industriousness of the student who mindlessly accumulates and memorizes facts and theories to be regurgitated on an exam to please the teacher and the ‘dynamic possession’ of the student for whom experience and action is an integral part of the learning process.”\textsuperscript{76}

Of course Albers’s classrooms would come to look much like the latter, and how he went about teaching through this notion of “dynamic possession” was through a concrete change in the way students engaged the material world. What this meant was “providing tools for the conscientious rearticulation of form.” And as Eva Díaz highlights, “the outcomes of such explorations were not elaborated. This was perhaps a liberation proposition for students. The ethical dimension—the language of realization, responsibility, and improvement—was stressed above an active political program or explicit goals.”\textsuperscript{77} In this way, the stress of Albers’s class was on experience rather than any definite outcomes, and the change in subject/being, or at the very least the change in thought, came during the process of making, rather than the final critique of the art

\textsuperscript{76} Harris, \textit{The Arts at Black Mountain}, 15.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 49-50.
object. That was the true revolution: coming to see the world differently, inherently, and finding yourself in that process. This, Díaz would suggest, was Albers’s “ethic of perception.”

To return to Cantieni’s study and the notion of figure|ground, we see that the arrangement of color—and the process of that arrangement (i.e., the layering, order, etc.)—articulates two new forms (or configurations) on an otherwise flat, assorted color surface. The two new forms are depth and transparency. The “windows,” which appear stacked and reflected through one another, are merely shades of different colors painted on top of the striped background. The illusion of their form (i.e., their seeming depth and transparency, and perhaps more simply the fact of their appearance) is achieved through a process of color juxtaposition. By manipulating how the colors interact with one another, the “windows” become articulated through that interaction. What is more, the configuration/form of transparency is actually a result of the figure|ground confusion. Because the form of the window is articulated through a layering and pairing of foregrounded and backgrounded colors, it is impossible to tell if the “windows” are lifted from the canvas’s colored surface, or if the stripped colored surface is in fact a larger window frame coloring the three window forms behind it. As a study in the figure|ground, its function exists largely as an effort in color refraction, and thus configures a new experience of visual interaction.

The experience of this image-confusion is ultimately what Albers was after in his classroom. As he insists, “art is not an object but an experience”—an experience in and of perception that facilitates complex understandings of the visual world.”

confusion of form and color, of figure and ground that allows us to see the world anew. It allows us the opportunity to engage a new mode of thinking that reorients our understanding of materiality, form, and perception—those things that give shape to our sensory experience of the world.

Finally, and to speak a bit more generally about the social dimensions of this exercise, Albers reminds us that “when you really understand that each color is changed by a changed environment, you eventually find that you have learned about life as well as about color. This,” Duberman adds, “was the heart of Albers’s sociology as well as his art.” We are, Albers would suggest, figured in the relationship between things. No longer is there a figure/ground distinction. Rather, we are, in a sense, formed from within the interconnection of environment and self, a kind of figureground. This, in no uncertain terms, is what Guattari was attempting to construct, similar to his meld of natureculture. He was—as an effort to return psychology and sociology to the physical ground (to material)—postulating a subject that does away with old world barriers and instead resides among the changing connections between forms.

*Matière Studies*

As an alternate study to the interrelationship between materials, Albers implemented an exercise equally as intriguing. *Matière*—which quite literally means something of the mix of matter, subject, and material—was a study into the surfaces of things, their external appearance. John Urbain, a student of Albers’s *Matière* Studies, discusses the study’s “comprehensive definition”:

In paintings we find an arrangement of lines, spaces, and colors. The planning of these elements, according to various principles in art, involves a matter of
selection—the selection of lines, spaces, and colors. In creating a matiére we are concerned with appearances of surfaces and materials. As in painting, one color affects another, one value affects another, or one space affects another, so surface qualities influence other surface qualities. The visual arts involve the optical sense. With matiére, there is involved an additional factor, that of the tactile senses. We desire to touch and feel the matiére studies.\textsuperscript{79}

Largely concerned with the “discrepancy between the physical fact and the psychic effect,”\textsuperscript{80} the process of this exercise stimulated the artist’s mind to take part in in the possibilities of material. It engaged the visual and physical experiences in order to gain a new vision from that stimulation. More often than not, the way in which this new vision was achieved was by apprehending the material through unfamiliar means. For instance, by changing surface qualities—“how to make a brick look like something spongy”\textsuperscript{81}—Albers believed one could more easily see into the actuality of the object, the material, and more truly believe in its existence.

The culture, he thought, had reached a point where the material and spatial object was lost to abstraction. Abstraction, for him, was a symptom of a larger cultural sickness—a kind of blindness, an unseeing. It was the same sickness that could render a chair as any “chair.” The process of the matiére, then, was a way of approaching the material for the first time, of seeing its surfaces anew and truly becoming attentive to its reality, its life. That, for him, was belief. It was seeing the material both as itself and as it existed outside of its relation to everything else. For this exercise, and indeed for most others he taught while at the College, attention was directed at the experience of art, rather than any kind of finished product. In this way, the ecologies of this exercise are manifold. In one sense, there is the direct attention to material. The artist is

\textsuperscript{80} Harris, \textit{The Arts at Black Mountain}, 78.
\textsuperscript{81} Duberman, \textit{Black Mountain}, 56.
communicating through, at, within, and between it—enfolding his or herself in the recognition of the material reality. In another sense, it is about a process of reinvention, which is to borrow directly from Guattari’s articulation of the mental ecosophic praxis. “Mental ecosophy,” he suggests, “will lead us to reinvent the relation of the subject to the body.”82 By examining the ways that material can be rendered different visually, students can, as subjects, by participating in that exercise and process of recognition, awaken themselves to the vitality of materiality. They can begin to see the world and its materials more keenly, more profoundly.

Ray Johnson’s *Matière* study of tent caterpillar nests serves as an interesting example of this return to material, to matter.


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82 Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 35.
Ruth Asawa, a classmate of Johnson’s at the time, commented on the matièr: “nobody could really see what it was…He took something that you normally would just see in a tree and say, ‘oh, that’s a caterpillar’s nest,’ …but when you cut it away from that and brought it in, presented it on a hard surface, like foil, a metallic surface, then you couldn’t relate it to anything. So it became something else.”83 That something else is what most interested Albers because it meant that the world as it is typically seen is always possibly something else. It is as though the world has its own meaning beyond the contexts that humans place around it, and the attempt of art to engage that meaning is what enlivens the participant to a new sense of subjecthood.

In the instance of Ray Johnson’s project, the caterpillar nests, insofar as they are removed from their usual scene, do look new. Because they have been removed from a context we typically abstract or pass-by (as Ruth Asawa says it, “oh, that’s a caterpillar’s nest”), these caterpillar nests have taken on a whole new material meaning. Resting against the metallic foil, they almost come across as tiny galaxies, constellated by the fabric of their own making. And even more, through this particular study, we can begin to see them as habitats—as homes, in and of themselves. When they are caught in the tree, it’s easier for us to dismiss their image as part of the larger tree structure. Alone, though, they come alive through the vitality of their own specific form, texture, and material. Here, we can begin to see that the world, even at the level of insect, produces a complex reality. And by isolating that complex, via the process of Albers’s study, we can come to

see its meaning, and thus reinterpret our own meaning in relation to it. The exercise, then, assists us in our reinvention.\textsuperscript{84}

I think it is important to note that these exercises, and the philosophies of art associated with them, were not directly born from the space of Black Mountain College, nor were they constructed from the singular geniuses of Josef and Anni Albers. Rather, they are a part of a longer Bauhaus project, in particular “a utopian vision of aesthetic form integrated into society (art, architecture, design, and performance seen contextually and as part of modernist industry, transport, infrastructure, communication and media, housing, and education).”\textsuperscript{85} As it can be seen, there were already efforts of interrelation and systematic thinking buried in their praxis from their Bauhaus days, and these terms—interrelation and systems thinking—as we know, are popular in the vocabulary of a science-based ecology. Despite this fact, the Bauhaus didn’t necessarily appeal to or make available new forms of ecological agency—reason being the kind of education the

\textsuperscript{84} Of course, there is a paradox here that I feel I must touch on. Typically, Johnson’s piece would fall under the category of “eco-art,” both by way of traditional definition (à la environmentally-engaged art) and Guattarian definition. The piece, however, was quite literally created through a moment of purposeful natural destruction (the nests forcibly plucked from their tree). There is an interesting and decidedly complicated ethics involved in this moment of natural destruction committed for the sake of human appropriation and human reinvention. Some might argue against any “natural” art that destroys before it creates, seeing that act as an entirely anthropocentric venture. But, in defense of Johnson and the project at hand, it seems that to make that argument, one would be arguing against any practice of artistic making, for any artistic product—be it a book, canvas, or some environmental installation—must appropriate natural material for the sake of human means and human meaning. Indeed, if art is to live on—and I hope it does—it will continue to destroy. That is the order of material things. A tree, after all, is felled for a run of books. The best anyone can do in the face of that fact is create art that, at the very least, helps themselves and anyone who witnesses it to change.

\textsuperscript{85} Eva Diaz, \textit{The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College} (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2015), 11.
institution was espousing. The Bauhaus, of course, was more of a technical institute, whereas Black Mountain College resembled a liberal arts training. So even though the Bauhaus notions of interrelation and systems are, of course, ecological (especially at the level of city, country, planet), only when we see them placed inside the liberal microcosm of Black Mountain—that artistic and communal crucible—do we see the effect at the level of subject. Namely, the efforts that were once directed toward a utopia of holistic social design were now directed toward the makings of the individual and its community. Instead of the architecture and design of a city block—as far as it could be engaged artistically, pragmatically, etc.—the architectural focus was on the main area of construction happening at the college: that of the self and subject.

In this way, the exercises the Alberses brought with them are not only instances of a kind of utopic praxis of reassembly, they are also tools with which to reassemble the human subject, an assembly, no less, that builds an awareness of the environment into the subject. How else would one explain Josef Albers taking his beginning class to the woods and having “them cut sticks, the ends of which the students then chewed and used as brushes”? Indeed, Albers’s process and the way he went about conducting that process (even going so far as to discover the artistic tools in the forests beside the classroom), were deeply ecological. They were to the engaged and interested participant a way to relate oneself in a more immediate sense to the actual world. And through these processes, the Black Mountain student participated in an assembly of art that afforded them the possibility of a new world, one built from the rearrangement of a previous mold.

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86 Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain*, 17.
As Albers professed in a lecture on teaching, “We want the student who sees that art is neither a beauty shop nor imitation of nature. And more than embellishment and entertainment [sic]. But as a spiritual documentation of life, as a leader of quality, who sees that real art is essential life and essential life is art.”

This leaf study is an emblem of that. Seeing the grains, veins, and cracks of each leaf—contrasted against the stark yellow—shows the intricacies of each small thing, which, as the viewer comes to see, is the essential life of the piece. Against such a glaring color, one can see the expanse of nature through time and space—locating along each dried filament and brittle leaf-edge the breadth of its being. Yes, the leaves are isolated, but in that isolation it is finally possible to see the vast intricacies of their myriad ways. Within it, you can see everything that becomes you:

![Leaf Study IX, ca. 1940](image)

*Figure 7 Josef Albers, Leaf Study IX, ca. 1940.*

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87 Josef Albers, from “Let teaching art be ‘biological’ (Mark art teaching),” quoted in Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain*, 245.
IV. BLACK MOUNTAIN THEATER: JOHN CAGE’S THEATER PIECE NO. 1
AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ECOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE

--I am interested in any art not as a closed-in thing by itself but as a going-out one to interpenetrate with all other things, even if they are arts too. All of these things, each one of them seen as of first importance; no one of them as more important than another.\textsuperscript{88}

Supposedly, this is how “The Event” happened: John Cage read from a lecture on Zen Buddhism; as Robert Rauschenberg’s \textit{White Paintings} dangled overhead (if you’ll look to Richards’ drawing (fig. 8) you’ll see one of the major discrepancies of the night. Her drawing suggests that Kline’s paintings were hanging, whereas the reporting of other sources suggests Rauschenberg’s paintings were up); as Merce Cunningham danced around an audience (who were supposedly sitting facing one another in a kind of broken square shape); as a dog chased Cunningham around; as Charles Olson, poet and soon to be rector, and M.C. Richards read from atop the “poet’s ladder”; as David Tudor performed on the piano; as “Edith Pilaf records were played double-speed on a turn-of-the-century machine”; as a movie was shown against the wall.\textsuperscript{89}


\textsuperscript{89} Several sources chart the event, some a bit differently. For this list of “as,” I selected, like Duberman, those things that seem to occur in most people’s account of the event. The actual quotation is selected from Francine du Plessix Gray’s “Black Mountain: The Breaking (Making) of a Writer,” \textit{Sprouted Seeds}, 300. Eva Diaz’s \textit{The Experimenters}, Martin Duberman’s \textit{Black Mountain}, and Mary Emma Harris’s \textit{The Arts at Black Mountain} each provide a similar narrative, as far as the details for the night are concerned.
This, of course, is a listed out script of one of the more talked-about experiences/events to come out of Black Mountain College. *Theater Piece No.1* (as it was later known) was directed by John Cage and compiled entirely by way of chance operation. It has, since its inception, gone on to represent both Cage’s career and the spirit of Black Mountain College itself. Performed once and only once on an August night during the 1952 summer institute, the event ended up becoming a monumental and revolutionary work of performance and mixed media art. It “radically disrupted previous models of performance,” and did so by the sole means of chance and compartmental improvisations. Because of this, it has often been cited as the first “happening.”

Following on the heels of this originary designation, the event—as I communicated in my introduction—has become something of a myth. The lack of “texts” or artifacts (indeed, all we have to go on are these memories—no video or photographs exist of the actual event) combined with the cultural gravitas of its participants, has resulted in a kind of non-stop wonderment. Of course, several scholars—in what appears to be a maddening carousel of revolving and contradictory details—have attempted to coordinate those details into a single and whole narrative. This, however, as numerous attempts will attest, has ended up being a somewhat unproductive exercise. Yes, the work of arranging *does* afford some amount of entrance into that night, but, as Ruth Erickson has noted, perhaps it is better to approach the event from an altogether different angle. As she suggests, “Rather than attempting to pin down what happened...we might take a cue from the improvised event and shift our energy toward tracing the encounters between people, ideas, and art forms that led to the performance on

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90 Eva Díaz, *The Experimenters*, 78.
91 What is more, no two recollections match.
92 An effect easily transcribed to the greater history of Black Mountain.
that warm August evening in the rural South.” Even though her take on this alternative approach is entirely historical in scope—meaning she traces the events and causes leading up to the happening—the sentiment it provokes is entirely fitting to my project here. What her sentiment suggests is that the event itself was built from a convergence of factors. For her project, those factors consisted of the “people, ideas, and art forms that led to the performance.” For my project, although not entirely dissimilar, these factors are communicated through an ecological discourse. Not only does this kind of reading speak to Black Mountain’s structure of environmental life, it also engages an instance in which the development of a new form of agency resulted from a convergence of encircling ecologies, which is not something altogether available to a strictly historical tracing.

Here, Theater Piece No.1—more than a historical convergence of people, ideas, and art forms—was a convergence of different ecologies (most prominently those that are social and mental in scope) localized and concretized into the single event. Following from the first two chapters of this thesis, Theater Piece No.1 becomes another instance through which we can examine the subject and ecological agency of Black Mountain College as it was actualized from the interactions and interrelations of the college’s psychic, social, and environmental climate. As I’ll discuss here, Theater Piece No.1 provides a truly original and intriguing glimpse into the ways of Black Mountain’s social and mental ecology. By studying the event in relation to its ecology—its enactment as a process toward Black Mountain’s environmental life—I will show the kind of social and psychic reconditioning that occurred as a result of its “happening.” Specifically, I will look at two things: 1) the audience’s ecological (specifically mental and social)

experience of the event and 2) the event itself as it coordinates and enacts the “transversal tool” of interpenetration. Taken together, what this section will show is that Theater Piece No.1, more than a monumental event in mixed media art, was a convergence of ecologies that when performed together enabled access to a greater spirit, one that existed through the convergences within Black Mountain’s environmental life. In this way, the event is something of a synecdoche (a single local image) for the greater ecological forces at work.

The Audience

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8** M.C. Richards, *Floor Plan of John Cage’s Theater Piece No. 1 (1952)*. Drawn for William Fetterman in 1989.

As M.C. Richards’ belated drawing shows, and as it might be easily inferred, the event was certainly a bit chaotic. Even though there was some organization to the space (Cage arranged the event both by time registers and spatial layouts), much of it happened
improvisationally and, to the audience’s confusion, simultaneously. In reality, “Audience members could neither anticipate the presentations nor necessarily see them all at once.” The result, of course, was a forced shift in spectatorship.\footnote{94 Ruth Erickson, “Chance Encounters: Theater Piece No.1 and its Prehistory,” 299.} No longer were audience members able to give their full attention to any one thing. Instead, they were forced to just sort of let it roll over them, “and not try to make sense of the individual threads.”\footnote{95 Ibid.} Already in the somewhat abstract conversation surrounding the audience’s experience of the event, it is possible to see a situation of mental ecological restructuring. Because of the inability to engage wholly and completely to any individual thing, the audience member was, for the duration of their experience, unable to singularize or individuate the act of performance. As a result of this inhibition, the audience member was a participant in a decidedly nonsingular experience.

Typically, in any act of traditional theater, success is achieved whenever the audience is able to relate to a character on stage, to see and feel themselves in or with that character. In the instance of Cage’s theater, though, there were no characters, no means of direct relation. Rather, in his version of theater, the audience, instead of relating to any one character, was forced into a relation with the environment as a whole. They were, to this end, put amidst a world of environmental happenings, and forced to situate themselves amid all the noise.

The consequences of this rearrangement vary depending on whom you ask. As Francine du Plessix Gray recounts, “Most people who sat through it felt that it was great, that it had been an interesting experience and a worthwhile effort on the part of everyone who was taking part.” This, though, is a slightly more positive interpretation of events
than, say, David Weinrib’s. As he suggests, “There were a lot people looking at clocks.” Of course, these differences of experience can be chalked up to a number of things. Perhaps it had something to do with where people were sitting? Or perhaps it had something to do with the fact that many of the audience members had already seen these performers “do their thing” outside of this collected performance, and so putting them together didn’t do much to add to their appreciation or admiration of their work? Or perhaps to the already experimentally minded crowd, the event seemed like something that had already happened in different, albeit more engaging ways? Or perhaps people were simply very tired and just wanted to sleep?

Regardless of the reason, the fact remains that people sat through it; that people did, in fact, experience it. And so—as far as experience can be read—it follows that the very fact of the event and its incorporation of spontaneity, improvisation, and combination, prove its actuality of social and psychic affect. Even if one were somewhat disinterested, the fact remains that, by sitting there, one is prohibited from accessing the traditional modes of spectatorship. One cannot relate to any one thing, as is usually the case with theater, and so what results from that kind of disorienting environmental participation is an entirely different kind of mindset—namely, one that has been mutated (or rather reoriented) from the old relation of self to one single other and into a relation of self as a point of social and environmental contact in a greater event of simultaneous happenings.

As can be seen in Richards’ drawing, the audience was directly in the middle of the performance. And I might even go so far as to say they were the performance, or at

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96 Both Gray and Weinrib were interviewed by Duberman, and a lengthened version of their accounts can be found in his book, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, 373-374.
the very least a major part of it. Indeed, if the event was largely about the point of relation between and within things—undoubtedly it was, as we’ll see in the next section—then the audience as center speaks to their role in the over-all staging of Cage’s event. Communicated ecologically, one might say that their role, as a group and as persons within that group, was to enact and live through the restructuring of group (or environmental) being. Because everyone was caught in the environment together, it follows that their experience of mind and socius was also caught in the notion of whole environment. Without the possibility of direct relationality—whether to character, setting, or plot—the group and its persons were flung into the collected space of the environment and were left there for some time as it continued to wash over them, leaving, in its wake, a different conception of subject (especially as it relates to the environment as a whole). They were, to the event’s organization around a center, the site of convergence.

**The Act of Interpenetration**

Alongside a consideration of the ecological affect on the audience, one can also read into the event itself, seeing in its performance a Guattarian transversal tool (i.e., something with which the performers—in the space of the night—could use in order to install themselves in the greater multi-part ecological structure). The transversal tool in question could be termed “interpenetration.” Kay Larson describes this effort of interpenetration in the following way: “Lacking a narrative, the event has no plot and no denouement. Everybody in this moment is ‘going nowhere.’ Each performer’s action, since it doesn’t support a narrative, is clearly a process. Each and every being in all of that time and space is related to every other being—penetrated and being penetrated by all the
Clearly infused with Buddhist sentiment, this expression of interpenetration is perhaps one of the more performative ecological features of Black Mountain’s history. And as a signifier of ecological convergence, it works on both the levels of time and space, effectively enacting the greater spatial and temporal currents of Black Mountain’s environmental life. As such, *Theater Piece No.1* coordinates an activity of time and space that enacts, at the stage level, the greater conditions of Black Mountain’s ecological convergence. It was a kind of living theater, one that went “nowhere” and lived in its own space of assemblage, interpenetrated by genre, act, and being.

It seems pertinent then to introduce a passage by Michael Rumaker that eloquently describes this quality of time and space, specifically as it existed at the larger scale of Black Mountain life:

> I was learning not only the slowed pace of the school itself but also the slow time of the Seven Sister Mountains, so that my movements, even heartbeat, became slower, yet, paradoxically, my eyes and mind became sharper; began to perceive—that heartbreakingly blue sky, or a foxglove in a shadowy glade up in the hills, or one of those orange blue-spotted salamanders that I mentioned earlier amidst the corn stalks, the rugged rock and heave of the mountainous earth itself as I hiked over it and began to receive—the new ideas, the new ways of seeing and thinking about things...ideas and visions that seemed to stream everywhere, tumbling and echoing from ridge to ridge over all of the hundreds of acres of land that was Black Mountain.98

It is this description—and the kind of alteration to subject it implies—that figures most perfectly the new kind of convergence Black Mountain provided at the level of time and space. It was, as a convergence of culture and environment (in some sense, corollaries for time and space), a place that afforded its participants the feeling of a moving mountainous earth beneath them. And it afforded, even more than that, a sense of

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98 Rumaker, *Black Mountain Days*, 143-144.
creativity and ideas in the everywhere around them. At Black Mountain, being was always in front you, in the space of each other and the mountains that surrounded the school. Much like the meaning of this first happening, Being was in the air. It was a feeling of “slow time” (i.e., of “going nowhere”), of spatial and temporal expansion that could be interpenetrated by the subject moving between the myriad things, in a relational process of experience. And as long as one was willing to participate in the processes of this artistic making, or perhaps more simply be a witness to the performance of something entirely new, they might have been able to install themselves there and participate in some new experience (or process) of living, a new kind of art that is achieved through the confluence of ecologies that are coursing in the energies between things.

As it interpenetrates between genres—poetry, dance, film, music, etc.—performers, and actions, the Event plays into this same convergence. Situated as one of the first “distributed array” art installations, Theater Piece No. I assembled performers, objects, actions, and texts and “installed” them simultaneously in a specific moment of time and space. Because of this fact, each of these participants (objects, texts, or performers) were each conducted over one another, causing something of a “cacophony” of noise and visions. As it was referred to in the previous sub-section, much of this resulted in an inability to identify with any one thing. It was more of a wash of experience than it was an engagement with any specific art piece. Even now there is some difficulty in discerning the exact texts of each individual participant; there is no telling

99 Ibid., 257.
100 From Charles Olson’s perspective, who at the time was reading a poem from a step ladder, any voice, including his own, was “drowned out in the ambient informational context, a chaotic sea of seemingly unrelated activity and noise.” Tom Clark, Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet’s Life (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2000), 226.
which Olson poem was read, nor are there the specific words of Cage’s Zen lecture. The
texts of the night have disappeared, but, to the purpose of the happening itself, and to its
purpose as an experience of environmental life, that fact is an insignificant one. Indeed,
since the Event was staged so that each individual performance was occurring alongside
several others, the meaning of the Event is situated not in the art objects or performances
in and of themselves, but rather in their collected experience and the process of their
convergence, i.e., in their interrelation and interpenetration. The meaning, then—similar
to the meaning of a collected vision of Black Mountain as a whole—is determined
through the process of interrelations through time and in space. Meaning, then, is the
process of composition, rather than the content of its final act; in other words, “the new
ways of seeing and thinking about things.”

As Allan Kaprow would later define the “happening,” this new medium would
involve “‘the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch’”...To
this end, it would become “‘a spatiotemporal dilation of the end of painting into ‘the
world we have always had about us but ignored’; ‘a new concrete art.’”101 Much like
Josef Albers getting after the beauty of the extraordinary world his students had learned
to ignore, and much like the sense of one wrestling themselves (a new subject
transformation) from the greater experiential world of convergences and meaning that
were the ecologies of Black Mountain, this Event, this “happening,” was very much a
“dilation” of a greater life, one that transcended the composition of any one text and
instead resided in the convergence of many circulating truths. It was an experience of
process that projected, from its collected center, the possibility of a new art, an art that

101 Judith F. Rodenbeck, Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings
enabled its participant subjects a new sense of their own being with the world—simultaneously, concurrently—each part converging into another as they begin to form some greater sense of a world simply “happening.”

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The simultaneity of experience matched with a sense of continuous action and process contribute to the event’s qualification as “eco-art,” which, for Guattari, is perfectly performative. The essence of eco-art, he suggests, is the “opening up processually from a praxis that enables it to be made ‘habitable by a human project.’” It is, like Cage’s artistic endeavor, “a praxic opening-out,”102 and the aim of its project is necessarily one of value. Its ultimate goal, beyond the experience of process itself, was to suggest a whole greater than its parts—a kind of whole experience the individual actions fed into. Much like Guattari’s eco-art praxis that fills into a larger human project, Cage’s happening was a multivalent architecture that assembled, through its simultaneity, into something the participant could interpenetrate into, thereby involving him or herself in the collected state of “happening.”

In this way, the performance was as much of an expression of a new ecological agency as it was a revolutionary artistic practice. Through its process and its demand for collective rather than individual meaning it engaged a mental architecture specifically ecological in scope. And in its interpenetration between the roaming centers of performers, artistic production, and genre, the performance made corporeal the ecological processes of Black Mountain’s environmental life. This, more than anything, is the

102 Guattari, The Three Ecologies, 53.
enactment of Guattari’s praxes; of social ecology in action—reimagining our group being through different modes of thought and experience; and of a mental ecology in action—how it mutates the participant psyche in their reimagined relationship to an extended sense of life or world “happening.” Taken together, these ecological efforts enacted at the Event recreated the greater ecological convergences of the College, and were largely conducive to the development of the subject as a new ecological agent within that confluence.

Lastly, as a final note to this section, Kay Larson communicates the following: “In Theater Piece #1, no one could tell where the ‘artwork’ ended and the ‘world’ began…liberated from the need to pick and choose to fit a theme or interpretation, artists discovered that art could embody the processes of living in each moment.”103

What other proof does one need to believe that this school, unlike anything else, developed an art to living? I mean even in the span of a largely improvised day (as it was here—Cage, at lunchtime, scrawled on a napkin the idea for Theater Piece No.1, which he then staged that very same night)—members of the school could discover that art, community, and space all play an integral role in the process of life, in the making of life. And that, for all intents and purposes, was a regular Black Mountain day.

103 Kay Larson, Where the Heart Beats, 255.
Over the course of this project I have developed a fear that the kind of ecological construction that I’ve been highlighting is necessarily utopic and eternal (perhaps a result of my own romance with the school). My fear is that even though these things actually happened, the sense of their meaning and purpose has been stained in a nearly unattainable hue. For this reason, it seems pertinent to conclude with a brief conversation surrounding the fragility of this kind of life, this way of building oneself from the exterior in. After all, it is a temperamental process, and the way of being in this kind of life is certainly touch and go, or, to use the language of Guattari, circumstantial and necessarily contingent upon the local ecological conditions—be they social, mental, or spatial. In highlighting the fragility of this construction, I hope that one is more easily convinced of its actuality. For in seeing the ruination of something, the success of its previous build is more easily conceived.

The school’s final years, otherwise known as “Olson’s University,” (i.e., the college as it became both the image and life to his personality and ideas104) show the fragility of this environmental life construction. As I mentioned in my introduction, these final years saw the College ultimately meet its end because of Olson’s somewhat unassimilable and slightly destructive artistic process, i.e., his particular brand of environmental poetics. In order to understand this alteration of processes, one need only look to one of Olson’s first artistic feats at Black Mountain.

Upon the occasion of Black Mountain’s 1951 summer institute, Charles Olson wrote Apollonius of Tyana, A Dance, With Some Words, for Two Actors. It was to be

104 Harris, The Arts at Black Mountain, 178.
performed by Nick Cernovich, a beloved student, poet, and dancer, and narrated by Olson as a kind of capstone to the 1951 institute. Admittedly, outside of Apollonius and the printing of Olson’s pamphlet-styled polemic “Letter for Melville 1951,” the institute proved to be largely unremarkable, especially when compared to the summer that followed. Though despite the summer’s general lackluster, the play and its printing (the play was never actually performed; though it was printed locally and distributed throughout the campus) provided a cap to Olson’s thinking on theater and performativity, and, as an added dimension to its relevance, provided the reader a full-bodied look into what Robert Creeley called Olson’s “concept of man.” For the purposes of my language here, however, the play, more than working toward Olson’s “concept of man,” was instead working toward his new environmental being—that is to say, his subject—that ultimately spelled the end for the College.

Even before a study of the actual content of the play, one can see in Apollonius’s aesthetic and dramatic form an equally if not more directly emblematic representation of Olson’s aim and intention, particularly as it regards the development and staging of his poetics (and subject) at the site of Black Mountain. The play itself is framed after the traditional Japanese Noh play, and as such it incorporates many of the form’s aesthetic and philosophical markers. The form, which developed sometime in the fourteenth century, is characterized as highly stylized, abstract, and philosophical. Thus, it is often appreciated for its engagement with the human spirit, as opposed to the supposedly more limited concrete dimensions of traditional drama. It is, at its root, an effort to perform the “trials of human emotional and metaphysical experience.”\textsuperscript{105} In this manner, the Noh play

achieves success if it makes corporeal an otherwise noncorporeal or nonconcrete facet of the human (or rather, spiritual) experience. Concerning its aesthetic, the play form combines dance, drama, music, and poetry on the set of a relatively austere and minimalist stage. This simplicity is ultimately what affords the dancers/actors and those in the audience the opportunity to experience a more direct contact with the human spirit and its trials, unencumbered, as it might have been, by material distractions. Not to mention the Noh play is often repetitive and slow-paced, which often leads to a kind of ritualized stage performance, lending more credence to its metaphysical substance.

Incidentally, Olson did not have to look at Japanese theater alone to retrieve its formal possibilities. Indeed, the “stylized performances, lack of dialogue, emphasis on abstract ideas, and depiction of inner conflicts” were elements that were already being appropriated into the modern avant-garde theater.⑩6 What is more, it was these same elements of Noh that were being incorporated into the work of Modernist writers like Ezra Pound (a big “father” to Olson). For Pound in particular, the Noh form provided him a touchstone of high civilization, something from which he could counterbalance “the instances of destruction he saw around him.”⑩7 This was especially true for his Cantos. All in all, Noh provided a form through which he could engage an alternative sense of cultured life. Olson, drawing from Pound and the heritage of Japanese Noh drama at large, appropriated its aesthetic and philosophic forms to conduct a similar counterbalance. Only in Olson’s case it wasn’t so much an appropriation for the sake of an alternative “civilization.” Rather, it was an appropriation for the sake of alternative being, namely, the environmental being developed throughout his poetry and poetics. As

⑩6 Ibid.
⑩7 Ce Rosenow, “‘High Civilization’: The Role of Noh Drama in Ezra Pound’s Cantos,” Papers on Language and Literature 48, no. 3 (Summer, 2012): 227-244.
a figural representation of his poetics, this alternative being was most prominently figured as *Maximus*, but in these first few years of poetic and philosophic development Olson chartered the performance of his new being through another early Greek name: Apollonius, a name intimately paired with its place, Tyana.

The minimal and austere stage matched with an attention to spirit and the metaphysical conditions of *being* allowed Olson the opportunity to build and project for the audience a live running image of his “man,” his subject that was clearly informed by the recent drafts of “Projective Verse,” “Human Universe,” and “The Present is Prologue,” among other things. In this sense, not only is *Apollonius* a precursor to the eventual “long work” persona of Maximus, it also serves as the corporeal and bodied construction of Olson’s environmental ontology. Read in this way, we might come to see *Apollonius* as evidence of Olson’s subject, particularly as the kind of environmental being that, when read critically, highlights his tendency toward proprietorship, which is ultimately the name for the kind of process that led to the College’s end.

Even though the play was described by Olson (in a letter to Robert Creeley) as “the whole known world of the 1st Century,” the play, as Tom Clark describes it, “was actually focused on its protagonist’s inward voyage, the journey toward self-knowledge.”[^108] And as Clark goes on to note, this focus was less concerned with constructing a historical tableaux of the actual philosopher Apollonius than it was a kind of personal projection of Olson’s own “questing self.”[^109] The fact of this self-reflection is


[^109]: Ibid.
evident throughout the dance play, but it is perhaps most evident in Tyana’s opening
remarks, as the dancer, Apollonius, is introduced:

Let me detach your minds from religion. Let me, instead, direct your minds to
birth, how men, once born, seek to be born another way—and without necessary
reference to such words as ‘spirit’ or ‘the after-life.’ In other words, let me remind
you that men, first, deal with their lives, their discoveries therein—in their own
and other lives—and that they seek by their actions, if they are serious men, to
concentrate their own and others’ attentions to the closer intervals, not of any
removed place but of the intervals which surround us here, here in the distraction
of the present and the obvious, in short, that which surrounds us, what we make,
what we live in and by…¹¹⁰

Not only is this opening proclamation an effort to localize the mind to its most immediate
source (i.e., “that which surrounds us”—itself a very clear image of Olson’s sense of
reality and nature), it also serves to release us from the narratives of historical specificity.
To detach the mind “from religion” and to direct life inward (thereby denying attention to
any “removed place”) is an attempt, on Olson’s part, to wholly and completely depart
from any thinking that relies on the capacities of traditional history and its discourse.
Instead of reveling in the records of history or historical thought—of past lives removed
from a “present” place—Olson asks that we direct our minds “to birth,” to see, in
essence, how “men” are formed and potentially born anew by the action of their own
internal discoveries. Already this seems to be an altogether paradoxical way of
introducing a play about a man from nearly two thousand years ago. One would expect
something more closely resembling Olson’s description of Apollonius to Creeley—that of
“the whole known world of the first century”—but instead we get a deeply ontological
formulation, one with a reach that extends beyond the life of Apollonius and into a

¹¹⁰ Charles Olson, “Apollonius of Tyana,” in Selected Writings, ed. Robert Creeley (New York:
New Directions, 1966), 134.
contemporary frame. In this way, we can come to read Apollonius as an avatar for Olson, a kind of living and performing embodiment of his subject.

In another essay from that same year, Olson, however crassly, speaks to a similar view. “The Gate and the Center,” which he considered his major “culture-statement to date,” opens with the following: “What I am kicking around is this notion: that KNOWLEDGE either goes for the CENTER or it’s inevitably a State whore…[so] anyone who wants to begin to get straight has to, to start, a straight man has to uneducate himself first, in order to begin to pick up, to take up, to get back, in order to get on.” For a statement concerning the current culture, its directive is just as easily transcribed to Tyana’s (a)historical appeal. The process of “uneducating” oneself is nearly the same as the detachment that Tyana offers at the play’s opening. Both are ways to remove us from the burden of “State” discourse, religious or otherwise. What is more, his notion of “CENTER” is easily another term for the life that’s concentrated inward, i.e., the life of men who “deal with their lives, their discoveries therein” (emphasis mine). “KNOWLEDGE” in this way is formulated from birth (whether from the start or as one is “born another way”) outward, and developed through an attention to the closer intervals that surround our “CENTER.”

In a word, Olson, here, is championing a sense of self that begins (or is born) outside of the usual (he might say controlling) historical or “State” discourse, and as such is built from the discoveries that are made presently in the now. This, he might

111 Clark, Charles Olson, 188.
113 in “Human Universe” he refers to this discourse as the “UNIVERSE of discourse,” and characterizes it an enclosed Greek system of language and thought (Olson, “Human Universe,” Selected Writings, 54).
suggest, is the nature of life—a getting back to center by way of your own action, and finding, through exploration, the nature we once thought lost. This is his ontology: a return to center (i.e., ourselves) and nature. To clarify the parts of this ontology, Olson provides us the following terms from “Human Universe”: our need now, he suggests, is a return “to the only two universes which count, the two phenomenal ones, the two a man has need to bear on because they bear so on him: that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets.”¹¹⁴ There is the “CENTER,” himself, and the phenomenal world, and the only way to find or broaden your bearing (i.e., your self) is to chart a course through the world, discovering a wider and wider center as you move and take it up. Certainly this represents a natural and environmental ontology. However, even as far as it can be seen in this opening proclamation, there is a sense of ownership that imbues this concept. The very notion of “center” suggests it. That is, if a sense of the world is developed through the proximity to any one center, the world itself is being defined by its relationship to that center. The qualification of meaning therefore rests in the center (i.e., the human, man, etc.). As such, the world is a tenant to the property of your becoming.

From the ideas of this play, Olson built toward a College in his own image,¹¹⁵ one that was predominantly attentive to the inward process of taking up the world for the construction of your own meaning—a decidedly different, and nearly opposite approach to the previous Guattarian construction. As a result (perhaps directly or indirectly), the school (with its small number of faculty and students) lived in a more pronounced poverty. Those final years, under Olson—even though they were deeply productive in

¹¹⁴ Ibid. ¹¹⁵ He told Creeley in a letter once that he “needed the College to think with.” Robert Creeley in a preface to Tom Clark’s Charles Olson, xviii.
terms of *individual* artistic output—were essentially represented by cold December nights in unheated buildings, buildings so lost to the weather that any attempt at wood-burning and heat was swallowed by the thin and empty rooms.\(^{116}\) Some days the only available food was peanut butter and milk. They persisted through small numbers and often times long periods of isolation—locked away until the thing (a painting, a poem, a collage, whatever) was finished. This was the new world Olson enacted there, so caught up in self-production that little attention was given to the outside conditions of the school’s architecture (both figuratively and actually). In fact, some students went so far as to cover up the windows of their studio in order to shut out the view. And some students, in an even greater act of aggression toward the place, “stayed up all night painting as many of the leaves on the trees white as they could,”\(^{117}\) effectively shutting out the color that had come to distract them from their own inner-exploration. And so from there on, the retreat from Black Mountain—from both its life and place—occurred, until all that was left of it was Olson, the one man left to shut down the remainder of the school. He communicated the efforts of that closure in an obituary poem, written in the year of Black Mountain’s end, 1957, to commemorate what it was for him and what it had then become:

> The quail, and the wild mountain aster,
> possess the place...

> Now the animals, and snakes,
> have come down in. I saw a fox
> cross the road last night...

> The mountain lion
> is rumored

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\(^{116}\) Because of the school’s financial struggles, they, mostly Olson—the head honcho—had to sell off a good bit of the bottom land, which is where many of the community buildings were. Consequently, nearly everyone came to reside in their own houses, apart from each other.

\(^{117}\) Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 424.
in the hills. The last man of the place dreamed...

This is to be sung to the lyre of quantity as a lute at Kwansing was sung in honor of honor—for all those few who left the empire because they found her not a good lay. Every one of them, on the roads, were missing from the central places where business had usurped even religion...

It was,
Now that it closes,
For those who ain’t here,
pain...

And now is over-
grown

Here, there is no sense of the life that it was—no color, no interrelation. It was, for Olson at the close, a place of Wilderness that he alone occupied, a place of over-grown “pain.” And perhaps that was the effect of his poetics at large—a sense of being alone in the wilderness of the world, of feeling isolated in the internal conditions of your own self-making. As Maximus, Olson imagines this condition:

Isolated person in Gloucester, Massachusetts, I, Maximus, address you you islands of men and girls

From this poetry and from this ontology, you are more as an island, only ever extending your shore with each new discovery until, at some point, you’ve come to occupy the whole place. Here, it is perhaps best to return to Apollonius, for that is where this act of occupation and appropriation is most readily visible. Before the play transitions into its final “move,” there is “A DANCE OF PASSAGE” in which Apollonius arrives at an ecstatic joy: that “nothing is so good as each allowed to be himself alone in the midst of that phenomenal world raging and yet apart.” From this reverie that breaths out a joy for isolation, the play finishes in a final move of “DISAPPEARANCE”:

He was near home. And with pride and ease, let the dancer go back to Tyana, let him come in slow to her as she sits as she sat at the beginning of the play and let him come down to her, go forward into her arms, and as the lights go down, the color over the whole stage area (the known world) should first go off, color by color, and then, when the same stick of light with which the play opens is all that picks out the two of them, let that light go down, showing us the two of them as they were, but with this one difference, that, now Apollonius’s back is to the audience, and they shape together an ambiguous, double-backed thing as darkness returns and is final.121

It is clear to see that whatever place Olson imagines as “home,” as the kind of originating entity, is ultimately swallowed by the expansive character of the learned and huge Apollonius and the eventual darkness of the “raging apart.” Though before this consuming darkness, the audience is afforded one last image of the play’s meaning: that of them (person and place) together in some “ambiguous shape,” double-backed and without any of the world’s color. In this image there is the “raging apart”—the color of the “known world” shutting off—and there is the last man, alive in the final light of his new mythology: the “double-backed thing,” which Olson tells us elsewhere, is the “true

120 Olson, “Apollonius of Tyana,” Selected Writings, 152.
121 Ibid., 156.
lineaments of ourselves...facing up to the primal features of these founders (i.e., Tyana) who lie buried in us—that this is us, the Double-Backed Beast." For Olson, this is the better mold of any self and any process of self-reinvention—a mold that forms a mythology and is shaped by “facing up” against those internal features that are buried within us. As such, the measure of Olson’s subject—his man, Apollonius—is always built from an interior place that, through its mythology, can withstand the “raging apart” of the world as it slowly disappears into his one, lone image. As it can be seen, this is certainly a far off form to the once convergent and interconnecting life originally enabled at Black Mountain. In fact, it is almost its opposite. Members of this poetics are formed as islands, and the effect of that type of subject formation ultimately spells ruin for a life that once sought itself in the spirit of the all-around.

Now, this is not to say that Olson’s poetics and his advocacy for his brand of exploration was solely responsible for the financial and political collapse of the school. Undoubtedly, there were a number of factors contributing to that end. I do, however, mean to say that it, in a very real sense, resulted in students moving further and further into themselves, retreating into their private worlds (their islands), unable (or perhaps unwilling) to attend to the greater life of the place. How else do you explain the once strong advocacy for color—as it shifted in between contexts, materials, and instances of being (you see, Albers’s *sight* and *process*)—now taken over by a dark stage or the many leaves painted white?

Indeed, what I hope this transition and deconstruction shows is that, even more than the temporally and spatially grand concept of being—one determined by different ecologies coalescing and converging into a place of subjective possibility (something that

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may have been portrayed as a given condition of place)—the activity of this environmental life—its process and action—that I’ve attempted to depict through Black Mountain, is something deeply fragile and necessarily temporary and therefore must be actively worked toward if it is to ever truly be. Perhaps if we are to recognize that fact, we, too, could actively work toward a similar life here, in the space of wherever we are.

Finally, I hope that by reading the college in this way, I have shed some light on the often-befuddling nature of Black Mountain’s creative ferment. And I hope that I have gotten closer to expressing its capability as a place of reinvention. As Christopher Benfey notes, “No one has been able to explain the sheer number of artists and writers and other creative people whose lives were decisively touched by…Black Mountain. Perhaps,” he suggests, “it had something to do with the confluence of European refugees and American mavericks in search of safe harbor, finding unexpected common ground in the Appalachian outback.” A confluence of persons and common ground notwithstanding, I hope that I have argued how this creative ferment, this Black Mountain spirit—that thing that pervaded and animated the experiences, stories, reflections, and artistic endeavors of its participants—was a result of this tripartite ecology, this ecological assemblage of subjectification. And from that, I hope it is clear to see that art and community—more than the social and mental energies that they were/are—were deeply integral to Black Mountain College’s ecological architecture. Indeed, they were necessary for a world that sought to change itself, that sought to envision entirely new ways of life.

124 In other words, its subject.
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