What to whom: a document

Ammiel Alcalay

We cannot disconnect the narratives of intellectual life from the operational procedures of documentation and official history within the "national security state" that we live in everyday. This is not an attempt to posit a hermetically sealed continuum, but rather to begin unpacking the enormous impact hierarchical and covert structures have on us, from across varied kinds of discourse. What follows is an exercise in immediate investigation of this. While looking for material regarding Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris's choice of Charles Olson's "La Préface" for the opening text in Volume Two of their *Poems for the Millenium*, I found an interview that Jack Foley conducted with them. Foley dwells on the details of the poem before saying: "I mention Olson in particular because Olson has come under considerable attack by the language poets, who are a very important group of people." While I've been aware of various points of friction between some of those who have come to be classified as "language poets" and aspects of Olson's poetics, a lot of that history has become submerged in what I've characterized at other points in this book as "false debates." Such "false debates," as I've gotten to know very well from my experience with my book *After Jews & Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (1993) — a book that wielded certain influence and helped create a new field of inquiry, but whose critics refused to take any public stands on it — always come at the cost of deeper exploration and debate, not to mention refinement of one's own positions and the range of possibilities for re-imagining and redefining the very terms of a debate. Such structures mirror the constraints and privatizing forces within our official political and media framework and, I would assert, these are not unrelated phenomena.

As the investigation progressed, I encountered, by chance, the first quote that appears below (part of an exchange with Ralph Maud printed in the *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society*) by prominent literary critic Marjorie Perloff. This was just a few days after having read *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*, by Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson. I was struck by the contradiction between what some of the practicing poets were saying in their interviews and the critic's quote — specifically regarding Olson. I was even more struck because a number of the poets were people whose work Perloff admires. Olson is, of course, an easy target for a certain kind of feminist critique. But I sensed something else at work here, having continually noted the absence of contemporary reference to Olson's range of concerns in so many poets and movements where one might expect not only reference but some active engagement, whether positive or negative or somewhere in-between. In what gets called a feminist critique, for example, deeper questions of gender and patriarchy seldom get explored or expressed in their biographical, political, economic, historical, or mythological context and complexity. One of the still important, and still threatening, qualities about Olson's work is precisely its political

challenge to administered forms of knowledge, scholarship, and poetic activity. Divisions of labor, mythologies, academic power, the role of friendship, cosmologies, and a myriad other things that might very usefully be explored or addressed get left by the wayside. But when a poet like Olson is superficially dismissed, things left by the wayside or swept under the proverbial carpet don't actually disappear.

The chance encounter between seemingly contradictory assertions brought up by the quotes I found seemed to open a dialogue of sorts, or at least a place where certain questions could be raised. Once I matched the quote from Perloff with quotes from women recounting their actual experiences, I proceeded to go through other things I had on hand, looking for material that might be relevant. What follows is by necessity initial, but it also captures how thoughts and ideas unfold in the moment of their appearance and pursuit. The investigation poses a series of questions: how do we access our history and verify our experience of it? Does the theoretical/critical imperative (or some other superstructure), take precedence over expressions of indebtedness, ambivalence, or contradictory experiences expressed by the subjects of inquiry themselves? Why are lineage or indebtedness kept secret in some cases and loudly pronounced in others? Why is one dismissed as a biographer, while another is elevated to a critic? How do structures of judgment and issues of "originality" reduce the complexities of poetic movement and transference, making some poets "innovators" and others "followers"? On what bases are such judgments even made? Might they follow the imperative of the *New York Times Book Review* quoted in an earlier chapter, deeming Olson, for example, a "failure" at the outset, without even stating any criteria for "success"? Why does partisanship so seamlessly wedded to official versions of history go unremarked, while partisanship going against the grain is considered crude or unsophisticated?

The way I have chosen to proceed is not even an exercise in partisanship so much as an enactment of it. My purpose here is not to all to settle scores, but rather to explore how cases are made and how histories can unfold in a public way, revealing parallels between the ways power and control over experience get distributed, and the fate of representations of our personal and collective encounters with the world.

Marjorie Perloff:

In c. 1970, Philip Yanella, a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, where I was then living, asked me if I'd like to contribute something to a special Olson issue of boundary 2 he was editing. I had never read much Olson, being at that time very much in the camp of Robert Lowell et al., but thought this would be a chance to explore the work. Reading Olson "from the outside," as it were, I was overwhelmed by the hype — that is, by the pure adulation the Olsonites gave their hero. Everything he wrote, everything he did was regarded as special. And that included, of course, "Projective Verse 1950," an essay that was treated like some sort of milestone in critical discourse.

Now to me, "Projective Verse 1950" was very interesting but I hardly thought then, and I don't think now, that it was as momentous a statement as it has been made out to me [sic]… As for individual cases, I don't think it matters whether Olson owned this or that book by Williams or whether he had read this or that essay. My point was that these ideas and phrasings were in the air — Olson didn't exactly think them up. Certainly he might have known Williams's "The Poem as a Field of Action," but even if he didn't know the piece as such, Williams's priority here suggests that Olson was more of a disseminator than an originator, when it came to poetics. That was and continues to be my basic point. I did not call him a plagiarist because plagiarism is hardly the issue. Originality of conceptualization is.

…Over the past two decades I've come to see "Projective Verse" as an important statement historically speaking, never mind that it wasn't "original." Pound's own statements have been shown to be equally unoriginal in many cases. And I have come to find Olson much more interesting and exciting than I took him to be in 1971 or so when I wrote the piece. At the same time, I now understand my original animosity (and its current residue) as everything having to do with Olson's patriarchal stance, something I didn't understand in 1970 when the feminist movement had not yet been launched. Olson's sexism, evident in so much of the poetry and criticism, and foregrounded in studies like Charles Boer's Olson in Connecticut, where we read about Olson's expulsion of women from his classroom and subsequent glee when they "couldn't take it," is pretty hard for women to take. And I shall ask you a question I asked Chris Beach when he similarly criticized my piece in his ABC of Influence: how many women critics (or younger poets) have responded favorably to Olson? There's Ann Charters, but she is writing primarily as a biographer. Who else? And if women have on the whole steered clear, doesn't that tell us something?

Ann Charters:

I don't think that anyone took me personally as somebody whom they had to bother with. The only one who did was Charles Olson.

Hettie Jones:

And then when I met him he was just UP and I was DOWN. But he made me feel so comfortable that that disparity in size just melted away, and we just became instant friends. I hadn't met an older person who was so comforting and encouraging to me.

D.H. Melhem:

We may courteously or condescendingly admit that certain speeches and sermons are "poetic." Perhaps Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech is very like a poem. The epigraph to this introduction, Du Bois's "Postscript" to the *The Gift of Black* (1924), may indeed be a prose poem. And some musical incursions (blues and jazz) may be admissible, in certain instances, to a kind of racy exotic privilege, but the degree and purpose must be questioned. The most incisive comment, however, remains Charles Olson's "Who knows what a poem ought to sound like? Until it's thar?"

Joanne Kyger:

Olson's "Projective Verse" hit me like a wallop

Diane di Prima:

In terms of direct influence, though, I'd say that Robert Duncan and Charles Olson were it, and are still…

Susan Howe:

It would be hard to think of poetry apart from history. This is one reason Olson has been so important to me.

Rosemarie Waldrop:

though I would not place the act, the center of the energy totally "within," but on the intersection — and interaction — of within and without, of I and world (Olson's "skin"), of libido and language.

Some are more concerned with *the mot just*, with *the* perfect metaphor, others, with what "happens between" the words (Charles Olson)

…finally, that the vertical tendency of metaphor (Olson: "the suck of symbol") is our hotline to transcendence, to divine meaning, hence the poet as priest and prophet.

…What matters is not so much the "thing," not "the right word," but what "happens…between" (Olson).

Alice Notley:

I think I was influenced a lot by my misunderstandings of people like Olson and Williams.

Eileen Myles:

I was walking around this year thinking, I'm like Charles Olson, because I feel as if I've just used the inside of my apartment, the street, the neighborhood again and again and again.

Kathy Acker

> WROTE DOWN "PRAY FOR US THE DEAD," THE FIRST LINE IN
> THE FIRST POEM BY CHARLES OLSON SHE HAD EVER READ WHEN
> SHE WAS A TEENAGER. ALL THE DOLLS WERE DEAD. DEAD
> HAIR. WHEN SHE LOOKED UP THIS POEM, ITS FIRST LINE
> WAS, "WHAT DOES NOT CHANGE/ IS THE WILL TO CHANGE."
> WENT TO A NEARBY CEMETERY AND WITH STICK DOWN IN
> SAND WROTE THE WORDS "PRAY FOR US THE DEAD." THOUGHT,
> WHO IS DEAD? THE DEAD TREES? WHO IS DEAD? WE LIVE IN
> SERVICE OF THE SPIRIT. MADE MASS WITH TREES DEAD AND
> DIRT AND UNDERNEATH HUMANS AS DEAD OR LIVING AS ANY
> STONE OR WOOD.

"When I first started writing, I was influenced by poetry, mainly the Black Mountain school of poetry."

Peter Wollen:

> Acker's debt to Black Mountain — to Charles Olson, in particular, whose work she had known since she was still a schoolgirl — is quite clear and it is strange that this should have gone unrecognized, at least as she saw it, because she was not considered to be a poet. She adapted his concern with writing as language-driven, with a certain kind of incantatory text, based on the physical cadence of the breath, while introducing these preoccupations into the writing of prose rather than poetry.

Diane Wakoski:

I don't feel I'm doing anything different from what Charles Olson is doing, which is trying to discover the geography of America, which is the geography of the world, which is what human civilization is all about, and which is what my life as a poet is all about.

Olson's concerns were with archaeology, history, and language as it changes through history, so when he uses his city of Gloucester, Massachusetts, as a focus for these interests, open-ended lines which seem digressive become essential; and discovering that each subject led rapidly to another and left a field of discourse, a field of information to roam around in, his lines found themselves unhappy with simple objects and predicates. Olson found that history doesn't have beginnings, middles, and ends, as the neat composer's mind would like to think. So each poem becomes a field, a landscape of ideas, and completely baffles the critic or reader whose reading techniques were formed by the New Criticism.

I try to get away from the whole biological argument that men are that way and women are that way, but simply that's what our civilization has been. And it's an enormous fight. I was fascinated and delighted last week when a critic, a man named Sherman Paul — who is quite a traditional New England critic, an expert on Emerson and Hart Crane who is currently very, very, very interested in open-field poetry and is in fact working on a book about Charles Olson — came to deliver a lecture on Olson, and gave both a brilliant lecture on Olson's mythology and a very interesting seminar on Olson's coming out of the New England tradition. And it was impressive to listen to him talk about the need for an open-field criticism that can in some way deal with open-field poetry. And we were all interested in a kind of minor little baby intellectual problem, which is why so much of the very masculine open field poetry like Olson's or Creeley's or Duncan's is spurned by the new critics because certainly it seems to be in the tradition of the masculine and the abstract. The real answer is (Paul spent about half an hour talking about the subject) how personal the ideology and aesthetic of the open-field poets are. That they absolutely insist their poems are personal documents. They are *not* abstract documents. That ultimately it is not Maximus speaking; it is *Olson* speaking. And by the end of the Maximus poems he is *declaring* himself to be Olson; no longer — I mean, Maximus never really started as a persona. He started as another name for Olson, but even by the end of the Maximus poems he is not… the name Maximus isn't important; it is Olson and the insistence that it is Olson and Olson's history, which if he has a big enough mind is big enough to encompass the whole of civilization. That is, if you will, moving the feminine notion of the personal in on the masculine notion of the abstract. And of course we want to think of the androgynous — not in any biological sense meaning having both physical organs, which must be really freakish rather than real, but as a spiritual combining of things — certainly that is moving towards what enlightenment must really be so that you can have the soundness of the abstract principles of the world informed by the urgent sense of the personal. And so far, there isn't a criticism. Even structuralist criticism has moved in the direction of the antipersonal. And yet the whole purpose of structuralist criticism was to deal with the eccentricities and the personalities of twentieth-century freedom and writing that comes after Freud and Marx, in a period of time where people feel absolutely authentic enough to declare themselves personal and at the same time voices, and where we don't have to think of ourselves as spokesmen for groups of people, but in fact proclaim that the personal voice is big enough to be an important voice. And in a sense

this is what contemporary poetry is all about, a strange combination of the lyric and the narrative — which is the narrative for heroic epic verse, and the lyric for personal love poem; putting them together and saying that the personal voice of the love poem can be an epic voice. In other words, it can have a narrative content. It can be meaningful in terms of philosophy, history, and civilization. We don't…and I'm not claiming this for myself; I'm claiming this for all serious contemporary poetry, and I'm still angry at the critics who can't see that this is going on and who try very hard to separate out, as they say, the sheets from the ghosts, the strong intellectual (therefore reputable) poets and the weak, namby-pamby personal poets. And I do think that the whole women's movement has done a lot to emphasize the very *worst* elements of this with women claiming, "*We* feel. You don't feel." Well, I mean, it's no better to feel if you don't think than to think if you don't feel.

Anne Waldman:

I date my confirmation of a life in poetry to the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965 and the point where Charles Olson says:

> No, I wanna talk, I mean, you want to listen to a poet? You know, a poet, when he's alive, whether he talks or reads you his poems is the same thing. Dig that! And when he is made of three parts — his life, his mouth, and his poem — then, by god, the earth belongs to us! And what I think has happened is that that's — wow, gee, one doesn't like to claim things, but god, isn't it exciting? I mean, I feel like a kid, I'm in the presence of an event, which I don't believe myself.

"*In the presence of an event*" was the illuminating phrase for me. His reading was fragmented, disturbed, and chaotic on one level, but completely lucid on another. He kept the audience there for more than four hours.

Olson continues to be a kind of "imago," as do Robert Duncan, Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs, all for very different reasons. But that oral moment in Berkeley where Olson played the fool, the anti-hero poet at his shamanic worst, or most vulnerable on some level — that presence was like a strange attractor as I, as a young person, witnessed it. And the event still ripples in my poetic consciousness. And there's the event of Maximus, rich with history and mythology and language and location as a salvation for the poet, his only anchor or link to reality, as we know from the biography and various accounts. He was really possessed with this poem, people would visit him and he would be surrounded with little scraps of paper and speaking the poem, living the poem. I can identify with that kind of possession and salvation. Poets of my generation and much younger have the conversation about whether it's possible to ever have these kinds of heroic poetic figures again. It's a dying patriarchal breed, perhaps. Whether it's Spicer or Olson or Duncan or Ginsberg or Ed Dorn. Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Ashberry, Baraka, of course, are still active, alive, and are major poetic pioneers. But the imposing, egomaniacal, fierce, ethical poetry hero whose presence is as startling as the work — where has he gone? And can't there be women heroes? Maybe all the contemporary careerism gets in the way. And maybe the power has shifted to women who have a different, though often as uncompromising, kind of command. We'll see.

Daphne Marlatt:

"that etymology paper really led me into all the writing I would subsequently do… it opened up language for me."

Fred Wah:

The problem has to do, in Marlatt's case, with where her language comes from. She strives for a writing which will accurately reflect the condition of the writer at the moment of the writing. This is called "proprioceptive" writing and Marlatt is one of its most disciplined proponents.

Proprioception is a physiological term and has to do with the sensory reception in our bodies responding to stimuli arising from within. The term is also the title of a short "chart" written by Charles Olson, circa 1959, in which Olson seeks to place "consciousness," a very important condition for Marlatt. Olson says the gain for proprioception is:

> that *movement* or *action*
> is 'home.' Neither of the Unconscious nor Projection
> (here used to remove the false opposition of
> 'Concscious'; 'consciousness' is self) have a home
> unless the DEPTH implicit is physical being —
> built in space-time specifics, and moving (by
> movement of 'its own' — is asserted, or found-
> out as such. Thus the advantage of the value
> 'proprioception.' As such.

The "soul" is in the "body." George Bowering's outstanding interview with Daphne Marlatt, quoted in this introduction so extensively, is called "Given This Body." Repeatedly in the interview and elsewhere, Marlatt has insisted on the place of the body in the origins and processes of her writing. When I talked with her recently she said, "I realize things about my living when I'm writing that I think it's necessary for me to realize and I don't seem to be able to realize them any other way.

Kathleen Fraser:

… the *visualized* topos of interior speech and thought — that full or fully empty arena of the page imagined into being by a significant number of non-traditional women poets now publishing — cannot really be adequately thought about without acknowledging the immense, permission-giving moment of Charles Olson's "PROJECTIVE VERSE" manifesto (widely circulated from 1960 onwards, through its paperback arrival in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*). There is no doubt that — even if arrived at through a subtle mix of osmosis and affinity rather than a direct reading of Olson's manifesto — poets entering literature after 1960 gained access to a more expansive page through Olson's own visual enactment of "field poetics," as mapped out in his major exploratory work, *The Maximus Poems*.

An urgency towards naming, bringing voice to off-the-record thought and experience — as marked by increasing eccentricities of syntax, cadence, diction and tone — would have lacked such a clear concept of PAGE as canvas or screen on which to project flux, without the major invitation Olson provided… this, in spite of his territorial inclusive/exclusive boy-talk. The excitement Olson generated, the event of the *making* — the hands-on construction of a poem being searched out, breathed into and lifted through the page, fragment by fragment, from the archeological layers of each individual's peculiar life — revealed the complex grid of the maker's physical and mental acitivity. Its "*it*". Olson's *acute visual sensitivity* separates *The Maximus Poems* from *The Cantos* and *Paterson*…." (Susan Howe) — two other models for poets writing in the 1960s, who desired to break from a more standardized poem model. Olson's idea of high energy "projection" engaged an alchemy of colliding sounds and visual constructions, valuing *ir*regularity, counterpoint, adjacency, ambiguity… the movement of poetic language as investigative tool. An open field, not a closed case.

It was Olson's declared move away from the narcissistically probing, psychological defining of

self — so seductively explored by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell in the early and mid -1960s, and by their avid followers for at least a generation after — that provided a major alternative ethic of writing for women poets. While seriously committed to gender consciousness, a number of us carried an increasing scepticism towards any fixed rhetoric of the poem, implied or intoned. We resisted the prescription of authorship as an exclusively unitary proposition — the essential “I” positioned as central to the depiction of reflectivity. As antidote to a mainstream poetics that enthusiastically embraced those first dramatic “confessional” poems, Olson (in “PROJECTIVE VERSE”) had already proposed:

> The getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature…

The excitement and insistence of Olson’s spatial, historical and ethical margins, while clearly speaking from male imperatives, nevertheless helped to stake out an area whose initial usefuleness to the poem began to be inventively explored by American women — in some cases drastically *re*concieved, beginning with work in the 1960s and 1970s by such poets as Barbara Guest, Susan Howe and Hannah Weiner and continuing forward to very recent poetry by women just beginning to publish.

Sources

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