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"To Open Eyes": Community Literacies, Radical Democracy, and a Pedagogy Presence at Black Mountain College, 1933–1957

Angela Muir

Abstract

This article examines the transformative educational practices and democratic ethos of Black Mountain College, an experimental institution ahead of its time. Drawing on insights from scholars like Rhea Estelle Lathan and Susan Kates, Muir positions Black Mountain as a site of community literacies, by prioritizing democratic engagement, diversity, and experiential learning. The article explores how Black Mountain, amidst the socio-political tumult of the mid-20th century, fostered a dynamic environment centered on art, community, and individualized learning. By unpacking Black Mountain's foundational values and meticulous analysis of archival materials and educational theories, Muir highlights the pedagogical innovations of figures like Josef Albers, whose "Pedagogy of Presence" emphasized perception, process, and abstraction, nurturing not only artistic expression but also critical citizenship. Muir invites readers to reconsider the role of education in fostering democracy, inclusivity, and social change.

Keywords: community literacies, service, collaboration, democracy, citizenship, contemplative, pedagogy, social change, Black Mountain College

> *I concede that several contemporary literacy scholars have begun broadening the domain in which literacy is situated. These studies suggest there is a great deal of complex literacy activity occurring outside standard academic contexts, as well as what constitutes "community literacy" within local communities. However, standard frameworks traditionally follow a "master framework," marginalizing or ignoring "other" ways of knowing.*
>
> —Rhea Estelle Lathan, "Testimony as a Sponsor of Literacy"

> *If we must accept education as life and as preparation for life, we must relate all school work, including work in art, as closely as possible to modern problems.*
>
> —Josef Albers, "Teaching Form Through Practice"

Consider the possibility that in 1933, there was an academic institution centered around art, community building, individually tailored curriculums, and democracy. Now imagine that this place was also a refuge for immigrants and was racially integrated in 1944, a decade before Brown v. Board of Education. Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts college in the Black Mountain foothills of North Carolina, was such a place.

I begin this article with epigraphs from Rhea Estelle Lathan and Josef Albers because at the intersection of what they say is the goal of this essay: to make a case for Black Mountain College as a community literacy site by the model of its principles and emergent pedagogy. Within the field of composition and rhetoric, many scholars are working to expand the definition of literacy and provide examples of useful frames for consideration and study. Among them, Lathan, as well as Susan Kates, Stephen Schneider, and Candace Epps-Robertson, explore the literacy schools of the Civil Rights Movement to exemplify the connection between literacy and activism. Epps-Robertson establishes that critical pedagogies can challenge power dynamics by giving students access to skills that will prepare them for life. She concludes, "[p]edagogical and curricula recovery work is important because of its ability to help us recover voices, sites, and movements that have traditionally been marginalized or shadowed by dominant histories"(91). Jessica Pauszek forwards this sentiment and, through her exploration of Pecket Well College, adds the angle of working-class literacy and the principles of "collective organizing, peer learning, and a belief in equal participation" (657). These examples lead us to consider the role of education in democracy: the development of community members and active citizens empowered to make decisions and solve problems.

While the Prince Edward County Free School, Highlander Folk School, Sea Island Citizenship School, and Pecket Well College have been presented in scholarship as community literacy sites, I believe Black Mountain College is another example worth exploring. Though not technically centered around reading and writing literacy, Black Mountain aimed to create core organizational literacies that placed democracy at the center and resituated hierarchies to centralize learning over power. Not only did it obtain diversity standards unheard of for its time, but it also practiced an open curriculum long before the conversation gained traction. Black Mountain shows us that service and collaboration within academia's walls are crucial to building a productive democratic community. Finally, and most importantly, it provides an example of a contemplative pedagogy, which "place[s] the student in the center of his or her learning so that the student can connect his or her inner world to the outer world" (Barbezat and Bush, 6), that supported the development of craft and community citizenship.

The pedagogical literacies offered at Black Mountain were designed for holistic education. Albers, an art educator and pedagogical theorist, worked at Black Mountain to establish what I call a *Pedagogy of Presence*, which attempted to solve "modern problems" by studying perception, process, and abstraction. The crux of this pedagogy demands a presence from both student and instructor, an early example of contemplative practice in higher education. The result of this approach to learning was

not only to "open eyes," as Albers says, but also a mastery of form and a product that responded to "modern problems," which resulted in antiracist literacies and activism in action.

Black Mountain endured throughout a period wrought with national and international tension. After its closure in 1957, the United States underwent a dynamic time of change, and perhaps we can see our current predicament in similar terms. This essay places Black Mountain as a model site for community literacy because it provides literacies central to creating community in higher education. I overview the organizational literacies through the school's origins and structural values, describe the service and collaboration literacies, and highlight a specific pedagogical literacy that emerged from the democratic framework. Finally, I reflect on how these explored values and pedagogy resulted in antiracist literacies and activism, which should be relevant to composition and rhetoric scholars, as well as education theorists and social historians, as a site for further exploration.

Organizational Literacies: "Radical Democracy in Action"

Since the turn toward democracy in rhetoric and composition studies, scholars such as Rachel Reidner, Kevin Mahoney, and Susan Wells have pointed us to Freire, Gramsci, and Derrida to suggest that "*Democracies to Come* emerge between the fields of cultural studies and rhetoric and composition" (9). Black Mountain is a perfect example of this, where historical context, values, and pedagogy intersect to produce a model where we see "learning as a practice of and for freedom" (9) that "creates ways of knowing that suggest political possibilities" (3). Radical democracy at Black Mountain was enacted first in the framework and guiding principles.

In 1933, the United States was amidst the worst year of the Great Depression, the Third Reich had come into power in Germany, and John Andrew Rice founded Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Rice had been recently dismissed from Rollins College for refusing to sign a loyalty pledge that he felt was not in the best interest of his students. Rice had a relatively progressive and controversial view of academic measures; he considered "regulations the last refuge of mediocrity," he disdained "numerologists in education," and thought that learning should happen "in one's own way and according to one's own timetable" (Duberman 5). His aim at educating students had more to do with forming their emotional intelligence and problem-solving skills than mastering subject knowledge. After months of toying with the nagging sentiment that he should put his theories into action, he finally approached his encouraging colleagues with the idea of opening Black Mountain. After months of work, the lease was signed on August 24, 1933, and Black Mountain College was officially founded.

From the perspectives of fellow academic administrations and the surrounding community, Black Mountain's enrollment and hiring policies were considered controversial. It sought to enroll and hire both men and women and offered refuge to Jewish immigrants fleeing Nazi Germany, becoming a haven for cultural differences. Black Mountain admitted the first Black student in 1944 and employed many Black instruc-

tors as early as 1945. For the Jim Crow South, these were landmark events that did not come without pushback, such as threats of violence and protest. Nevertheless, the founding ideologies and actions set the precedent that the board, which was made up of both students and instructors, was to follow democratic practices in decision-making and social responsibility.

Black Mountain's interdisciplinary approach enabled students to direct their own learning. Without a core set of requirements, referred to as an open curriculum, students were made active in their education. It was a democratic system where students were empowered to direct their learning. Will Hamlin, a Black Mountain student, said of this methodology, "Academically, I don't think we suffered from having the freedom to study whatever we wanted to study… There was a sense of involvement in Black Mountain classes. You were there because this was something you were interested in" (Duberman 100). Freedom of choice sets up a model that mirrors life, requiring discernment and confidence. In addition, it establishes a system of trust between the student and the institution and encourages collaboration to reach learning goals. In short, asking students to explore their interests and priorities, exercise good decision-making skills, and take ownership of experiences and community participation prepares them for citizenship outside academic walls.

Black Mountain aimed to dismantle hierarchies and encourage democracy in every aspect of its structure. Students and instructors held equal positions on the board, worked side by side on building and farming, sat together in the cafeteria, and cooperated on creative projects. This effectively endorsed a sense of freedom and a blending of the public/private and personal/political. This was, at times, chaotic and not always harmonious. Still, it positions the college as "a living example of radical democracy in action, an experiment in the practice of community that requires neither consensus nor harmony" (Molesworth 49).

Furthermore, the policies and values for the students were the same policies and values for the teachers. Many instructors took classes in other disciplines while they taught at the college. Notable examples are English literature lecturer M.C. Richards, who studied pottery at Black Mountain with Karen Karnes and David Weinrib, and writer Charles Olson who studied dance with Merce Cunningham. Instructors taking courses alongside students established a mutual respect for both study and instruction while encouraging collaboration.

Collaboration & Service Literacies: Happenings

Black Mountain's central organizational aim was to provide a "holistic" model, educating the "whole person" by encouraging service and collaboration. At Black Mountain, holistic education blended curriculum and extracurriculars. By keeping the students engaged outside of the classroom in duties around the community, the students were not only gaining skills but were also learning to see their impact on the larger group. In Susan Kates's article "Literacy, Voting Rights, and the Citizenship Schools in the South, 1957–1970," she posits that "service learning" and "service-ori-

ented endeavors" call for "reciprocity and community empowerment," which is essential in education (499). Similarly, John Dewey writes,

> unless [the] end is placed in the context of service rendered to others, skills gained will be put to an egoistic and selfish use and may be employed as means of a trained shrewdness in which one person gets the better of others. Too often, indeed, the schools, through reliance upon the spur of competition and bestowing special honors and prizes, only build up and strengthen the disposition that makes an individual, when he leaves school, employ his special talents and superior skill to outwit his fellows without respect for the welfare of others (11).

At Black Mountain, students worked with faculty to build the structures that became classrooms and housing. They planted and harvested the food they would eventually use in the kitchen. They shared the responsibility of cooking and serving meals or cleaning the mess hall alongside the faculty. Everyone was involved in the running of the community, centralizing a service mindset.

Drawing from the insights of Kates and Dewey, service to others, in the context of art, shifts away from the traditional definition of art as "self-expression," and instead, expression becomes a byproduct of the experience. A famous example of this is the "happenings" at Black Mountain, a free-to-all performance in service of the community.

The "happenings" embodied the essence of Black Mountain: art centrality, an interdisciplinary experience, free community entertainment, and a non-hierarchical cast of talent. Teachers and students would perform alongside one another without distinction. The "happenings" were based on the doctrine that "art is completed by the observer" (Duberman 370) and developed in a conversation between composer John Cage and pianist David Tudor. Cage would outline the "happening" into time brackets and then invite various artists to fill the time, all acting "by means of chance operations" (Duberman 370). For example, one famous performance included readings by Charles Olson and M.C. Richards, paintings by Robert Rauschenberg, piano compositions by Cage and Tudor, and a dance number by Merce Cunningham. Cage's aim was "purposeless purposefulness." Performances were not recorded, and recollections of these experiences varied wildly. Each artist and audience member would recall different details, demonstrating diverse perceptions and focus. Not recording was also an act of resistance to history, a way to disentangle power and hierarchy.

With art education at the core, Black Mountain modeled how creativity could be experienced, not as isolated instances, but as central to all life. The 1933 Black Mountain Catalogue speaks to the central role creativity can play in life through the following statement:

> Dramatics, Music, and the Fine Arts, which often exist precariously on the fringes of the curriculum, are regarded as an integral part of the life of the College...through some kind of art experience... 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.

All students, whether they considered themselves artists or economists, would actively experience the arts. This points to a measure of student potential not as an endpoint but as an integrated process or method. It also foregrounded a pedagogical framework that championed new ways of seeing and being in the world.

Pedagogical Literacies: Pedagogy of Presence

Composition studies have engaged contemplative pedagogies since before they were labeled as such in the forms of freewriting and introspection. Scholars such as Robert Yagelski and Paula Mathieu have helped shape how we see these pedagogies function inside the classroom. When integrating contemplative practices, Mathieu explains that by "developing compassion and exploring empathy," we shift to awareness. She goes on to illuminate that this is a move away from "thinking" and toward *presence*. She says of mindful practices, "thinking and the intellect are the very problem they seek to counter. They are fundamentally about what could be called *awareness*. About being fully present—as a writer or a teacher—in the current moment, and not preoccupied with thoughts of the past or future" ("Being There," 15).

With this consideration as my guide, I see a contemplative pedagogy that emerged from within Black Mountain College's core values. I have termed it the *Pedagogy of Presence* because it requires teachers and students to rely on a fully immersive learning experience or *awareness*. Perception, process, and abstraction are the three pillars of this pedagogy, and one can see how these three elements function by examining the methods used at Black Mountain College. These organizational values of Black Mountain set the stage for the *Pedagogy of Presence* to materialize. This pedagogy can be best outlined through the methods used by Josef Albers. Though Albers worked with fine art rather than writing, his practices could easily be applied to composition studies or almost any other discipline. For this reason, I believe it demands our close attention. Albers's pedagogy was a method of instructing art while educating the whole person through offering an experiential course for learning to see (perception), working with a medium (process), and creating a product (abstraction).

Josef Albers, an already distinguished art teacher at the Bauhaus in Germany, was asked by John Rice to teach at Black Mountain via telegram in 1933. Albers had recently lost his position at the Bauhaus as it had closed to avoid accepting Nazi instructors. Albers and his wife Anni were consequently looking for a reason to leave Germany to avoid conflict over Anni's Jewish heritage. Josef spoke little English, but when he arrived in North Carolina fresh from Berlin, he told newspapers, "I want to open eyes." This simple statement was the core trait of his approach to instruction. He believed that "academic studies under academic teachers, and academic methods, and for academic measurements will produce school stars which will wane after school. Any work done for the sake of the teacher, or the sake of the school is not enduring, because life is everything but academic" (Albers, *Abstract Art*). For Albers, a community setting such as Black Mountain was an ideal place to enact his philosophy.

Albers held that self-expression should not be taught as central to the arts; instead, an understanding of direct observation and self-discovery were vital. Art is not simply a result of imitation or reproduction but a communication of feeling. This enactment would find the best results in training the eyes and the hands. He says, "art is a province in which one finds all the problems of life reflected—not only the problems of form (e.g., proportion and balance) but also spiritual problems (e.g. of philosophy, of religion, of sociology, of economy)" (*Concerning Art Instruction*). This makes art a rich medium for general education and development and a pillar for community literacy.

Josef Albers's "open eyes" pedagogy was made clear in the 1934 Black Mountain Bulletin, "Concerning Art Instruction." Albers writes, "our art instruction attempts first to teach the student to see in the widest sense: to open his eyes to the phenomena about him and, most important of all, to open to his own living, being and doing." Therefore, experimenting with the "branches of art" and confronting fundamental problems gives students a window into their unique abilities as artists and as a reflection of their connections and problem-solving abilities. Albers broke down the disciplines in his instruction into three main categories: Drawing, Color-Painting, and Basic Design (*Werklehre*). Drawing for Josef Albers was regarded as "graphic language." He says,

> Just as in studying language it is most important to teach first the commonly understood usage of speech, in drawing we begin with exact observation and pure representation. We cannot communicate graphically what we do not see. That which we see incorrectly we will report incorrectly. We recognize that although our optical vision is correct, our overemphasis on the psychic vision often makes us see incorrectly (Albers, "Concerning Art Instruction").

In other words, before an artist can represent a "self-expression," they must understand proper unbiased sight. Therefore, the students were taught to "test" their seeing. This included a systematic study of foreshortening, overlapping, and articulation of "nearness and distance."

Albers famously tested his student's perception with the study of color. In his 1963 manual, *Interactions of Color*, Albers writes, "With the discovery that color is the most relative medium in art, and that its greatest excitement lies beyond rules and canons, a more sensitive discrimination is needed." Albers thought one should become fundamentally aware of one's way of seeing due to its relativity. This can only happen through involvement. Albers used color demonstrations to highlight the subjective dimension of color. For example, in demonstrating the reactions of a specific red shade, Albers comments, "all group members will have the same visual perception. But still the individual associations and emotional reactions will differ vastly" (Diaz 24). A demonstration such as this allows the student to track their relationship with the color beside others in the group, bringing awareness to not only the variability in opinion but also an experience in mindfulness and empathy.

Experimentation with color was just the beginning for Albers. Once the students are trained to see, they are asked to explore their process. Investigation into shape,

geometry, landscape, and material followed. Each aspect is examined from this multi-tiered lens, teaching his students to have a keen awareness of their perceptions, observing them more actively through the experience and, therefore, through their art. For example, the manual act of drawing was instructed with the most basic and technical aspects in the foreground: measuring, dividing, estimating, and so on. He says, "the hand must be sensitized to the direction of will" (Albers, *Concerning Art Instruction*). The awareness of the mind to manually act, or thought to will, progresses this deep study of perception into a profound look at one's process. By excluding "expressive drawing" at the beginning of the student's studies, one can produce a distance between the object, the art, and the audience.

Albers believed that a deep understanding of the medium would lead to more apparent intentions with the student's painting process. It would also result in proper execution. For example, with paint, Albers says, "to prepare for a disciplined use of color to prevent accident, brush, or paint-box from taking authorship" (Albers, "Concerning Art Instruction"). Albers's aim was not to decentralize the artist but rather to make them experts in process and medium so that their own "authorship" would not falter at the hand of their materials. Experience with the materials becomes knowledge to make decisions and act, just as in life.

Albers blends perception with process in his explorations of the material composition of form. *Material* studies were more concerned with the technical nature and capacities of the materials. Students would test the materials by folding, bending, compressing, and stretching the medium. This resulted in a dynamic exploration of the relationships and use of objects. Through the construction process, students could then understand the economic qualities of form, such as space, volume, and dimension. This led to an active sense of balance, proportion, and composition.

Albers's focus on abstraction was rooted in *Matière* studies, which sought to explore the optical and tactile nature of things, their texture, structure, and contrasts. Students would be asked to combine found materials, remove them from their everyday context, and obscure their identities by using them in a new way. They could use a single or several different materials to create a new abstracted work. In essence, by using materials out of their standard frameworks and placing them in relationship to one another, Albers's students began to see the world around them more acutely. For example, one student, Ray Johnson, used caterpillar nests and metallic paper to create tent-like structures. When one sees a caterpillar nest in a tree, it is apparent what it is, but when paired with the reflective paper, both materials become unrecognizable.

The students would engage a hyper sense of awareness to question their perceptions, work with the materials through their process, and create a product that was an abstraction of the original through the unique lens of the student. Often, the product was activist in nature, and the artists used their art as an interaction and commentary on the world around them.

Antiracist Literacies: Activism in Action

Albers' color experiments included looking at color relationships, a skill that permeates the realm of antiracist literacy and art activism. Rather than teaching complimentary or contrasting color theories, as many art schools do, Albers would demonstrate how one's relationship with color changes depending on what other colors surround it. For example, if the particular red hue from the example above were to be placed next to lilac or brown, how would one's interaction with the color change? Does it appear to be the same hue of red, or has it somehow altered? In Eva Diaz's book *The Experimenters*, she says of Albers' instruction,

> "visual memory is amazingly poor" as compared with, say, auditory memory, and suggests that "color is deceiving us all of the time"; these influences on vision have the effect of converting "the optical (physio-physiological) susception ["stimuli'] into a psychological effect (perception)."

Because optical impressions are highly influential, the artist must be trained in perception. Training includes experience with the interaction of color and the evaluation of the resulting data from these interactions.

Albers further taught the mutability of color by exploring gradient, reverse ground, after image, color mixture, transparency, warm and cool, and many other interfaces. In each demonstration, he emphasized the shift in the reception of color based on the situation. He thought careful analysis of optical discrepancies versus their material realities could activate the student's ability to render this awareness with other habitual patterns of meaning. The artist could then become more consciously aware of their "seeing" and gain greater intuition and drive for discovery. Through experience, the student is taught that in visual perception, "there is a discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect" (Albers 2).

Beyond the obvious application of Albers' color theory to art, Tomashi Jackson found in her studies at Yale University that his language use was strikingly similar to the use of the language of segregation in civil rights and education policy. Jackson read Albers' *Interaction of Color* alongside *Brown v. Board of Education: A Documentary History* by Mark Whitman. What she found was a stunning similarity in rhetoric. She says in an interview with *Hyperallergic*,

> The language around *de jure* segregation is similar to Albers's description of the wrong way to perceive color, as if color is static. Marshall and Albers concluded that color is relative, and what a viewer perceives a color to be is determined by the color nearest to it. Color is always changing, and, contrary to popular belief, it is not absolute. I saw the phenomenon of vibrating boundaries aligned with residential redistricting and redlining.

Jackson's insights might help us to recognize Albers' methods as "radical democracy." The implementation of her findings further these sentiments. Jackson moved to create a series of abstract paintings as metaphors for the categories of race, an exploration of process that could be equated to activism.

Albers' influence on activism endures far beyond this example. Several of his students, including Robert Rauschenberg and Ruth Asawa, went on to create organizations for arts activism. Rauschenberg famously wrote, "Art has no borders. Specialization leads to cultural sterilization. An Artist is a diplomat, a prophet, a historian, a poet, and a calendar of nourishment or morality and energy." Rauschenberg said of Albers, "[h]e didn't teach you how to *do art*. The focus was always on your personal sense of looking" (*Rauschenberg Papers*). Rauschenberg considers Albers, his most influential teacher and continues to posthumously honor his time at Black Mountain through *The Rauschenberg Residency*, which "fosters the ideal that artistic practice that advances mutual understanding and engenders a focus on the conservation of a sensitive and pristine environment and integration with the local surroundings." The foundation also offers an "Artist as Activist" fellowship, which supports artists who tackle critical social issues with a two-year grant. The program aims to serve "artists as problem solvers," a credo that mirrors Albers's mission.

Ruth Asawa founded the Alvarado School Arts Workshop in 1968, a program that involved professional artists visiting public schools to teach young children. Asawa lobbied politicians and charitable foundations for funding, scraped together found objects to use in classrooms, and eventually made her way into fifty public schools in the San Francisco area. Asawa says she was "primarily interested in making it possible for people to become as independent and self-sufficient as possible. That has nothing really to with art, except that through the arts you can learn many, many skills that you cannot learn through books and problem-solving in the abstract" (*Arts Activism*).

Conclusion: Generating Citizens and Problem Solvers

> *By encouraging both self-reflection and the translation of thought into action, pedagogy at Black Mountain began with art to end with democracy.*
>
> —Ruth Erickson

By the time Black Mountain went bankrupt and closed its doors in 1957, the United States was amid a critical civil rights movement. Many of the college's professors and attendees moved on to produce works of activist art, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Charles Olson, creating a sort of "opposition culture" (Duberman 433). Moreover, though the college failed to continue operation, it would hardly be considered a failure. Not only did many activist and *avant-garde* movements emerge from Black Mountain alumni, but several people moved on to learn, instruct, and influence at other higher education institutions.

Despite its lack of accreditation, graduate schools such as Harvard and Radcliffe accepted Black Mountain students based on recommendation (Duberman 101). This is not only a nod to the veneration for Black Mountain inside of academia but also a reminder that Ivy League and top-ranked institutions were at one point amongst the most progressive educators. It is apparent that the framework of higher education is being questioned as many top universities are also removing the undergraduate stan-

dardized test requirements, such as the SAT and ACT, and the graduate requirement of the GRE.

Just as Pauszek concludes in her article "Biscit" Politics: Building Working-Class Educational Spaces from the Ground Up," I want to conclude by highlighting the literacies that Black Mountain offers our sense of community literacy practices: Black Mountain provides *organization literacies* within the values and principles it used to form and operate the college. The interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum, social and cultural activities outside of the classroom, democratic methodology, and experiential learning inside the classroom give us examples of structures within a community and academic setting that operate with the goal of holistic education and citizen-making at its core. Black Mountain offers *service and collaboration literacies* as central to its foundation. Through art instruction, students have a productive problem-solving method for all disciplines and citizens while supporting the whole person with a creative outlet. Black Mountain advocates *pedagogical literacies*, as we see with Josef Albers and other educators at Black Mountain engaging in critical presence with their student's mastery of materials, introspection, and social action in the product of their labors. Finally, it left us with a legacy of antiracist literacies through the enduring influence of Josef Albers.

Higher Education has undergone several reforms in American history, in the 1930s and the 1960s. It is time to consider what was at the core of these upheavals. What is left to repair? What remains broken? Considering these examples of organizational literacies, service and collaboration literacies, pedagogical and antiracist literacies, how can we as policymakers, educators, and community members infuse these literacies into our own environments?

Black Mountain can be a window into the past and perhaps a catalyst for future advancements in rhetoric and composition, cultural studies, and beyond.

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