

Charles Olson and Empire, or Charles Olson Flips the Wartime Script

By Alan Gilbert

By the fall of 1970, it had become obvious to large segments of the United States population, to the US media, to substantial parts of the US military, and to members of the Nixon administration that anti-colonial resistance to the US military occupation of South Vietnam was neither slackening nor close to being dismantled. The war itself seesawed militarily throughout 1970, despite increases in US aerial bombardment that annually served as Nixon's favorite military strategy. On the diplomatic front, national security advisor Henry Kissinger commenced secret meetings outside Paris in February of 1970 with North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho. It was a sure sign that the US was looking for a way out of Vietnam. Situated within the fluctuating matrix of geopolitical relations between the US and Southeast Asia, especially the planned rapprochement with China that the previously fervent anti-communist Richard Nixon was hatching in the White House, this exit strategy eventually assumed the form less of a withdrawal or even a defeat per se than of a total abandonment of the people and nation the US claimed to be liberating.

Domestically, the US military and the Nixon administration faced the public relations nightmare represented by the court martial of William Calley and other members of the US Eleventh Light Infantry Brigade's Charlie Company for their participation in the 1968 massacre at My Lai, an event the US military (including a young Colin Powell) did its best to cover up for as long as possible, until leaks from conscientious soldiers and investigations by US journalists (including a young Seymour

Hersh) broke the story. Calley's trial lasted from November of 1970 until March of 1971, when he was convicted by a jury and sentenced to life in prison, though he ended up only serving three days after Nixon personally intervened. The fall of 1970 also saw the opening of an exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in New York City that featured a new series of paintings by the visual artist Philip Guston, who in previous incarnations as a figurative painter in the 1930s and '40s and an "abstract impressionist" in the '50s and '60s had received some of the highest honors and acclaim available to an artist working in the US. Coming four years after a major exhibition of dark, predominantly gray abstractions at the Jewish Museum, this new work provoked a stunned, befuddled, outraged, and excited response from its art world audience.

A number of the paintings in the Marlborough show contained large cartoonish images of figures from the Ku Klux Klan engaged in vaguely menacing activities. In all of the paintings on display, a willfully awkward figuration replaced the careful abstractions Guston had been crafting for nearly two decades, just as they departed from the more polished figuration of the art he produced during the two decades before that. Despite the seemingly abrupt and dramatic shifts in Guston's work over the course of fifty years, hooded figures in general, and images of the Ku Klux Klan in particular, periodically resurfaced. In fact, one of Guston's first mature works—composed when he was only seventeen—is "Drawing for Conspirators" (1930), a complex piece that includes a lynching, a crucifixion, and what may possibly be a self-portrait, if a related painting in the Marlborough exhibition entitled "The Studio" (1969) is any indication. In his essay "Recognizing Guston (in four slips)," Harry Cooper even goes so far as to describe Guston's "arguably . . . first total abstraction," 1951's "White Painting," as "a

view from inside the hood” (2002: 126), an analysis that begs the question the contemporary artist William Pope.L has asked about Robert Ryman’s studiously all-white paintings: Why is race rarely mentioned when a white artist makes white paintings (Bessire 2002: 25)? For Pope.L, one implication of his question is that non-white artists aren’t always allowed—by themselves or others—this same political obliviousness to color.

Much has been said about Guston’s brooding figurative work from the Marlborough show and the remaining ten years of his life in terms of its rejection of what Guston saw as the formal purities and institutional rigidities of abstract expressionism. From a broader cultural perspective, this work was Guston’s way of responding to the political turmoil of the late ’60s, and especially the Vietnam War: “[W]hen the middle 1960s came along I was feeling very schizophrenic. The war, what was happening to America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home reading magazines, going into frustrated fury about everything—and then going to my studio *to adjust a red to a blue*” (emphasis in original; Balken 2001: 93). Given Guston’s reference to reading magazines, it’s possible the later hoods also have a source in those used by the US military in Vietnam—and now even more infamously in Iraq—as part of prisoner interrogations. Yet another way of reading Guston’s later work is as a rejection of a ’60s Pop aesthetic, despite his return to figuration and its parallels with Pop’s aesthetic ideology.¹ Compared to Andy Warhol’s nearly affectless silkscreen portraits of celebrities and icons, with their cool surfaces further enhanced by seriality, Guston’s portraits, including his self-portraits and political satire, are layered with a knotted set of

¹ Guston and other abstract painters quit the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1962 because of the gallery’s plans to exhibit a show of Pop art.

emotions that run the gamut from loathing to sympathy. Mid-century abstractions notwithstanding, Guston's complicated obsession with heads and hoods makes him one of the most difficult and underrecognized portrait painters in American art during the past one hundred years.²

Having utilized hooded faces and Ku Klux Klan imagery to ease himself into and out of figuration throughout his career, in the last decade of his life Guston pared down his range of representation to what he seems to have considered bare essentials: shoes, food, drink, his wife, cigarettes, and himself, all painted within a relatively narrow color palette, heavy on the red. This paring down, and, more specifically, the objects pared down to, recall the final poem of Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, a one-line list that reads: "my wife my car my color and myself" (1983: 635). Written at the end of 1969, the same year Guston was working on many of the paintings in his Marlborough show, including "The Studio," Olson's poem isn't the only moment of overlap between these two figures. Almost exact contemporaries (Guston was born in 1913, three years after Olson), both were the children of hard-working immigrants; their fathers died suddenly, prematurely, and for both sons tragically;³ both lived frugally during the Depression; both produced art during the '40s in the service of the US war effort; both were staunch supporters of the politics and policies of the New Deal; and when their first works were being published and exhibited, both had strong affiliations with '30s and early '40s-era Popular Front artists.⁴

² "Guston's brushstrokes throughout his period as an abstract painter remained at the scale of those used in representational easel painting" (Auping 2003a: 41).

³ At one point, Olson declared that his "father was killed fighting for the right of labor men to organize in unions" (1975: 44).

⁴ "Recent developments in American historical studies have made clear that the 1930s and 1940s need to be treated together if the long-term trajectory of the American political economy is to be

On a cursory reading, Olson's poem appears to be a list of possessives. In actuality, it's a poem about loss and displacement; blank spaces between each of the poem's units further amplify this sense of loss. Written around six weeks before he died, and during the same week he finally sought a doctor's opinion about the persistent pains that were a symptom of the cancer that quickly killed him, Olson's poem strings together the most devastating losses during the last six years of his life: it moves chronologically from his wife Betty Kaiser Olson who died in a car accident outside of Buffalo, NY, when Olson was teaching there, to the car that helped partially appease his restive loneliness after her death, to his own health, to his nearing demise. But as much as these are losses, they're also a string of displacements, displacements that further occur within each unit in the set. Cooper persuasively argues that Guston's late work functions via metonymy; the same can be said of the closing page of *The Maximus Poems*: "Metaphor attempts to reinstall being through a substitution or condensation, but metonymy frustrates that move by extending the initial substitution into an endless chain of displacements, a 'veering off of signification.' In this way Lacan, as he himself concludes, 'links metaphor to the question of being and metonymy to its lack.' Desire, one might summarize, is metonymical . . ." (2002: 116-117). Guston's painting of a painter painting a painter in "The Studio" echoes the dialectic between desire and death that inflects each of the units—"my wife my car my color and my self"—in Olson's poem.

For instance, does "my wife" refer solely to Betty Kaiser Olson, or does it conflate her with Olson's first common-law wife, Constance Wilcock Bunker, from

effectively understood. This is also the case in relation to the history of culture . . ." (Hemingway 2002: 1).

whom Olson separated in 1955? There are numerous references to cars in Olson's poetry, including the 1958 non-*Maximus* poem "Rufus Woodpecker . . ." in which "three nurses / and a dog" "at the Capitol" in Washington, DC, back their car into another car, thereby momentarily upsetting the intricately rhetorical confabulation of a Cold War strategy of peace via mutually assured destruction (1987: 454)—from his years in politics working for the Roosevelt administration, Olson knew more than most poets about political double-speak. And of course "car" immediately brings to mind the car in which Betty Kaiser Olson died. The "color" may refer to Olson's complexion, an idea seconded by Olson scholar Charles Boer (Butterick 1978: 752); if so, is the loss of red in Olson's cheeks as his health fails him a conflated reference to his earlier commitment to Roosevelt, the New Deal, and aspects of Popular Front politics and aesthetics? Or maybe his cheeks aren't red but pink, because there's a queered Olson to be read in the ways he discursively conjures certain relationships between men.

The reference to "my color" doubles back on the political dimensions of whiteness, and evokes once again Guston's painting "The Studio." In *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson*, George Butterick pursues this angle and quotes from published and unpublished Olson material in order to illustrate Olson's critical awareness of whiteness as a socially and politically constructed category. Quoting from Olson's *Muthologos*, Butterick writes: "Olson referred to himself at Berkeley half-mockingly as 'that famous thing, the White Man, the ultimate paleface, the noncorruptible, the Good, the thing that runs this country, or that *is* this country'" (emphasis in original; 1978: 752). This isn't dissimilar from the controversial museum admission tags the artist Daniel Martinez created for the 1993 Whitney Biennial which assembled in whole or in part the

phrase: “I CAN’T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE” (Martinez 1996: 48-50). Olson asserts his color in the final poem of *Maximus* only to displace and lose it. In the original manuscript page for this poem, housed in the Olson archive at the University of Connecticut, there’s a space between “my” and “color” equal to the empty spaces between each of the poem’s constituent units. In “The Studio,” Guston paints his own whiteness in order to question and critique its capacity for arbitrary violence. In the case of both Olson and Guston, this isn’t a form of double consciousness but cognitive dissonance, which far from being the white man’s burden is the liability of any ruling class.

If one bristles a bit at the looseness, “the veering off of signification” with which Guston plays with Klan imagery or Olson “half-mockingly” refers to himself as “the ultimate paleface” (or, conversely, if one fails to see the humorous component in Martinez’s intervention), it’s important to realize that as an artist Guston seems to have felt an ethical need to literally get inside the head of evil, which, while a potentially troublesome approach, is still a more nuanced engagement than any black or white, with us or against us perspective. There’s an ethical imperative behind Olson’s idea of the polis as well; in fact, it’s driven by ethics, as opposed to, say, political economy or urban planning, which is why Olson’s polis is such a nebulous formulation. Moreover, a critique of whiteness is Olson and Guston’s inheritance of a first-generation, working-class immigrant experience in the US. Guston’s fascination with the Klan is also related to his Jewish upbringing in Los Angeles, which at the time was a center of Klan activity. Guston talked about his earliest work in relation to the Klan’s role in strikebreaking: “The KKK has haunted me since I was a boy in L.A. In those years they were there mostly to

break strikes, and I drew and painted pictures of conspiracies and floggings, cruelty and evil” (Balken 2001: 94). Thus, for Guston the Klan has labor and class associations alongside racial ones. Furthermore, while on exhibit in LA in the early '30s, some of these Klan paintings were destroyed by members of the Klan (Auping 2003: 17), thereby confirming for Guston art's operative political power.

In 1935, Guston moved from Los Angeles to New York City in order to become an artist in the Federal Art Project of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA). In 1942, Olson abandoned his bohemian existence in New York City and moved to Washington, DC, in order to become a communications specialist, aka a propagandist, in the New Deal's Office of War Information (OWI), a federal agency assigned the task of keeping the US population abreast of domestic and international developments related to World War II, as well as boosting wartime morale. (For those keeping track, this is also the moment in Tom Clark's biography of Olson when he drops the condescending “Charlie” that infuriated Olsonites so much when the book was first published [1991]. Otherwise, Clark's biography is perhaps most illuminating when discussing Olson's life during the '40s.)⁵ Olson and Guston may even have almost crossed paths in 1943 when Guston went to Washington to install a mural depicting “Reconstruction and the Well-Being of the Family” in the Social Security Board Building there. It was the last commissioned mural he painted, though it was followed by requests from the US Navy and *Fortune* magazine (which employed another WPA artist, Walker Evans) to produce drawings depicting the domestic war effort (Shapiro 2003: 28-30).

⁵ However, the groundbreaking research on Olson's activities in the '40s was done by Catherine Seelye for *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*, a book she assembled from Olson's mostly unpublished writings detailing his visits to Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeths psychiatric hospital in Washington, DC, from 1946-1948. Her introduction remains the best thumbnail sketch of Olson during the '40s (Seelye 1975).

The Popular Front was an alliance of leftist, socialist, communist, and progressive organizations and individuals united in the fight against fascism, racism, and class inequality. It congealed in the mid-'30s and began petering out during World War II. While one shouldn't overestimate the influence of Popular Front aesthetics and politics on Olson (as opposed to Guston, for whom that influence is unequivocal), it should be noted that much of what might be considered central to Olson's thinking incorporates cultural, social, and political legacies of the Popular Front and its New Deal milieu: Olson's focus on the local and everyday world of Gloucester as both subject matter and audience for his work directly reflects a Popular Front aesthetic ideology of the local; he shares with large portions of the Popular Front a direct support for Roosevelt and New Deal social programs; and his stout anti-fascism mirrors the concern that most united the Popular Front. One can't stress the last of these three attitudes enough, since Olson's break with both Ezra Pound and the Truman administration in the late '40s revolved around Pound's fascist politics and what Olson presciently understood as the economic and political imperial ambitions of post-war America.

The New Deal and its WPA federal arts programs directly supported a slice of progressive and even radical art, though in general the art funded was, in Michael Denning's phrase, "the middlebrow nationalism and domesticity of the aesthetics of regionalism and the 'American scene'" (1997: 80), work perhaps most famously represented in the visual arts by figures such as Thomas Hart Benton (whose *The Arts of Life in America* [1932] is currently on display at the Whitney), *American Gothic's* (1930) Grant Wood, and, in almost a category to himself, Norman Rockwell.⁶ Similarly, New

⁶ Nevertheless, even Benton produced what might be termed proletariat art, as in his 1933 lithograph *Strike*, which depicts striking workers being shot by National Guardsmen. And in the

Deal arts programs absorbed a small number of progressives into the US government, though it's a version of red scare hysteria to imagine this happened in substantial numbers. In fact, reactionary art haters were also appointed to oversee regional departments of WPA arts programs. Nevertheless, conservatives were convinced Popular Front artists were using WPA money to undermine the US government, and within three years of the 1935 establishment of federal arts programs had already convened a House Committee on Un-American Activities to investigate the situation. As a result, they managed to abolish in 1939 the Federal Theatre Project, arguably the most radical of the funded programs because of its support for radical workers theater (Denning 1997: 78-80). By 1943, focus on the war effort, rising employment, and the beginnings of a corporate-led conservative shift in US politics meant the end of the WPA and its federally funded arts programs.

In the early '40s, a number of Popular Front members joined the Office of War Information. Olson's affiliation with these individuals and his work on Roosevelt's 1944 reelection campaign later led to three visits from the FBI during the McCarthy era. The first occurred in 1951 while Olson was in Mexico; the others were in 1952 and 1954 when Olson was teaching at Black Mountain College (Clark 1991: 217-218, 241). One Popular Front visual artist at the OWI whom Olson became good friends with was Ben Shahn, a relationship that extended to their respective families and lasted a decade. At the time, Shahn was one of the most prominent Popular Front artists in the US (the Museum of Modern Art was to host a retrospective of his work in 1947). It's a little-known fact

'60s, Rockwell made a series of illustrations for *Look* magazine that represented political concerns in the US, including *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), in which a young, African-American girl is escorted to school by four National Guardsmen as she walks past a wall with the words "NIGGER" and "KKK" scrawled across it.

that Olson's first published book was neither 1947's *Call Me Ishmael* nor the small collection of poems *Y & X* published the following year, but a collaboration he produced with Shahn in 1943 for the OWI. Entitled *Spanish Speaking Americans in the War: The Southwest*, it's a 24-page English-Spanish bilingual pamphlet combining Olson's prose with photomontages designed by Shahn using photographs from government sources. Neither of their names appear anywhere on the 8½ x 11" two-color pamphlet.

The pamphlet appears to have been produced with three primary objectives in mind: to rally support for the war among "Spanish speaking Americans"—primarily Mexican and Mexican-Americans—in the American Southwest; to commemorate their deaths during the Battle of Bataan and subsequent "Bataan Death March"; and, more subtly, to disseminate a New Deal agenda. Propagandizing among ethnic minorities was of genuine concern to Olson and the OWI, since part of Olson's responsibilities in the Foreign Language Division where he worked was to monitor pro- and anti-fascist ideology in foreign language newspapers published across the US. Olson's archive at the University of Connecticut includes summaries Olson both collected and himself compiled tracking the politics of these newspapers; these summaries also occasionally mentioned a newspaper's pro- or anti-communist stance. The Olson archive contains newspaper clippings documenting fascist politics in the US, such as one from April 21, 1942 with the headline: "Russian Handbill Heils Hitler: Workers in Jersey Plants Get Pro-Axis Propaganda." Given the pervasiveness of fascist sympathies Olson and fellow researchers found in US newspapers and even on US radio, it's not surprising that the OWI felt a need to propagandize the war effort in foreign language speaking communities in the original language of these communities.

Because Spanish was a primary language spoken in the Philippines, two National Guard units from New Mexico were already stationed there when the Japanese military invaded. The 1942 defeat on the Bataan peninsula of these troops, other US soldiers, and their Filipino counterparts (which precipitated Roosevelt's exile of General MacArthur to Australia, the latter famously uttering "I shall return" as he departed), and the consequent 85-mile "Bataan Death March" to Japanese prison camps, resulted in over 25,000 military and civilian deaths, thousands of which were suffered by the New Mexico National Guard (later, in Vietnam, Latinos suffered almost 20% of that war's total casualties, although in the US Latinos represented less than 5% of the population [Schmal 1999: n.p.]). On one two-page spread in *Spanish Speaking Americans in the War*, Shahn and Olson commemorate US troops killed at Bataan by juxtaposing a portrait of a forlorn couple from Kentucky with a photograph of a mother dressed heavily in black standing in a desolate desert cemetery. The text by Olson below the mother in mourning reads:

BATAAN was a National Guard tragedy. The first soldiers ready, they were the first to go. Unlike the regular army, the Guards were home town units, local soldiers, local leaders. The threat of war was too great to allow time to regroup them. They went to the Philippines as they were. The 200th and 515th Coast Artillery of New Mexico were sent because they could talk Spanish and above all because they were the crack anti-aircraft units the Filipino people needed.

On April 9th, it was over. The glory of Bataan is the nation's but the grief is in the homes of the small towns of America—from Harrodsburg, Kentucky to Salinas, California, on the faces of this New Mexican mother, these Kentucky parents. New Mexico gave the fullest measure of devotion—one quarter of the 9,000 men from the mainland lost. (1943: n.p.)

What's striking in Olson's otherwise solemn pedestrian rhetoric is the emphasis on the damage done to local communities. As mentioned, Olson partially inherits this focus from a Popular Front and New Deal aesthetics and politics that in 1943 was beginning to wane, but that remained vital enough to project forward into Olson's mature work, most explicitly in *The Maximus Poems*.

Popular Front and New Deal aesthetics inform other aspects of Olson and Shahn's collaboration. In his biography of Olson, Clark describes the pamphlet as, "[t]he poetic conjunction of humanitarian sentiment with documentary image" (1991: 79), which is as succinct a definition as one might find of Popular Front art's principal aesthetic strain. *Spanish Speaking Americans in the War's* center two pages reproduce a near stock US social realist photograph of a man on a tractor (of the sort Adorno reading Lukács derisively deemed "boy meets tractor" art [1991: 237]). Elsewhere in the pamphlet, an image of soldiers landing on a beach faces a close-up portrait of a miner. Above the former image, Olson has written:

These fighters, this worker are one.

The very meaning of democracy lies in the bond between fighter and worker in a common cause. (1943: n.p.)

The Popular Front united fighter and worker under the aegis of anti-fascism, a concern Olson references as “a common cause.” Yet as stated here, democracy is defined less in opposition to fascism than by the bond it generates between fighter and worker, with the goal of their union finally left unspecified. Against whom, exactly, are the forces of democracy arrayed in “common cause”? Olson’s rhetoric eludes him, as rhetoric always eludes itself. The contiguity Olson and Shahn establish between charging soldiers and the readily available legacy of exploited miners contains an element of provocation that wouldn’t have been lost on those who experienced the labor and class struggles—and their portrayal in art—during the 1930s. It was exactly the kind of material conservatives in the US were wary of, and Olson and Shahn’s pamphlet in particular was singled out for attack as New Deal propaganda dangerously espousing racial equity (Clark 1991: 82).

Olson’s OWI research and writing, as well as his commitment to the Roosevelt platform, landed him a job in the president’s 1944 reelection campaign as director of the Democratic National Committee’s (DNC) Foreign Nationalities Division, i.e., encouraging ethnic and immigrant groups in the US to vote Roosevelt. But severe disillusionment with the direction US politics was taking had already begun to set in for Olson. As Bram Dijkstra states in *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change, 1920-1950*: “The economic recovery accelerated by the coming of World War II had also brought with it a marked return to power of the conservative factions in government”

(2003: 10). Though a degree of creative freedom had initially been allowed OWI cultural workers producing materials for the war effort, this autonomy was soon curtailed. Shahn's artwork was consistently rejected for being too disturbing, and only two of his posters for the OWI were ever produced. One of these, entitled *This Is Nazi Brutality* (1943), paired a hooded figure with text detailing Nazi genocide in a Czech village (Greenfeld 1998: 190).⁷ Olson's press dispatches were increasingly circumscribed, amended, and censored by new administrators with backgrounds in advertising and mass media. Eventually, Olson was no longer allowed to suggest his own writing and research projects, but instead was forced to work on assignment. After futile protest, he resigned from the OWI in May of 1944, though almost immediately slid into his new job working for Roosevelt's reelection. Shahn left the OWI two months later.

At the OWI and while organizing for the DNC, Olson saw the strategy being developed by corporate America and conservatives outside and within the Democratic Party to turn the struggle against fascism into a springboard for post-war US hegemony. The uniqueness of Olson's position, and the speed with which he recognized these developments, was the result of their occurring literally under his nose. Michael Denning argues: "[T]he Popular Front vision of the anti-fascist war was defeated by the corporate vision of an American Century in the OWI (and its successor, the USIA [United States Information Agency])" (1997: 82). The changes in agenda and ideology enacted within the OWI during Olson's two short years there were part of a much larger shift in the US as domestically it moved from the dynamic political struggles of the '30s to the

⁷ Similarly, the US Navy turned down Guston's 1943 sketches. Looking at his "Clothes Inflation Drill (For Navy Pre-Flight Training)," with its somber image of young pilots undergoing water survival training, some of whom appear to be on the verge of drowning, it's not difficult to understand why.

reactionary Cold War deep freeze of the '50s; internationally, the US sought to establish itself as the world's sole superpower in the wake of World War II's global ruin.⁸ These two strategies reinforced each other:

Notably, the Truman administration overcame congressional opposition to its long-term aid program for western Europe by couching it in terms of containing communism,⁹ which, Soviet intentions notwithstanding, deftly linked main street hatred of the New Deal, labor, blacks, and state regulation to permanent projections of American power overseas and thus, in turn, consolidated in the name of democracy and freedom the external legitimation of the corporate sector, while freeing it to pursue a program of domestic pacification and stabilization. (Bright and Geyer 2002: 84)

(Substitute “terrorism” for “communism” here and a six-decade continuity in US domestic and foreign policy is brought into sharp focus.) The check to these tendencies that Roosevelt partially provided ended with the DNC's 1944 nomination of Truman as vice president and, given Roosevelt's poor health, imminent presidential successor. It was a move Olson, temporarily a significant player in Democratic Party politics, viewed as a betrayal of the party's progressive principles (Clark 1991: 86).

⁸ A position it actually occupied until for a complex set of reasons it fabricated the threat of a superpower rival in the Soviet Union.

⁹ The “strategies of containment” thesis favored by Cold War historians such as John Lewis Gaddis (1982), in which the Cold War is the result of US attempts to contain and defend itself from Soviet aggression, is called into question by US military action in Korea at the very start of the Cold War. Not satisfied with containing communist forces in North Korea after they were driven from the south, Truman expanded the Korean War with the goal of liberating North Korea (a liberation it paradoxically sought to achieve via the bombing of North Korean civilian populations).

Within two or three years of quoting at the end of *Spanish Speaking Americans in the War* the words of “[a] young Spanish speaking boy” willing to fight, and if necessary die, in the defense of “liberty,” Olson is privately confiding to himself a very different perspective. In an unpublished note from the mid-’40s buried in his archive,¹⁰ Olson writes:

 Their whine bares the lie of their big, official war. They call it “the world war of survival” – and bable [sic] of “American” lives as though American lives were somehow more precious than Russian, Filipino, Italian lives.

 If we, the people, shall save ourselves from our leaders’ shame, if we, the people, shall survive our disgust, if we, the people, shall end our own confusion, we must see this big war for the lie it is become. Make no mistake: it is a lie. Unwrap the charters and pacts. Recognize the deals. Stomach the people’s hope for security. Tighten the soil over the men, always little men, who are dead. Call the big war what it is: a defeat for the people.

 And take a look at the other war. You might call it little. It is, where Italians in the triangle of Milan, Turin and Genoa are fighting it. Little in Jugoslavia. Little in the night of France. Small like a seed in the undergrounds, wherever men of Europe stand up to the beast.

¹⁰ Parts of which are quoted by Seeley in her introduction to *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound* (1975: xix-xx).

You might think Russia would make this little war big. But China probably comes closer to characterizing the size of this bastard twin of the big war. For in China the tragic brotherhood of the official and unofficial war is most pronounced. (Olson 1944?-1946?: n.p.)

Olson saw the script being flipped, just as he flipped the script of his own writing for the OWI, as well as the script of the victors' official histories of World War II—then and now. In comparison with the “lie” of the “big war,” Olson’s sympathies appear to be with the little wars of national and leftist liberation in China, Italy, and France. This isn’t to diminish the strong personal commitment to anti-fascism Olson shared with what was left of the Popular Front, as evidenced by the literally visceral abhorrence of fascist ideology conveyed in Olson’s descriptions of his meetings with Pound at St. Elizabeths around the time he wrote this note. Moreover, along with the residue of the Popular Front’s portrayal of the Soviet Union as being on the progressive side of history (at least until the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact of 1939), it’s possible that in his reference to Russia making these little wars big Olson intuited the geopolitical dynamics whereby Cold War confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union would be displaced onto smaller countries, culminating in pointless, self-immolating wars for these two superpowers in Vietnam and Afghanistan, respectively. In any case, Olson’s note points to a new set of social and political conditions being fashioned at the end of World War II, ones that entailed “a defeat for the people,” despite their enormous sacrifices during the war and the decade preceding it.

Olson realized that the United States was squandering a unique opportunity to use its singular power and resources to help fashion a better world. This is echoed by Cold War historian H.W. Brands in his book *The Devil We Knew: Americans and the Cold War*:

In 1945, nearly all Americans and probably a majority of interested foreigners had looked on the United States as a beacon shining the way to a better future for humanity, one in which ideals mattered more than tanks. During the next forty years, American leaders succeeded in convincing many Americans and all but a few foreigners that the United States could be counted on to act pretty much as great powers always have. (1993: 228)

(From a public relations standpoint, Abu Ghraib may possibly constitute the pinnacle of this recognition of the abuse of power.) In a notebook from 1967, Olson writes: “It was foreign policy—the chance to change the world by astounding American ability & wealth—TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority public works project] on the Danube or in China, or on the Jordan—all were possibilities destroyed & defeated by policy” (n.p.).¹¹ Just as one marvels at Olson’s near prophetic awareness in the mid-’40s of a chain of events in France that would eventually lead to the revolt against Gaullism in May of 1968, so, too, does one pause at the references in this 1967 notebook entry to what appear to be the 21st-century’s primary loci for the assertion and denial of US hegemony: China and the Middle East. But perhaps most incisive in Olson’s understanding of the post-

¹¹ Thanks to Benjamin Friedlander for helping me decipher Olson’s at times nearly illegible handwriting in this notebook entry.

World War II geopolitical world order was the role to be played by the economy and culture of the US. Again, Olson's privileged position as Washington insider allowed him to observe all of this firsthand. For Olson, the failure of the US to direct its enormous wealth and resources toward large-scale domestic and international social programs helped fuel his mid-'40s disillusionment with US politics. As Olson's 1967 notebook entry indicates, he was still brooding over this failure two decades later, and it's quite possible that US intervention in Vietnam helped prompt this reflection.

In poems, letters, essays, and notebooks Olson repeatedly—if obliquely—returned to this moment, this slip in a personal and collective history that occurred in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Embracing this slip—it was, after all, what precipitated his abandonment of politics for poetry—Olson spends the rest of his life writing history and politics as proposition, not “policy.” Olson deeply valued poetry's propositional qualities, and they inspired his energetic quest for formal innovation. Form as process became the extension of proposition as content. It's a methodology that carries over into Olson's prose writing as well. Why are the most memorable passages in an essay such as “Projective Verse” quotes from other people, specifically Robert Creeley? Why is *Call Me Ishmael* propelled by a series of historical accounts and intertextual references instead of a linear argument? Proposition moves by association and metonymy, as opposed to the logically argued and strictly delineated language of policy. At the same time, propositional writing is distinct from indeterminacy as Cold War aestheticism or postmodern opacity. Ideally—and how often must one approach experimental literature ideally?—Olson's proposals are meant less for individual readers to tease out than for communities to perform.

This is why Olson's abandonment of conventional politics for a life of poetry involved a commitment to alternative modes of cultural transmission and the creative formation of subcultures.¹² Conjoined with this in *The Maximus Poems* is an unconventional historiography from below that nevertheless keeps one eye on the top, whether by tracing dominant social and political structures in the US back to their earliest manifestations in the Massachusetts Bay Colony or addressing them in the present. An example of the latter is buried within the dense web of mythological references that overtook much of Olson's poetry in the '60s. Olson dedicates the 1964 *Maximus* poem "The Condition of the Light from the Sun" to John A. Wells, a former undergraduate classmate of Olson's who became a Republican Party campaign manager, and Alan Cranston, the person who hired Olson to work for the OWI, and who was later a California Democratic Senator (Butterick 1978: 550-551). At one psychological level, they are Olson's alter egos:

The Condition of the Light from the Sun

—for John A. Wells (Oxon.

1934) and for Alan Cranston

on ground level

up on top of the world

the Bulgar and his sons

¹² Yet even at their most utopian, subcultures tend to function according to their own sets of inclusions and exclusions, their own hierarchies, and their own discourses of power. The communities Olson helped fashion—most directly around his position as teacher—were no different in this regard, particularly in their marginalization of women.

in the eye of ice
over the left shoulder
North North East
on a line extending
directly half way distance
between the left neck
and the ridge above
the road which passes over
the top of the world
constituted of color
divided among them
the Throne the Kingdom the Power (1983: 411)

Olson's decision to abandon mainstream politics in the mid-'40s means that he won't be among those—Republicans and Democrats—who will divide “the Throne the Kingdom the Power,” a domain that at the end of World War II included much of the globe. Metaphorically figured as hegemonically “up on top of the world,” these new rulers—the Bulgars were an invading tribe that pushed into Europe in the seventh century A.D. (Butterick 1978: 537)—are located far to the north in the land of ice, snow, and whiteness. As someone intimately familiar with Melville's chapter on the whiteness of the whale, Olson knew how terrifying and overwhelming this whiteness can be. Yet the infinite expanse of whiteness as seen from the North Pole is only an illusion, and the northern lights Olson references in the title are limited in extent. Hegemony, then, must

always account for resistance, and for Olson this resistance flourished as a critically engaged—rather than indiscriminately dismissive—opposition to mainstream politics, culture, and literature.

Ben Shahn's 1944 painting *The Red Stairway* contains an image very similar to Olson's road passing over the top of the world. In it, a one-legged man on crutches begins his climb up a red staircase that instantly descends after reaching its peak. In *American Expressionism*, Dijkstra badly misreads the staircase as potentially "religion," "patriotism," or "both" (2003: 224), and misses the most obvious detail of the painting, further cued by its title: that the staircase is red. Shahn himself talked about the painting in near Sisyphian terms echoing '40s French existentialism: that is, as a rendering of humankind's eternal, yet futile, hope (Pohl 1993: 82). At the same time, it's difficult not to look at this painting and see the gray-haired disabled figure as Roosevelt and the stairs as the waxing and waning of his New Deal programs and the Popular Front. As Andrew Hemingway writes: "The ending of the Popular Front and the winding down of the New Deal arts projects coincided" (2002: 3). In this painting of a stairway made precarious by the instability of the demolished façade to which it's attached, the only figure making progress is the person in the bottom right-hand corner carrying a basketful of stones (or are they bones?) in a bleached landscape full of stones and bones. Both figures in the painting are staring downward—at the "ground level" Olson opens "The Condition of the Light from the Sun" with—but they're each gazing at a different ground.

His close relationship with Shahn led Olson to invite him to teach painting at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1951. It was an overall miserable, if illuminating, experience for Shahn, and a conflicted one for Olson, as it was the

beginning of the end of their friendship. While at Black Mountain, Shahn ran headfirst into abstract expressionism and neo-avant-garde art, both of which were bumping Popular Front visual artists from the pages of a still living history. For Clement Greenberg, 1950 was one of the pinnacles of abstract expressionism; it was also the year he taught at Black Mountain (Katz 2002: 102, 119). Shahn's ultimate nemesis during his brief tenure at Black Mountain was Robert Motherwell, whom he'd had a confrontation with a few years earlier during which—adopting the redbaiting rhetoric overtaking US cultural and political life—Motherwell called him “the leading Communist modern artist in America.” Along with being a friend, Olson felt closer to Shahn's political and aesthetic sensibilities. Olson confided in a letter to Creeley that Shahn was “the only American painter who has ever interested me,” and declared Motherwell, a young Robert Rauschenberg, and other artists at Black Mountain, “all these little shit painters.” Nevertheless, Shahn's time at Black Mountain wasn't entirely engrossed in petty personal feuds, and the challenge of meeting a newly dominant aesthetics was a stimulus to his art and thinking (Greenfeld 1998: 260, 259, 256-257).

At the end of his stay, Shahn delivered a lecture entitled “Aspects of Realism,” in which he defined realism as, “an earnest search for truth within the framework of one's own values” (Greenfeld 1998: 265), a formulation that bears a striking resemblance to the main thrust of one of Olson's most important essays, “Against Wisdom as Such,” written at Black Mountain three years later, namely, “that any wisdom which gets into any poem is solely a quality of the moment of time in which there might happen to be wisdoms” (1997: 263). This skepticism toward epistemologies received as opposed to actively fashioned shows Shahn and Olson adapting their thinking to changing conditions in the

transmission of knowledge taking place after World War II. There's some evidence from Olson and Shahn's correspondence that Olson may have invited him back to Black Mountain to teach in 1952, though Shahn seems to have declined. Within another year or two, Shahn writes to Olson wondering why he never hears from him. On a microcosmic level, this neglect parallels what was happening in the '50s to the Popular Front art and artists of the '30s and early '40s. For instance, Motherwell described one prominent feature of the New York School of painting as: "POLITICS: None—Hatred of W.P.A." (Dijkstra 2003: 265) Part of Olson's significance is as a key transitional figure in this process, the so-called inventor of the word "postmodernism" (not true, as Perry Anderson points out in *The Origins of Postmodernity* [1998]) with roots in the Popular Front era. This isn't to argue that New Deal and Popular Front politics and aesthetics are the only influence on Olson's work; they may not even be the primary one. But they're a significant factor and context that have been consistently overlooked.

This is in keeping with the larger discourse on art and culture in the 20th century, a discourse undergoing substantial revision. Just as abstract expressionism was the dominant visual art aesthetic of the '50s, Popular Front cultural politics achieved general, critical, and—perhaps most importantly for any art's survival—institutional support in the '30s and early '40s. Rarely, however, is modern art history read back this far or in this way. Instead, these histories tend to link abstract expressionism to a post-World War I European avant-garde, thereby for the most part skipping the '30s and early '40s in the US. The same goes for avant-garde literature. Yet, as Linda Nochlin writes, "[T]he history of modern art, far from being a Greenbergian one-way street to greater and greater abstraction, comprises many important byways, including one kind of

representation in which the social and the psychological tensions of contemporary life played a dominant role” (2003: 179). Hence, the recent renewed attention paid to figurative painters such as Christian Schad and Max Beckmann (the latter a major influence on Philip Guston [Auping 2003a: 38]), as well as to Guston’s later work. That said, the temptation to substitute one prevailing aesthetic ideology for another, or one modernism for another, ignores the degree to which Popular Front artists understood themselves as inseparable from their immediate social and historical circumstances. Thus, the question of finding representative works of art to be gathered into a canon becomes secondary to the specific interventions cultural products make in contested sites and moments of historical conflict.

From this standpoint, Nochlin’s “many important byways” would need to be revised to suggest “innumerable important byways.” One provisional way of tracking these variegated cultural forms can be found in a book published at the end of the ’40s by Muriel Rukeyser, another poet who worked for the OWI, and who at the time was far more famous and accomplished than Olson, while three years his junior (Rukeyser was Guston’s exact contemporary: 1913-1980). As its title suggests, Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry* (1996 [1949]) reads social and personal circumstances first and formal issues—i.e., genre and canon formations—second. Ranging widely over poetry’s landscape, Rukeyser discusses the political significance of Native American chants decades before they became the centerpiece of North American ethnopoetics; her sensitive reading of blues lyrics anticipates LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (1999) and Angela Davis’ (1998) important books on the subject; and her refusal to distinguish between high and low in poetry confirms a populist approach while also presaging postmodern strategies. She

writes sympathetically about cowboy songs and jump-rope rhymes; and employing an interdisciplinary lens, discusses the social relevance of a variety of cultural forms, including film, architecture, radio, photography, and more. Though its combination of the biographical, social, and critical spoke to successive generations of writers, in 1949 Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* was a fading voice amid the cresting onslaught of avant-garde formalist aesthetics and criticism.

This is a formalism and accompanying mode of reading that pedagogical expediencies and the presumptive equation of avant-garde forms with progressive politics have perpetuated into the present. As a result, it's easy to overlook the fact that one of the foundational texts of this formalist method itself comes out of aesthetic debates within the Popular Front—Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," with its articulation of a late-'30s Trotskyite aesthetics (a synthesis Robert Smithson described much less charitably as an attempt "to graft a lame formalism to a fuzzy Marxist outlook" [1996: 162]). Writing in 1939 that, "Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself" (1961: 6), Greenberg sounded a death knell for Popular Front art as the most influential cultural movement of the 1930s and established a set of formal criteria that subsequent iterations of the avant-garde have found difficult to shake. Of course, Greenberg never could have done this on his own. His critical writings were stirred into a much more potent mix of post-war anti-communism, the rise of corporate collectors with a taste for abstract—read: depoliticized—art to adorn office building lobbies, and even the CIA (for the last of these, see Saunders [1999]). Moreover, as Dijkstra convincingly argues, it's not a coincidence in terms of later reception (or lack thereof), and it's a sign of the systematic

racism in US society, that the '30s was the only decade non-immigrant artists and artists of Northern European descent were in the minority as major figures in US art and literature (2003: 13).¹³ While shifts in US culture and politics during World War II may have ended the Popular Front, this second set of institutional and social factors served to bury it.

A year after Greenberg published “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Olson is writing the first poems eventually included in his posthumous *Collected Poems*. Sometimes, to read Olson backward is to read him forward, and to read him forward is to read him backward. In “The Songs of Maximus,” which appear early in book I of *The Maximus Poems*, Olson summons a Depression-era context of “faces of want” to critique the wasteful expenditures of post-war American affluence:

In the land of plenty, have
nothing to do with it
take the way of
the lowest,
including
your legs, go
contrary, go
sing (1983: 19)

¹³ Dijkstra goes on to point out that some of the primary champions of the conservative American scene painting movement employed an anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic rhetoric in juxtaposing American Scene painting with Popular Front work (19-22).

Is an ethics of renunciation at the heart—or perhaps just the start—of Olson’s polis? If so, what relationship might it have with the post-Holocaust ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the fundamental ethical act is taking the bread from one’s own mouth and placing it in the mouth of the unfed other (1991: 56, 74)? What is the role of opposition—“go / contrary”—in this social ethics? Legs figure prominently in Guston’s late paintings, and he stacked emaciated versions of them in his work to represent the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. A grossly swollen leg figures prominently in Guston’s indicting, fall-of-Saigon, 1975 portrait of Richard Nixon, as various Nixon body parts—including phallic nose; stubbly, testicular cheeks; and phlebotic peninsular-shaped leg—stand in for the whole. However scabrously inverted in this painting, metonymy remains rooted in want; it’s a part yearning for more than a symbolic completeness. For this reason, it’s impossible not to read the metonymic strategies of Olson and Guston’s work against the background of Depression-era lack and the federal New Deal and local Popular Front responses to it. In this sense, the *Maximus Poems* as a whole are propelled by metonymy: Maximus himself and the city of Gloucester Olson chronicles are not metaphors, and certainly not symbols, but literal and imaginary parts gesturing at an always unfinished larger body politic.

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