Staying Open
Charles Olson's Sources and Influences

Edited by
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Series in Literary Studies


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Introduction

> "In the world of the shaping spirit, save for its patterns, there is nothing new that was not old. For the work of the creators is the mastery and transmutation and reordering into shapes of beauty of the given universe within us and without us"
>
> -John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*[1]

Staying Open: Charles Olson's Sources and Influences is a source study in the tradition of Lowes's magisterial *The Road to Xanadu*, perhaps the greatest source study ever written in the United States. With verbal élan and a level of literary appreciation that is now passé, Lowes explores the creative process and the labyrinth of the imagination, explicating the operations of transmutation that shaped Coleridge's poetry. The twelve unique studies in this book all involve the provocative claim that Lowes advances in his final conclusion concerning Coleridge's creation of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" – the artistic process re-orders the shapes of external reality and the inner consciousness, casting new and luminous patterns of beauty, truth, and information from older remnants and fragments. While understanding such a process is certainly a grandiose task, Lowes elsewhere qualifies that the total comprehension of the creative process is impossible: "it is the total content of the poet's mind, which never gets itself completely expressed, and never can, that suffuses and colours everything which flashes or struggles into utterance. Every expression of an artist is merely a focal point of the surging chaos of the unexpressed."[2] The surging chaos of the imagination, the content of the poet's mind, and the expressive struggle to create: we are after these subjects in our collective and alternate readings of Charles Olson's poetry. By definition, any explication of these lofty subjects will be incomplete and provisional, as Lowes prudently claims. Within this book, a reader will therefore immediately discover gaps, with no essays on Olson's historical sources, for instance. The value of this book does not lie in totality, I think, but rather in its various methods and approaches for comprehending Olson's writing: twelve

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[1] John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 396.
[2] Ibid., 12.

different essays broadly linked through their investigation into what Lowes calls "the procedure of the creative faculty itself."[3]

Olson and his contemporaries appreciated the power of Lowes's undertaking in his now aged and oft-forgotten study. Olson's constant companion, Robert Duncan, discusses the importance of Lowes's book for his understanding of the imaginative process in his essay, "Preface: Jack Spicer's *One Night Stand & Other Poems*." Duncan refers to how Lowes's text revealed to him that every poem is "a medium of messages" conveyed by other texts: "What John Livingston Lowes taught us was that no poem was an isolated or insulated product but drew upon and led in return to all that the poet or the reader of the poem had ever known […]."[4] Lowes's studies influenced Olson as well, although tracking the direct references to Olson's sense of Lowes's arguments is not as easy as it is with Duncan. In Ralph Maud's biographical study of Olson's reading, Lowes occupies a significant endnote: "Professor Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* […] was so much a 'best-seller' around Harvard in the thirties that it is remarkable that anyone in Olson's position should escape having a copy." "He certainly knew it," Maud continues, "as he knew Lowes's *Geoffrey Chaucer and the Development of his Genius* (1934), which he makes a note of on the endpapers of F. N. Robinson's standard 'Student's Cambridge Edition,' *The Complete Worlds of Geoffrey Chaucer* […], the text Olson used at Harvard, and kept."[5] These citations indicate that Olson and Duncan consciously worked within a framework that regarded texts as a medium of messages shaped from and by other texts, that believed the procedures of the imagination involved operations of transformation, and that deployed theoretical knowledge about the importance of having strong sources when creating poetry. We mean this study as a useful guide to these sources and influences, of course, but it is meant as a guide to the function of the human imagination engaged in creative work.

By unpacking Charles Olson's sources, *Staying Open* also extends the work of Olson's first editor, George F. Butterick. In his crucial and yet out-of-print *Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson*, Butterick carefully dates and annotates every poem in *Maximus*, directing readers to the sources behind Olson's allusive and complicated world-poem. When considering this type of scholarship in his own introduction, Butterick states, "the major difficulty,

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[3] Ibid., 5.

[4] Robert Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1985), 170.

[5] Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 235.

and it can be discouraging, is the large amount of reference needed to populate a poem that seeks to occupy and extend a world," a fairly concise statement of the difficulty of studying Olson's sources and a summary of Olson's modus operandi in his opus.[6] Still, Butterick's purpose in the *Guide* is vastly different from our own: "The desire has been to treat Olson on his own terms," he states.[7] Butterick does not interpret the poems, apply theory to the poetry, or extend the content of Olson's verse into the realms of argumentation. His informational study achieves its modest yet massive purpose by identifying source passages without meditating on Olson's precise transformations, his versification of so much socio-cultural material, or even the implications of the poems for literary approaches. *Staying Open* does build on Butterick's strict scholarly method, but each essay in the book makes arguments about the poems, puts them in conversation with contemporary theory, and speculates over the use of the poems for today's realities. *Staying Open* should also be timely at this critical-moment in Olson's legacy since The University of California Press recently allowed Butterick's *Guide* to fall into "out of print" status. By directing attention to the value of the academic source-study for situating a world-poem like Olson's, renewed interests in Butterick's *Guide*, in Olson's poetics, and in the properties of the human imagination could follow.

That is to say that Butterick and Lowes wrote two different, linked, yet aged styles of "source-study" in the history of academic scholarship that seeks to comprehend and explicate the creative process. Unlike that older vintage, *Staying Open* follows how *Criticism Genetique* resuscitated and added newer ingredients to that fine wine. Genetic criticism is a mode of textual study that developed in France in the late 1960s alongside post-structuralism. By going into the archive, investigating drafts, annotations, pre-documents (dubbed avant-textes), and the sources for the development of a given text, genetic criticism aims at understanding the temporal formation of a given text along with how each textual transformation casts light on contemporary approaches to literary study. The founder of Genetic Criticism, Louis Hay, indicates that "while genre studies, poetics, thematics, or narratology have produced remarkable works, they have also increasingly accentuated their autonomy."[8] In

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[6] George F. Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1980), ix.

[7] Ibid., xiv.

[8] Louis Hay, "Genetic Criticism: Origins and Perspectives," in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes*, ed. Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden (1979; repr. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004), 23.

contrast to these isolated approaches, Hay asserts, "Genetic analysis makes us question this development because it confronts us with a text in movement. The diverse givens that are acting upon it – ideas, representation, phantasms, as well as formal, rhythmical structures and linguistic constraints – react upon each other in the movement that carries the text forward."[9] Hay distinguishes genetic criticism and its study of avant-textes from isolated styles of literary theory, adding the textual history of a given poem as an ingredient in acts of interpretation. Hay's "diverse givens" that create a textual product take multifarious forms, but his key point at the outset of the genetic movement in France stressed reconstructing the context of a given poem before applying theoretical arguments. His emphasis on the poem's context does not mean that the poem must be studied as an autonomous objet d'art – far from it. In an important essay of 1985, "Toward a Science of Literature: Manuscript Analysis and the Genesis of the Work," genetic theorist Pierre-Marc de Biasi states that "Defining its research domain as one of systematically studying manuscripts to restore the genesis of written works, textual genetics does not claim in any way to be a substitute for different critical approaches to text."[10] Within this collection, readers will therefore find twelve different theoretical approaches to Olson, ranging from the ecological to the linguistic, the archeological to the cultural.

By exploring Olson's vast archive of sources and his creative processes, *Staying Open* undertakes one other critical task: further destabilizing the narrative in American poetry that casts Olson as a poor imitation of Ezra Pound. For too long, the diachronic, vertical, and Bloomian model of influence reigned over Olson's legacy, pitting him into a masculine agon against Pound, his mighty father.[11] This model of influence limits an understanding of what Olson writes in *The Maximus Poems* and misses the complexity of the human imagination's potentialities. The agonistic model is, in fact, a persistent myth in criticism that attempts to situate Olson; it originated with Marjorie Perloff's takedown of Olson's poetry in her 1973 essay, "Charles Olson and the 'Inferior Predecessors': 'Projective Verse' Revisited." In that essay, Perloff compares

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Pierre-Marc de Biasi, "Toward a Science of Literature: Manuscript Analysis and the Genesis of the Work," in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes*, ed. Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden (1979; repr. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004), 42.

[11] See Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4-5. Epstein does an excellent job of defining a horizontal mode of influence against the Bloomian model, and he applies this mode to his reading of the New York Poets.

quotes from Olson's "Projective Verse" with selected quotes from essays by Pound and Williams, arguing that Olson plagiarized most of his ideas. She then close reads one of Olson's early poems, "I, Mencius," and one of his later poems, "The Song of Ullikummi," concluding that Olson's writing is a "paradigm" of "confusion, inconsistency, and pretentiousness."[12] Perloff's argument adheres to the Bloomian model while also deploying a limited scope in its critique of Olson. The essay does not consider *The Maximus Poems* or a decade of essay writing and lectures in the 1960s, but the overall effect cemented a reading of the tradition of American poetry that only admits a small number of "successful" writers. Ammiel Alcalay questions this critical thinking in his 2013 book *a little history*, noting that "It's as if there were two strains of American poetry: those deriving from Pound […] and those deriving from Williams." "These origins and splits," he polemicizes, "are posited so that everyone else becomes derivative or an imitator and can then be erased. Poets are not looked at in the complexity of their own historical or poetic experience."[13] *Staying Open* follows Alcalay's implied recommendations, examining Olson's own experiences in pedagogy, music, with predecessor poets and with contemporary poets, as well as through ecology, philosophy, indigenous knowledge, and archeology.

The first essay in this volume by Michael Kindellan is titled "Projective Verse and Pedagogy," which reads projective poetry as a mode of pedagogy, such that no separation between Olson the poet and Olson the teacher exists. Focusing on Olson's teaching at Black Mountain College and analyzing Olson's interactions with his colleagues in the form of meeting minutes drawn from the records of Black Mountain College contained at the Western Regional Archives in North Carolina, Kindellan shows that the experimental potential in Olson's poetry has lessons for education as a practice and as a way of life. As he advances his argument that Olson's poetry and his pedagogy are mutually self-informing, non-distinct practices, he outlines a new reading of "Projective Verse," situates Olson's pedagogical-poetry in the context of John Dewey's educational theories, and argues that Olson opposed received orthodoxies as a general rule. To that end, the essay hones in on Olson's understanding of the poet's enactment in verse: how writing discloses the effects of an individual's phenomenal being and how the poet's activity amid the stream of reality constructs and is constructed by spatio-temporal realities.

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[12] Marjorie Perloff, "Charles Olson and the 'Inferior Predecessors': 'Projective Verse' Revisited," *ELH* 40, no. 2 (Summer, 1973): 306.

[13] Ammiel Alcalay, *a little history* (New York: re:public / UpSet Press, 2013), 104.

Kindellan does not explore a direct line of influence on Olson's poetics, offering instead a theoretical recalibration of Olson's poetry in relation to pedagogy; hence, Jeffrey Gardiner's essay, "Olson's Poetics and Pedagogy: Influences at Black Mountain College," functions as a companion piece. Gardiner focuses on the thinkers and writers who influenced Olson's poetry and pedagogy during his time teaching at Black Mountain College. By doing so, he is able to argue against a line of critical thinking that regards Olson's pedagogy and the poetic culture that developed around "Projective Verse" as a closed and exclusive coterie. Gardiner shows that Black Mountain College inspired Olson's interest in a process and material-based style of pedagogy that traces its lineage back to Bauhaus ideas on form and materials. Olson discovered this emphasis on process and material in conversation with Josef and Anni Albers, in his energetic dinner talks with Erwin Straus, in the pottery classes at the College, and as a result of his relationship with Merce Cunningham, who ran the dance program at Black Mountain College. By reconstructing the vibrant atmosphere of cross-disciplinary exchange that Olson experienced at Black Mountain College, the essay paints a picture of the College that reveals why diachronic and vertical models of influence are flawed. The College and its many experimental practitioners and artists engaged every day with Olson, and these day-to-day influences clarified for Olson an understanding of process, the role of the body in art, and the human modes of engagement that derive from the diversity of sensory perceptions. The social life at Black Mountain College represented the antithesis of coterie knowledge and influenced Olson's later poetry, which developed as a result of his egalitarian conversations with a community of artists, writers, and thinkers.

Olson's pedagogy thus constitutes the first movement in our consideration of Olson's sources, but the second movement transitions to an underemphasized disciplinary influence on Olson's poetry: music. Michael Jonik's essay "Olson's *Dérive*: Near-Far Boulez" explores how the musical and theoretical work of Pierre Boulez inflected the relationship between music and sound in Olson's practice. Jonik offers a unique portrait of Olson's well-known theories of field composition, revealing that from listening to Boulez and experiencing Cy Twombly's disjunctive architectures of painting, Olson developed ideas about field composition as a sound-structure, about spatio-temporal formation, and about the creative act. Olson's definitions of measure, metric, and prosody correspond to Boulez's understanding of "floating time" and "smooth space," in Jonik's reading, and these ideas shaped the open-ended and architectonic forms of projective verse. Incorporating readings of David Tudor's performance of Boulez's Second Sonata at Black Mountain College alongside philosopher Gilles Deleuze's work on Boulez, Jonik reads Olson's translation of floating or non-pulsed time into projective com-

position as the emergence of chance and choice, an on-going search for new forms and syntaxes in the drifts of the on-going processes of reality. Open form thereby negotiates the fluctuations of experience adequately yet all too briefly; music and poetry access these occasions in what Boulez called the *dérive* – a dual semantic pun on the derivations of a particular object or work of art (derived from) and that which drifts away or passes into the streams of time and space.

While Jonik's essay explores the influence of a musician who Olson often praised (Boulez), Alexander Ruggeri's essay, "'By ear, he sd.' open listening with Charles Olson and John Cage," considers Olson's connection to a contemporary (John Cage) who he criticized. Ruggeri closely reads Cage's and Olson's essays, arguing that in spite of Olson's public critique of Cage, both conceive listening as an embodied experience that radically rethinks aesthetic limits and that subsequently expands a listener's socio-political consciousness. By defining Cage's and Olson's relationship to listening as active engagement, Ruggeri reads against the grain of common interpretations of Olson's relationship to Cage, who Olson critiqued openly in his poem "A Toss for John Cage." Olson's swipe at Cage notwithstanding, the composer and the poet shared a belief in the act of listening as an act of social renewal and regeneration, Ruggeri suggests, such that they adhered to a commitment that connects listening and the health of the polis. Ruggeri analyzes how Cage and Olson developed complex logics around this connection between listening and social health, touching on topics as diverse as their antipathy for over-intellectualization, their spite for inherited formal traditions and techniques, and their opposition to the commodification of art. Ruggeri pays careful attention to the correspondences between Olson's and Cage's respective prose writings, as well as the way that listening becomes a socially affirmative practice in *The Maximus Poems*. In spite of their radically different modes of art, then, the commitment to listening as a means of actively engaging exterior reality in order to arrive at egalitarian health drives the experiments that Olson and Cage undertook.

While Jonik and Ruggeri focus on the direct influences two specific musicians wielded over Olson's poetics, Seth Forrest's reading of projective verse explores one of Olson's signature prosodic devices: the percussive discontinuities of the stammer. Forrest's essay begins with a reading of Olson's recording of his own poetry with Barry Miles on vinyl, released as *Charles Olson Reads from Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*. Olson's vocalization of his own poetry on the record, as well as his reactions to hearing his own voice stammer through the poems, substantially challenges readings of Olson's poetry as a mere poetics of breath, according to Forrest. By taking the stammer as a significant development in Olson's prosody throughout the fifties and sixties, Forrest is able to

clarify the distinctions between oral and aural poetics, distinctions that have too often led to confusing interpretations of "Projective Verse" thanks to Olson's own incomplete theorization in the essay. In many ways, the models of influence suggested by Forrest's essay indicate that technology, prosody, and the lived particulars of bodily experience and expression are powerful influences on imaginative processes. Along with his technical attention to Olson's prosody, Forrest's close readings of the relationships between Pound, composer George Antheil, and Olson's inflection of Pound's technique further support an understanding of influence that is heterogeneous, multiple, and in-process.

After the section on music and sound, *Staying Open* turns to Jeff Davis's essay, "Shadow on the Rock: Morphology and Voice in Olson's later *Maximus Poems*," which complements Forrest's work by analyzing why approaches to Olson's poetry have struggled with theorizing the position of "the voice" in projective poetics. Davis unpacks Olson's use of the tense known as "the middle voice," a tense absent from standardized English in which a subject acts on himself, for himself, and on something belonging to oneself. Although "middle voice" does not exist in English, it is quite common in other languages, and Olson explored the concept in essays like "Proprioception" as a means of investigating the body's depth and the inner being of the poet. As an almost spiritual or quasi-mystical mode of address, the middle voice acts as the voice of the soul, but as Davis intimates, this soul does not exist separately from the body, as with the disconnected universe of Cartesianism. For Olson, body and soul are fused by the middle voice and become indistinguishable factors of an individual in process – multiple and multifarious voices changing and morphing throughout space-time. Hence, Davis shows that when Olson combines many disparate discourses and voices in *Maximus IV, V, VI*, he crafts a jazz fugue to approximate an inclusive poetics. Olson's interest in the middle voice involves his readings of Henry Corbin's Ismaili Gnosticism, as Davis shows, a source that has not received enough attention in readings of Olson that avoid the second and third volumes of *The Maximus Poems*.

Following Davis' exploration of Olson's sources for his use of the middle voice, Joshua A.W. Gardner's essay, "Negative Capability: Charles Olson and his 'post-Modern' Exploration," calibrates Olson's legacy in relation to a key literary term that he invented: "the post-modern world." Olson used the phrase in 1951 in a letter to Robert Creeley, and his sense of the post-modern world was markedly different from the valences that literary culture attached to it. The erasure of Olson's position as the progenitor of the concept has been

a questionable aspect of institutionalized literary culture, and Gardner's essay goes some distance toward restoring Olson's legacy.[14] Gardner examines Olson's connected poiesis, philosophy, and pedagogy in relation to both modern and post-modern paradigms, thereby locating Olson between the two as the nascent protagonist of the "post-Modern" shift itself. To do so, Gardner unpacks the connections between Olson's theories in his lectures *The Special View of History* as well as other essays and philosophies of post-modernism. For Gardner, the connections between Olson's writing and post-modern philosophies reveal that Olson's "critical post-modernism" involves a sociopolitically engaged stance organized around mythological reinvention, multiple cultural realities, and a distaste for grand cultural narratives. Gardner pays special attention to Olson's development of his post-modern stance from the concept of negative capability, a concept that indicates the crucial inheritance Olson gained from John Keats. In the end, the restoration of this legacy of a negatively capable, critical post-modernism serves as a reminder of Olson's revolutionary literary thinking and a clarification of Olson's historically important position in the postmodernist canon.

After Gardner situates Olson's post-modernism as a transformation of ideas drawn from a predecessor poet (Keats), Kirsty Singer turns toward Olson's relationship with one of his contemporaries: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. By doing so, her essay emphasizes the influence of racial politics on Charles Olson's reevaluation of his own poetic priorities, which center on Olson's falling out with Jones/Baraka in correspondence in 1964. Singer then investigates Olson's use of the term "helitropism" in his 1968 Beloit lectures, "Poetry and Truth," and his late essay, "The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought," correcting the many studies of Olson's poetry that only focus on a select number of early texts like "Projective Verse" or "The Kingfishers." Critical readings often elide the influence on Olson's poetry of the racial and political turmoil of the sixties, even though there are clear references to them throughout some of the most magnificent final *Maximus Poems*. By revealing that Olson stayed keyed into political developments all throughout his life, Singer indicates how Olson tempered and modified some of his best-known positions in his earlier texts as a result of his intimate confrontation with the racially divergent experiences of 1960s politics. After his falling out with Baraka, Olson stepped back from his ambitious cosmological programs to emphasize the psychoanalytic working-through of historical damage. It is in this sense that Singer's essay provides cause for understanding the colossal

[14] For a full and developed critique of the erasure of Olson's position in literary culture, specifically by the *New York Times*, see Alcalay, 87-100.

turn of the final *Maximus Poem* itself: "my wife my car my color and myself."[15] Olson carves these hieroglyphs into the white space of his last *Maximus Poem*, cataloging psychoanalytic damages and regrets that include the death of his beloved wife Betty in a car crash, as well as his race ("my color") and his personal subjectivity.

My own essay then continues the investigation into Olson's philosophical sources that I have carried out elsewhere in other contexts, considering a few of the many connections between Olson's poetry and Alfred Whitehead's *Process and Reality*.[16] Olson first read Whitehead's cosmological philosophy in 1955 on the campus of Black Mountain College, and in my readings of *The Maximus Poems*, I argue that Whitehead is the great companion of projective poetry. During archival research, I uncovered Olson's sequel essay to "Projective Verse," which I published as a chapbook titled *The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II*, and which Olson wrote from his annotations in *Process and Reality*. The writing of *Projective Verse II* solved and deepened many intellectual quandaries for Olson, including a necessary revision of the "stance towards reality" that he posited in "Projective Verse." After reading *Process and Reality*, Olson concluded that the stance required some form of extension in order to account for ecological processes of mediation. By unpacking the annotations in Whitehead's cosmology pertaining to this revision, Olson's transformation of those annotations into "three magnitudes" for the projective stance of *Projective Verse II*, and the poems that Olson crafted with those three magnitudes in mind, I explore Olson's revised ecosystemic stance in his later poetry. This revised stance accounts for the poet's immediate sensory perception of the environment, the efficacious feelings of past inheritances from local history and deep time, along with an expanded cosmological consciousness that finds the marvelous in daily experience and the ecological processes of reality. Olson's stance, I argue, commits to these efficacious ecological truths, such that *Process and Reality* helped him to revise not only his relationship to Poundian Modernism, but also his relationship to writing poetry as an environmental act.

And yet, Whitehead's influence on Olson took several diverse forms, and Daniel Fineman's essay "Olson, Peirce, Whitehead, and American Process Poetics," investigates a model of influence provided by Whitehead and Ameri-

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[15] Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983), 635.

[16] See Joshua Hoeynck, "Deep Time and Process Philosophy in the Charles Olson and Robert Duncan Correspondence," *Contemporary Literature* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 336-368.

can process philosophies from an entirely different angle. Fineman reads these philosophies as supplying complexes of ideas for an aesthetic ground antagonistic towards the dualism between thought and extension latent in hegemonic models of representation. While Whitehead's metaphysics gave Olson a theoretical picture of process freed from Apollonian dualism, a problematic in Peirce's semiotics elucidates Olson's poetic praxis as well. Peirce, unlike Saussure, tried to perfect a triadic taxonomy of signs as icons, indices, and symbols; his life-long efforts revealed that every word is simultaneously an icon of its shape, an index of its manufacture, and a symbol for convention. Olson's poetry exploits this ubiquitously available "confusion" to perform a poetry of differential affective process, a notion very much akin to the monistic and dynamic world picture of "the actual occasion" in process that Olson learned about by reading *Process and Reality*. Fineman closes his essay with a reading of Olson's shortest poem, which involves inescapable semiotic failings of correlational dualism.

After *Staying Open* journeys into the worlds of philosophy, ecology, and linguistics, the final two essays turn toward Olson's relationship to indigenous cultures and archeology. Nathanael Pree's essay, "Maximus and Aboriginal Australia: Antipodean Influences on the Archaic Proprioceptive Epic," locates Olson's sources and influences in perhaps the most unlikely place: Aboriginal Australia. Through careful archival work and close readings of Olson's lectures "The Chiasma," Pree reveals that the connection was very much an active one in Olson's imagination. The links between projective poetry and Aboriginal Australia allowed Olson to articulate a sense of care and custodianship of place that finds parallels with a trans-continental and "archaic postmodern" poeisis evident in some of the longest surviving human cultures. Pree makes the provocative argument that *Maximus* outlines and enacts the recreation of sacred and everyday places in order to preserve their essential being in the face of modernity and erasure. Olson's care for the preservation of the ecology and health of place against the colonial violences of modernity appear similar to tropes involved in the perpetual recreation of Country (as a proper noun) fundamental to aspects of Aboriginal Australian daily practice and continually lived mythology. Pree covers several specific themes to connect Olson and Australia: law, totemism, and the embodiment of a conscious human gestalt within a properly maintained environment. At a time when Olson's poetry has fallen under significant scrutiny for its use of indigenous knowledge and cultural references, Pree's article offers an alternative approach to the all too

obvious criticisms.[17] Pree activates the connection between Aboriginal Australia and Olson's poetics as a means of identifying the essential use of projective poetics in our contemporary moment when climate change, ocean acidification, and deforestation now have the potential to harm the entire human species.

The final essay in *Staying Open* deals with the most well-known indigenous influences on Olson's poetry: the Maya of Yucatan. Dylan Clark is an archeologist, not a literary scholar like our other eleven contributors, and he takes an active interest in Olson's 1951 journey to Yucatan to study the Maya. Clark's essay situates the text Olson wrote in the Yucatan, *The Mayan Letters*, within the broad intellectual histories of archeology and anthropology, performing work that has been necessary for decades. Many studies make claims about the implications of Olson's six month stay in the Yucatan in 1951, but these examinations are limited by a strict literary focus that derives from the absence in Olson's critical archive of a truly interdisciplinary reading of what Olson knew about archeology, what he did not know, what mistakes he made, and what correct insights he had while in the Yucatan. Clark reveals that while Olson seemed most fascinated by Mayan hieroglyphic texts, he was also influenced by process in archeology – the methods of archeological excavation and interpretation – or, at least, what he perceived these to be. Clark traces Olson's simulacrum of archaeology at Maya sites in the Yucatan Peninsula, drawing on information in his *Mayan Letters* and other writing produced or inspired by the trip. The focus in critical readings of this journey by Olson needs to be less on Olson's ideas about Mayan hieroglyphic texts, as Clark indicates, and more on his experiential relationship with Maya material culture and ruins. Hence, Clark explores the actual sites Olson excavated, the influences that inspired his approach to moving through ancient landscapes, and the materials that Olson sought out. In the end, there are clear points of contact between Olson's self-described title as an "archeologist of morning" and archeological praxis. Lastly, Clark's essay closes with a truly important moment of scholarship that indicates the real-world academic value of the source-study: a newly discovered cultural biography of an object that Olson actually brought back from Yucatan and that we had all presumed lost after Olson's death.

I think that this extended summary of the book's content shows the range of interdisciplinary influences on Olson's poetics, and my general sense is that the twelve essays all explore the "compost library," a concept that ecological

[17] Here I am referring to Heriberto Yépez's study *The Empire of Neomemory*, trans. Jen Hofer, Christian Nagler, and Brian Whitener (Oakland: ChainLinks, 2013).

thinker Jed Rasula draws from Walt Whitman. In his book *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry*, Rasula defines the compost library as space where multiplicity and heterogeneity flourish: "The spirit of the library is not hierarchy," he writes, "but endless proliferation" because "in the compost library books have a way of collapsing into each other, not in the improvements of more 'authoritative' editions or versions, but by constant recycling."[18] All of the essays in *Staying Open* involve reading as recycling; the essays move backward into the cycles of time to enter the stream of Olson's creative imagination. Given the vast and multifarious content of any human imagination, I would again emphasize the provisional nature of this undertaking – a study that meant to cover all of the potential sources, influences, and arguments that can be discovered regarding *The Maximus Poems* would easily fill ten volumes. Like the potentiality of the human imagination, the compost library is endless, corresponding to the physical nature of the earth that Whitman describes in "This Compost," the poem from which Rasula draws the concept:

> Now I am terrified of the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
> It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
> It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless
> successions of diseas'd corpses,
> It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor.[19]

Whitman's lines catch the spirit of the creative processes that developed from Charles Olson's imagination and that resulted in the interdisciplinary frameworks of *The Maximus Poems*. Taking thought of the Earth's totality in all of its spatial and temporal extensions, its complicated evolutionary processes, delicate relational balances, and models of co-dependency will grow "such sweet things" from "such corruption," will turn humans forever in space while distilling "exquisite winds" from "infused fetor," and will cultivate endless regenerations of life. These processes are the birthrights of all humans, Whitman writes, because the Earth "renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, / sumptuous crops, / It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such / leavings from them at last."[20] For Whitman and for Olson, the human imagination remakes the "divine materials" of that which

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[18] Jed Rasula, *This Compost:* Ecological *Imperatives in American Poetry* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 16-17.
[19] Walt Whitman, "This Compost," *Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 496-497.
[20] Ibid., 497.

was once old into that which is new – sources and influences provide the gnosis that becomes rhythm and song, fashioned through the mind's generative capacity. And yet, modernity has created system after system designed to limit human access to these processes – what Olson ironically and acerbically calls "man's greatest achievement," "that he damn well can, and does, destroy destroy destroy energy everyday."[21] The disasters of contemporary existence in the decadent prosperity of the developed world do in fact destroy energy every day, even in the most mundane acts like driving a car or turning down the air conditioning. Amid these disastrous forces, as Rasula states, "It's only within a framework like that of Maximus – proposed as the enlarged image of human capability – that Olson manages to pinpoint *homo sapiens* as transhistorical fatality."[22] Against the transhistorical fatality of humanity's nefarious behaviors, there is the counter-force of human capability. When investigating Olson's sources and influences, the researcher comes into contact with the imagination's vast potential, which also reveals the relational calculus that governs and connects all life. It is time for literary criticism to come into consciousness of this relational calculus, I would argue, because approaches that have advocated for a self-described, politically effective "antireferentialism," whether as a means of discrediting literary source-studies or to dismiss experientially based philosophies, have failed to challenge the trajectory of contemporary politics.[23] Lawrence Buell deals with this political complex in *The Environmental Imagination*: "Whatever the conscious politics of the reader who espouses a philosophical antireferentialism in the domain of literary theory, that stance underrepresents the claims of the environment on humanity by banishing it from the realms of discourse except as something absent." Buell continues, "It forbids discourse the project of evoking the natural world through verbal surrogates, and thereby attempting to bond the reader to the

[21] Charles Olson, "Human Universe," *Collected Prose*, eds. Don Allen and Ben Friedlander (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1997), 164.
[22] Rasula, 191.
[23] See David Herd, *Contemporary Olson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 12-13. In his introduction, Herd lays out a provocative reading of how Olson "became unreadable" for a period of time after his death largely because of his attempt to "develop a vocabulary of shared humanity." Herd points out that given the nature of contemporary developments in politics, including the Iraq War and the election of Donald Trump, the time has come to wonder about the contemporary use of Olson's political undertaking.

world as well as to discourse: it forbids enabling the reader to see as a seal might see."[24]

Or to see as Charles Olson saw. The twelve essays collected in *Staying Open* provide readers a small slice of reality as Olson saw it before moving to argumentation, criticism, and the essential use of the poems in literary culture. Buell solders together an emphasis on how approaches that tend to proceed by a predetermined set of theoretical and ideological constraints without establishing some mode of reference to the poet's concrete reality efface the world and obscure the meaning of the poems themselves. Olson believed in the potential of a referential approach to the natural world and to the abstract world of text. In perhaps his greatest late poem, he welds together naturalistic and textual referentialism:

> My life is buried,
> with all sorts of passages
> both on the sides and on the face turned down
> to the earth
> or built out as long gifted generous northeastern Connecticut stone
> walls are
> through which 18th century roads still pass
> as though they themselves were realms[25]

"And no matter where I pose how Charles heard Pound's musical line will carry him through, and be constant to *The Cantos* to carry him," Robert Duncan states when he begins his analysis of these lines in his 1978 lectures "Ideas of Primordial Time in Charles Olson's Work," "That line [Pound's] does not yet open for itself the space of this kind of movement that allows a person to write, 'or built out as long gifted generous northeastern Connecticut stone walls are.'"[26] In his lectures, Duncan separates Olson from Pound and points out that his own sequence of poems, *Passages*, is, in fact, responsible for Olson's declaration that his very life is "buried, / with all sorts of *passages*." As Duncan gets deeper into his analysis, he concludes that it is not Pound Olson hears in this poem, but Duncan, the T.S. Eliot of "Gerontian" ("History has

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[24] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 102.

[25] Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, 633.

[26] Robert Duncan, *Imagining Persons: Robert Duncan's Lectures on Charles Olson*, eds. Robert Bertholf and Dale Smith (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 63.

many cunning passages"), and behind them all Marvell.[27] The communities of writers and ideas that influenced Olson's creations proliferate and generate new texts, as they likely do with any creative literary act. I will, therefore, close this introduction by acknowledging the two communities that have made *Staying Open* possible. All of the essays in this volume began as conference papers, either delivered at the annual meeting of American Literature Association under the aegis of the Charles Olson Society or at the Re-Viewing Black Mountain College Conference that takes place every fall amongst the fiery changing colors of Asheville, North Carolina. In my own case, for instance, I delivered a vastly different talk on Olson's stance at the American Literature Association conference in 2008 as a graduate student. Over the past decade, many of the contributors have had the pleasure of working with each other, contributing to these two communities that keep alive the vibrancy and ethic of an imagination deployed in the creation of poetry. I would be remiss if I did not thank both Jeffrey Gardiner and Gary Grieve-Carlson again since they have curated the Olson talks at the ALA for over a decade. I would also like to thank the other eleven contributors to this book for their energy, vision, and kindness. We have all shared many passages, sources and influences, aiming at the mastery, transmutation, and reordering of the imagination's content.

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