MARY EMMA HARRIS

Black Mountain College: Open Form in American Education

What is honored in a country will be cultivated there.
Plato[1]

Preface

Eric Weiner in *The Geography of Genius* identifies shared characteristics among several cultures which experienced "Golden Ages": Athens between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, Hangzhou under the Song Dynasty, Florence in the Renaissance, Edinburgh in the Age of Reason, Calcutta in the Bengal Renaissance, Vienna both in the time of Amadeus Mozart and of Sigmund Freud, and, finally, Silicon Valley in contemporary times. In summary, he attributes such cultural flowerings to three common qualities: disorder, diversity and discernment. He also notes that such communities are intimate and interactive, wherein challenging conversation thrives. Timing and serendipity matter as does coincidence. Physical activity is a stimulus to creative thinking. And perhaps, of greatest importance with respect to Black Mountain College, such societies become "talent magnets."

This essay does not suggest that Black Mountain hosted a Golden Age. Neither does it focus on individual genius. Instead, it observes commonalities between these enlightened societies and the small college to shed light on the generative, dynamic educational community which has had a profound influence on American art.

Disorder

> Disorder is simply the order we are not looking for.
> Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*

> Creative people are forever dancing in this space, on the edge of chaos. …
> Chaos is order dancing.
> Eric Weiner, *A Search*

Weiner concludes that social and political disorder occurs when the existing order is fragmented by war, plague or other catastrophes. This disorder may be a new order that has yet to be recognized or it may be a chaotic environment from which a new order will emerge. In such times of uncertainty, societies and individuals are willing to take risks as there is little to lose. Although war may precipitate disorder, peace is a necessary component of a Golden Age. Otherwise, all resources are consumed by the war effort. Weiner distinguishes between "chaos" as a characteristic of disorder and "anarchy," in which there is no recognized authority. Although Black Mountain College is at times referred to as an "anarchy," in fact, there always was an established structure within which disorder and freedom thrived.

Black Mountain College was born of rebellion and discord in a time of social and political unrest. A conflict at Rollins College in Florida in the spring of 1933 culminated in the firing of Classics professor John Andrew Rice and others. Simultaneously, in Germany, Adolph Hitler was elected Chancellor, and, under duress, the Bauhaus, where Josef and Anni Albers had been both students and teachers, closed. The Great Depression gave rise to a plethora of political and social ideologies that culminated in a "perfect storm," out of which Black Mountain College emerged as a courageous, innovative venture in American education.

> one loves only form
> and form only comes
> into existence when
> the thing is born … (Olson, "I, Maximus")

> Every perceivable thing has form …
> Every form has meaning. (J. Albers)

> What is the nature of an experimental action? It is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen. (Cage 69)

The founders of Black Mountain College were cognizant that they were creating a new form in American education. A corollary to the modernist dictum of "form follows function" was the awareness that "form determines function." It is primarily the form of Black Mountain College that sets it apart from other progressive era schools, and this form was largely responsible for the dynamic community that evolved over the twenty-four years of the college's existence.

Black Mountain College was an evolving, conflicted, interactive, open form, nourished by an experimental spirit. This open form fostered challenge, constant redefinition, and change. It permitted a free exchange of ideas and an unrestricted flow of creative energy. Conversation was intense and challenging. Rather than be defined by a movement or prove a rigidly delineated theory of education, from the beginning it embraced experimentation, redefinition, and new thinking.

The founders, aware of the need to reassure parents and potential donors, tempered innovation with caution. The 1933-34 catalogue issued in the spring of 1934 notes that the college was to be 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," while simultaneously assuring parents that for the first year the college would use only techniques proven in the "western world" – an exquisitely broad field of possibilities. Parents are further reassured that since "experiment is, for the individual, also experience … no experiment is being tried which is not submitted beforehand to the test of reasonable likelihood of good results." (*Black Mountain College* n. pag.)

> The willingness to undertake the task, the risk, and the high adventure of building an experimental and experimenting democracy, depends in part upon the habits of thought and action, which it is the function of education to develop. (Hook)

> When every day offers the adventure of seeking the word for the meaning rather than the meaning for the word, when action and word merge and become one, then shall we have the higher learning in America, and not before. (Rice 596)

At Rollins College, John Andrew Rice and his supporters encountered an authoritarian Board of Trustees and a rigid, vindictive president. At Black Mountain College, faculty would have total control. Governance was an interactive, tiered democracy which embodied the right to challenge authority. The college was also owned and operated by the faculty. A faculty-elected Rector with no separate authority chaired the Board of Fellows and faculty meetings and represented the college to the outside world. The Board of Fellows, comprised of faculty elected by the faculty and a student elected by the students, appointed faculty and managed the financial administration. The entire faculty was responsible for all educational matters and student conduct. The community as a whole – faculty, staff, students, and family members – discussed general matters and often debated or challenged Board and faculty decisions. An Advisory Council of prominent individuals had only the power of persuasion. The students formed a student government and were actively involved in decisions about college life as well as educational policy.

Academic independence was further guaranteed by the college's determination that it would not accept gifts that brought with them control over educational policy. There was no endowment, and the college had to annually raise funds for its own continuance.

The college sought to educate the whole person – head, heart, and hand – through intellectual studies, community life, crafts, and a work program. The student was to assume primary responsibility for his or her education. There were no required courses, and grades were recorded in the office only for transfer purposes (the student did not know what they were). Methods of teaching varied: John Andrew Rice, self-appointed Socrates, presented questions and themes for discussion and encouraged the student to examine cherished assumptions; Eric Bentley lectured, assigned papers, and gave tests; Josef Albers required a completed assignment as a ticket to class. Students entered the Junior Division for a period of general study. Advancement to the Senior Division, a period of specialization, was achieved by an examination covering all areas of the curriculum. Graduation was

achieved through examination by the faculty and an outside authority in the student's field of concentration. Academic bookkeeping, such as course hours and quality points, was eliminated as a measure of education.

From the beginning, it was determined that the arts "which often exist precariously on the fringes of the curriculum" would be an "integral part" of college life. Initially, the arts were not included for their own sake – "no efforts will be made at first to train professional artists" – but instead as means to an end:

> [The arts] when properly employed, [are] least subject to direction from without and yet have within them a severe discipline of their own; and also because of the conviction that, through some kind of art-experience, which is not necessarily the same as self-expression, the student can come to the realization of order in the world; and, by being sensitized to movement, form, sound, and the other media of the arts, gets a firmer control of himself and his environment than is possible through purely intellectual effort. This is theory, but a theory that has met the test of experience. It has already been shown to the satisfaction of those who have had a share in it that the direct result of the discipline of the arts is to give tone and quality to intellectual discipline. (*Black Mountain College* n. pag)

> Beginnings are usually more interesting than elaborations and endings. Beginning means exploration, selection, development, a potent vitality not yet limited, not circumscribed by the tried and traditional. (A. Albers 52)

Although the founding years at Black Mountain College are often overshadowed by the years when those who were to achieve prominence in the arts attended, it was during these critical pioneering years that the college evolved as a community, compelled by internal energies and ideas. It was more organic entity than institution. As the school evolved, the community incorporated characteristics of a small college, a farm school, a summer camp, an arts commune, a pioneering outpost, and, in its idealism, a religious community.[2]

Of financial necessity, faculty and their families lived alongside students in the massive Robert E. Lee Hall, a rented Southern assembly-type structure, with a large lobby flanked by dormitory-like rooms.[3] Thus, the college did not become a student ghetto on evenings and weekends. Walter

Locke, who visited in the fall of 1934, described Black Mountain, with its thirteen faculty and thirty-one students as a "family college." The large lobby with its "blazing fire," he observed, was the family living room. To the visitor, students and faculty were hardly distinguishable, both sharing in the college chores and intermingling freely (Locke n. pag.).

College life was informal and unregimented. Classes were held in the mornings, late afternoons, and evenings. Afternoons were free for recreation, the farm, and the work program. The community gathered for afternoon tea before dressing for the evening meal. After dinner, there was folk dancing with John Evarts, music teacher, at the piano and community singing. On weekends, the college provided its own entertainment. There were concerts, parties, drama performances, lectures, dances, and hikes in the mountains. Formal wear was often donned for evening festivities. A local beer joint with a good dance floor – initially Roy's Inn and later renamed Peek's Tavern – provided an escape from the closely-knit community. The massive amount of publicity attracted visitors, upon whom the college called for lectures, concerts, and community discussions. There were disciplines but no academic departments, and interdisciplinary communication was a natural outcome.

A critical corollary to the student's accepting responsibility for his education was that, although sharing sleeping space, each student had a separate study, a room where, alone, the student confronted the task of taking charge of his education. This feature was so important that when the college moved to its own property at Lake Eden, the top priority was construction of a Studies Building.

The arts were integrated into all aspects of community life. Art students created sets for drama performances; music students sang and/or played. Ted Shawn and dancers visited the first year when on tour and taught the community folk and ballroom dances. There were after-dinner community singing and Saturday night concerts. Students created elaborate decorations using available materials for parties.

Disorder was inherent in the college's open form, and Black Mountain was never an easy place to be. In contrast to the utopian vision of a democratic community in which faculty and students were united in work and study presented in college publicity, personality conflicts and disagreements over ideals and the practicalities of daily life were unceasing.

The Board of Fellows, faculty, and community meetings were often subject to heated debates. Periodically, conflicts would culminate in a schism, with the surviving community left to heal wounds and mend remnants. The possibility that a faction could take over and ouster the establishment engendered a constant fear of intrigue. Every year, new members of the community arrived with a barrage of suggestions for improvement.

The relationship between faculty and students epitomized Mark Hopkins's metaphor of the student on one end of the log and the teacher on the other. In the first catalogue, "constant intimate contact" was described as essential to the dissolution of the usual hierarchical relationship between faculty and students (*Black Mountain College* n. pag.). A corollary to this intimacy was vulnerability. Pretense was not a cover for incompetence. Frailties were unveiled. There was little privacy, and personal lives were exposed. Although this close relationship is often misconstrued to mean that students and faculty were the same or equal, it was instead the nature of engagement that was unconventional.

Compartmentalization, departmentalization, and curricular and extracurricular activities did not exist at Black Mountain. Learning took place in mealtime conversations, on construction projects, on the farm, and in informal gatherings. The college did not over-program to assure a predetermined result or protect against the unpredictable. The spontaneous, unplanned event was possible.

Absent an authoritarian regime to ensure adherence to an established form, Black Mountain College changed year-by-year – some say week-by-week. Students of the 1930s hardly recognized the college of the 1950s and vice versa. Authority was vested in personalities, and the most vital personalities often determined the tenor of the community. For example, although it is often assumed that Josef Albers was rector of the college, in fact, it was only for one semester that he was willing to reluctantly accept the position. Charles Olson, a commanding personality who returned to teach in 1951, did not accept the rectorship until the fall of 1953.

The 1930s were characterized by a pioneering spirit, a can-do ethic, and a sense of creating something new and significant. This spirit found its ultimate challenge in the spring of 1940, when, faced with eviction from the rented campus in June 1941, faculty and students constructed a large

Studies Building as well as other structures at the Lake Eden property, which it had purchased in 1937 as protection against such an ouster. The new campus was more dispersed than Lee Hall, with both pre-existing rustic wooden buildings and modern structures constructed by the college.

Conflict, struggle for survival, and innovation characterized the college during the Second World War. Most American men were drafted or left to join the war effort, and the college was peopled largely by European refugees, older Americans, and female students. Critic Eric Bentley challenged the progressive ideals of the college and proposed a more efficient, intellectual Black Mountain. He and others forced the issue of integration, and in the summer of 1944, the college admitted its first African-American student. Of greatest consequence, that same summer the college sponsored the first of the summer sessions in the arts.

At war's end, older, more mature GIs enrolled, and new faculty were hired. M.C. Richards and her husband Albert William Levi, in literature and social sciences, respectively, and John Wallen, in psychology, challenged the existing order. With approximately eighty students, the community began to break into cliques, and the faculty questioned whether it was becoming too large. It was during this period that students who were to achieve prominence in the arts first enrolled.

By 1950 in the United States, the risk-taking, ideological community of the Great Depression had been replaced by a materialistic, conformist society. McCarthyism created an atmosphere of fear. Increasingly, the college was a small Bohemian arts community with a constantly diminishing population. The idealism of the founding years had been replaced by a "beat" attitude, a sense of alienation from conventional society. In the fall of 1953, the entire community moved into a few faculty cottages, abandoning the lower campus as well as the few remaining vestiges of progressive education. Still, even in the final years, innovation characterized the college. The influential *Black Mountain Review*, edited by Robert Creeley, was first issued in the spring of 1954. Poet Robert Duncan and drama teacher Wesley Huss collaborated in the last year on the writing and performance of Duncan's *Medea. Part One: The Maiden Head.*[4]

In the fall of 1956, Charles Olson and Wesley Huss, the only two faculty members in residence, decided to close the Lake Eden campus.[5] Undeterred

by financial difficulties and lawsuits, Olson imagined a new life for the college as a "dispersed" university with an international curriculum. In San Francisco, Duncan and Huss continued their drama curriculum, and Olson delivered his "Special View of History" lectures there in March 1957. The actual end of the college occurred in the spring of 1957 when courts ordered all academic programs to cease until debts were paid.

The Law of Unintended Consequences

> Responsibility is to keep
> the ability to respond.
> Duncan, "The Law I Love"

> All real art is or was modern in its time, daring and new,
> demonstrating a constant change in seeing and feeling.
> If revival had been a perpetual virtue,
> we would still live in caves and earth pits.
> In art, tradition is to create,
> not to revive.
> Josef Albers, "Present or/and Past?"

Projects were abandoned or changes rejected any number of times, and the consequences of these unrealized possibilities will never be known. On other occasions, choices – which in a more authoritarian environment would have been controlled – inevitably and irrevocably altered the direction of the college, demonstrating Weiner's "law of unintended consequences." Primary among these are the arrival of Josef and Anni Albers only two months after the college opened, the special summer sessions in the arts, the visit by John Cage and Merce Cunningham in April 1948, and the hiring of Charles Olson in 1948-49 to conduct monthly seminars.

In the summer of 1933, the founders invited Josef Albers, former Bauhaus teacher of the preliminary course, to join the faculty. They anticipated an innovative art teacher. Albers was also an abstract artist as well as an assertive personality, and, once he learned English, an influential exponent and articulator of the college's ideals. From his arrival, the college was associated with the most forward movements in the visual arts. To

the American spirit of progressivism, he brought the spirit of European modernism, which for Albers meant embracing the spirit and possibilities of the present time while respecting the past. Although he was rector only for a few months in the fall of 1948, he was a compelling presence in the community. Through his teaching and that of Anni Albers, weaver and textile designer, the college was a center for the transmission of Bauhaus teaching and ideals in the United States.

The first of the special summer sessions in the arts which were to alter the history and influence of the college were sponsored in 1944. The Music Institute was a celebration of Arnold Schoenberg's seventieth birthday. The Art Institute had among its faculty photographer Barbara Morgan, muralist Jean Charlot, and painter Amédée Ozenfant. This was a daring venture during wartime with gasoline rationing and other restrictions. Conductor Heinrich Jalowetz, organizer with Fritz Cohen of the Music Institute, noted the plan was "audacious … [but] one learns especially here to maintain that nothing is impossible" (Jalowetz). For the most part, the guest faculty, many of whom later achieved prominence in the arts, were unrecognized, often impoverished, and thankful to have respite from the heat of the cities where air conditioning was uncommon.[6] One consequence of the summers was that students interested in the arts increasingly registered for the regular sessions, and for the first time the dominance of the arts in the curriculum was challenged by a group of faculty and students.

The seemingly inauspicious visit of John Cage and Merce Cunningham in April 1948 on a two-person tour had lasting consequences. Cunningham danced, and Cage gave the first complete performance of his *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946-48). They were invited to return for the 1948 summer to teach alongside Willem de Kooning and Buckminster Fuller as well as Richard Lippold and Peter Grippe. With their arrival, the arts curriculum, which previously had been dominated by the Germanic tradition, was inextricably linked to the community of young Americans who were to redefine American art in the second half of the Twentieth Century.

Although Cage did not return to the college until the summer of 1952, and Cunningham only for a one-week seminar, they were a generative

presence in the community. Cage recommended composers Lou Harrison and Stefan Wolpe to teach music in the 1950s; Cunningham recommended choreographer and dancer Katherine Litz. In 1952, Cage staged what has come to be known as the first "happening," and, inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's all-white paintings, on his return to New York composed his silent piece *4' 33"*. In the summer of 1953, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company took form at the college.

In New York, Cage and Cunningham were at the center of a community of artists, musicians and dancers for whom Black Mountain College was both a touchstone and a shared identity. Some met at the college; others, at chance encounters at parties and other events. Included in this group were M.C. Richards, David Tudor, Remy Charlip, Nick Cernovich, Ray Johnson, Richard Lippold, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Susan Weil, and others. In 1954, Cage, Richards and Tudor along with Black Mountain students Paul and Vera Williams and ceramists Karen Karnes and David Weinrib joined to form The Land – a Black Mountain for adults – north of New York City.

Charles Olson first commuted from Washington, DC one weekend a month for the 1948-49 school year to teach in the place of M.C. Richards, who was on sabbatical. He remained for the 1949 summer session. In the summer of 1951, he returned from the Yucatan and remained on the faculty – with several absences – until the closing. For the first time, the college was dominated by a single personality. In his own words, it was "Olson's University."[7] Through his presence, the dominant medium of the arts shifted from the visual arts to writing and literature. The *Black Mountain Review* was to become one of the most influential publications of the twentieth century.

Diversity

Josef and Anni Albers were only the first of a number of refugee intellectuals and artists to whom the college opened its doors. With their arrival, the fledgling, provincial school isolated in the mountains of North Carolina was transformed into an international community.

The Europeans, who represented diverse political points of view, had in common only that they had been forced out of Europe by the Nazi regime. Contrary to many schools that refused to take refugees because of Jewish quotas or concerns they might bring an obstreperous personality into their midst, Black Mountain was willing to take a chance. As a consequence, the faculty boasted leading scholars and artists whose presence complemented that of the mostly younger Americans. Xanti Schawinsky (BMC 1936-38), also from the Bauhaus, taught art and theater. His class produced two performances: an experimental *Spectodrama: Play, Life, Illusion* (1937) and a *Danse Macabre* (1938). Among the many eminent refugee faculty were Heinrich Jalowetz (BMC 1939-January 1946), a pupil of Schoenberg and director of the Cologne Opera before he was dismissed in 1933; Max Wilhelm Dehn (BMC 1945 winter-June1952), eminent Frankfurt geometer, who adapted to the community by teaching Mathematics for Artists (with limited success); and composer Stefan Wolpe (BMC 1952-56), who had few students but composed major works while at the college.

Although in the founding years students came primarily from privileged families in the Northeast, increasingly the college attracted students from diverse parts of the country. During the war, Walter Gropius at Harvard sent Asian students, who would not have been welcome elsewhere, to perform their architecture practicum. Ruth Asawa, a Japanese-American, enrolled after she was not able to perform her requisite teaching practicum in Milwaukee because of hostility toward the Japanese. African-American students and faculty joined the community beginning in 1944.

Numerous articles about the college drew the curious and the committed as visitors. Contrary to academic convention, visitors and invited guests were not housed in a hotel, entertained by a couple of faculty members after a performance or lecture, and then sent on their way. Instead, they dined with the community, were housed in Lee Hall (or later in cottages at Lake Eden), and were drawn into discussions. Students did not hesitate to take John Dewey to the local beer joint or to invite Albert Einstein for a hike. Among the esteemed visitors were Anaïs Nin, Henry Miller, Fernand Léger, Aldous Huxley, Albert C. Barnes, and Zora Neale Hurston.

Discernment

To "see" is to re-form all speech.
Robert Duncan, "Notes"

"What do you think you're going to do here, Mr. Albers?" Albers said "Make open the eyes."
Dreier[8]

Of the three characteristics of a Golden Age, the role of discernment, the ability to understand that which is not obvious or clear, is perhaps the most important yet the most difficult to describe. Key elements of discernment are judgment and perception, both central to teaching and learning at the college.

Black Mountain College sought to prepare students for responsible life in a democratic society. It was anticipated that through community experience students would develop emotional maturity and the ability to make intelligent, discerning judgments. The overriding "rule" was "be intelligent." There were guidelines, and there was advice from the faculty, yet, ultimately each student was responsible for his decisions. Students had to navigate their way through complex issues, conflicting personalities, and life experiences. There were no formulae and no absolutes.

The two central themes of Josef Albers's classes were perception – "a constant and accurate 'seeing and perceiving'"[9] – and relativity of visual experience. For Albers, visual phenomena had parallels in life. Just as colors interact and change in juxtaposition, so too do personalities in different situations and in relationship to different individuals. In design classes, students created *matière* studies in which they observed that materials in relationship to others assume new characteristics. Class notes are peppered with homilies:

> In color there is rarely right and wrong – also life is also the same way.
>
> If you can master the color you hate – you change to sympathy. Also in real life.
>
> Design is planning. … Design means conscious choice.

> Who has lied once, no one will believe him.
> Who has lied twice, people believe him.
> Who lies three times, he believes himself.
> Old German proverb. One lie said a 1000 times becomes Truth. I.e., Europe. These lies do that. By repeating an element, you give multiplied attention.
>
> Habit is in the way of creative production.
>
> Matière. Peel your eye so you become sensitive to form.
>
> Design means conscious choice... Design means highest developed feeling intellect economy!! (Peterson)

A corollary to "seeing" is the act of "recognition." Students at Black Mountain used whatever was at hand for their studies, including junk from the local dump, leaves, pebbles, and other materials. Anni Albers and student Alex Reed created hardware jewelry using sink strainers, hair pins, and other materials. The perception of students was altered to recognize possibilities for art in unconventional materials. When Rauschenberg passed the window of a shop on Seventh Avenue in New York and noticed the angora goat used in *Monogram*, it was an act of recognition, informed by a perceptive, educated eye.[10] Student Ruth Asawa, after observing utilitarian wire baskets in a market in Mexico, recognized in this common material the potential for elegant wire sculptures.

Poverty

Contrary to Weiner's observation that wealth is a prerequisite for a Golden Age, Black Mountain struggled every year for financial survival. Among the faculty, limited financial means were often a source of tension. For the community as a whole, however, limited means were a stimulus for innovation. At the request of the students, workshops evolved to meet community needs. A farm was started the first year. The press printed college forms and theater and concert programs; the darkroom, photographs for publicity. A local carpenter helped students build

furniture for their studies. Anni Albers developed a weaving program, the only one of the workshops in the thirties to have a professional curriculum. Local flora and trips to the town dump provided ingredients for Albers's *matière* studies. Imaginative solutions to problems were honored.

Serendipity, Timing, and the Magnetism of Creative Community

Weiner observes that the "pool of talent" in a Golden Age is no greater than at other times but that certain conditions foster the flourishing of that talent. He further observes that such cultures become "talent magnets." (Weiner 29).

Black Mountain College's reputation as a liberal arts college with a strong arts curriculum where students could study in a vibrant, democratic, unstructured atmosphere was spread through publicity and through word-of-mouth. Increasingly, students interested in professions in the arts enrolled. In the postwar years, GIs were not dependent on parental support or approval. Frequently, summer session students remained for the academic year. Asheville was Kenneth Noland's home, and he, as well as his brothers Harry and Neil, enrolled. Robert Rauschenberg met Susan Weil in Paris in the summer of 1948. Already, she had been accepted as a student for the fall semester. He applied and entered late in the semester. When he returned in 1951, he brought Cy Twombly from the Art Students League. Ray Johnson learned about the college from Elaine Schmitt (Urbain) at the Ox-Bow School of Art. Ruth Asawa, a student at Milwaukee State Teacher's College, also heard about the college through Schmitt and her sister. Dancer Viola Farber read an advertisement in a magazine. Kenneth Snelson saw a book on the Bauhaus in the library. Often, a high school teacher recommended a student who would not have thrived in a conventional school. The students were a self-selecting group willing to take a chance on an unaccredited experimental school. For the few students who enrolled, many more chose other options.

Physical Exercise

Weiner notes that the Greeks were walkers and that it has been shown that physical exercise stimulates intellectual activity. The work program at the college was an important corollary to intellectual and artist pursuits. Initially, at Lee Hall work was primarily on the farm and simple housekeeping chores. With the move to Lake Eden, there were major construction projects as well as general maintenance of the property and housekeeping chores, such as dishwashing and scrubbing. When a train with the coal car arrived in the village, the coal had to be shoveled into the college truck and transported to the furnaces.

The Illusion of Self-Support

Black Mountain College allowed itself one illusion: that it could survive financially on a year-by-year basis without an endowment or other reliable yearly source of income. Theodore Dreier, a founder, was from a prominent New York family. His mother Ethel Eyre Dreier was president of the Women's City Club of New York, and her endorsement of the college opened doors for donors who otherwise would not have considered it. Dreier, who taught mathematics, worked indefatigably to raise funds year-by-year. After the war, the GI Bill provided a modest, but steady, source of income. By 1948, however, that source was ending. Those who had helped the college in the 1930s were not willing to support it indefinitely. After Dreier left in 1949, the college was almost solely dependent on loans backed by mortgages on the land, and it was those debts, along with unpaid salaries which were listed as a debt against the college, that led to the college's end.

The Golden Seed

The commonalities of societies which have nourished Golden Ages shed light on the emergence of Black Mountain College as an interactive and

vital creative community. The college did not represent itself as a Golden Age. Instead, it was a garden where "golden seeds," as M.C. Richards put it (170) were nourished and allowed to sprout. While it was self-consciously experimental, it did not anticipate its ultimate influence on the arts and on education. Those who taught and studied there and who later were to achieve prominence in many professions were at the time unrecognized. As with societies where Golden Ages flourished, the conditions which fostered the creative life of the college are complex. The college existed in a specific moment in world history, and its experience cannot be transported or repeated. At the same time, its ideals and structure can serve as an example for others seeking to create relevant, vital communities of learning.

Notes

[1] As quoted in Weiner 61-62.

[2] A similar description of the college appeared in an article. Unfortunately, I have lost that reference and most humbly acknowledge my source.

[3] Families with small children lived in nearby cottages.

[4] The play was published as *Medea at Kolchis; the maiden head.*

[5] Joseph Fiore, art teacher, had taken a leave-of-absence.

[6] Summer faculty were guest faculty and were not members of the corporation.

[7] Charles Olson to Robert Creeley, May 22 [1952], *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence,* 92.

[8] As quoted by Barbara Loines Dreier in interview by Mary Emma Harris, June 21, 2000, Black Mountain College Project.

[9] Josef Albers, "if there is one truism of education today…," *Black Mountain College Papers*, Western Regional Archive, Archives of the State of North Carolina, Asheville. Henceforth, WRA.

[10] The description of "found objects" suggests that a person is looking for a specific thing. More important is a heightened awareness that enables the act of "recognition" when confronted with the unanticipated. Weiner posits that randomness is far more important for the artist than choice (196-197).

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