

## Introduction

The term *Black Mountain* hovers uneasily on the horizon of recent literary history. The diversity of poets to whom it has been applied and the divergence of their careers after the late 1960s call into question what once seemed a meaningful grouping within the counterculture of post–World War II poetry. Historically, Black Mountain poetry has been associated with the publication of Charles Olson’s 1950 essay “Projective Verse” and the little poetry magazines *Origin* (first series, April 1951–Winter 1957) and *Black Mountain Review* (1954–57), which were inspired at least in part by Olson’s conception of “composition by field.” In the preface to his 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, Donald Allen named the Black Mountain poets as one of five communities composing the counterculture of his “New American Poetry” and included poets “originally closely identified with the two important magazines of the period, *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*” in the Black Mountain grouping: Paul Blackburn, Paul Carroll, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, Robert Duncan, Larry Eigner, Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Jonathan Williams, and Joel Oppenheimer.<sup>1</sup> Allen’s communities have become to some extent canonical in understanding the period. As with other poetry subcultures of the 1950s and 1960s, however, much of the common ground that united these poets had eroded by the early 1970s. The countercultural movements that gained momentum in the 1960s, especially protest against the Vietnam War, transformed American culture, representing a critical threshold to a different configuration

of literary communities. From the perspective of 2007, we must ask whether the designation *Black Mountain* continues to be useful and from what vantage point to view poets associated with it.

Olson's "Projective Verse," with its poetics of "composition by field," proved tremendously important as a catalyst to innovation in poetry after World War II. While it did not produce a unified school of experimental poetics, "composition by field" provided poets as diverse as Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), Kathleen Fraser, Susan Howe, and Michael McClure with a crucial impetus to break with conventions and generate new poetic forms. Field poetics proposed an alternative to what Olson and others perceived as the bankruptcy of New Critical emphasis on the poet's craft and traditional forms and meter. In "Projective Verse," Olson argues the need for escape from what he perceives as the idealism of Western culture, which for him had imposed the forms of the human mind on the natural world, thereby alienating human beings from their existence as part of nature. Olson advocates eliminating the "lyric interference of the individual as ego" by rejecting the hierarchy of spirit over matter. For him, poetic composition becomes an open-ended tracing of environmental forces as they influence the poet, and poetic form should be an immediate translation of bodily experience (through breath and spoken language) onto the page.<sup>2</sup> Taken from physics' understanding of the world as an interaction of electromagnetic forces, the force field provides a model of reality in which all elements interact on the same level, each exerting force on the other. Rather than gaining meaning through an ideal order perceived and imposed by the poet, each element defines the other through resonance of similarity and difference that preserve its particularity. Poetic form should thus emerge not from a totalizing humanistic perception but from the interaction of independent things in the poem.

"Projective Verse" inspired impassioned discussion and drew poets and editors together in a strong sense of common purpose. The communities that developed around the magazines nurtured strong friendships influential in the individual development of many poets during the 1950s and 1960s as well as the growth of the larger poetic counterculture. Although Olson was directly involved only in *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*, other little magazines (e.g., *Yugen*, *Floating Bear*, *The Evergreen Review*) drew on or praised field poetics. Thus while some poets claimed close allegiance to field or Black Mountain poetry or were associated with

them, an even wider range of poets invoked Olson in formulating their poetics. Poets from three of the five groups that Allen's anthology identifies (Black Mountain, Beat, and younger poets) mention "Projective Verse" and its ideas explicitly. Frank O'Hara, associated with the "New York" poets, parodies "Projective Verse" in his influential essay "Personism." The widespread reception of the term *field* attests to its significance not only in the maturation of a small group of so-called Black Mountain poets but also as a term that expressed widespread desire for innovation among the New American poets. Field poetics was thus both influential and representative of its time.

The historical Black Mountain community and its critical reception require some explanation, for in the context of the arts "Black Mountain" evokes diverse meanings. While all of these meanings trace their origin to the small, experimental college in existence near Asheville, North Carolina, from 1933 to 1956,<sup>3</sup> the communities and esthetic principles associated with the college vary widely. Mary Emma Harris's documentary survey *The Arts at Black Mountain* divides the college's history into three periods: the college and farm founded by John Andrew Rice to implement John Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophy, the haven for Bauhaus émigrés from Europe dominated by Josef Albers in the 1940s, and the poetic-painterly community of experimental artists that formed during Charles Olson's rectorship in the early 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Although writers came to dominate the college community while Olson was rector, this community also included figures as diverse as painters Franz Kline and Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage, dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham, mathematician Buckminster Fuller, and weaver Anni Albers.

The term *Black Mountain poetry* invokes a somewhat different community. Historically, the Black Mountain poets were associated not only with Black Mountain College but also with the little poetry magazines *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*. Other poets and scholars define other combinations of poets, however, including for example John Wieners and Jonathan Williams.<sup>5</sup> Olson, Creeley, and Duncan taught at Black Mountain College, whereas Oppenheimer, Wieners, and Dorn were students. Perhaps due to generational differences, the students' emphasis on ironic and often humorous entrapment in cultural forms contrasts with their teachers' embrace of the poet's visionary role as shaper of culture and language. Levertov and Blackburn were never at the college but published in

*Black Mountain Review*, with which Dorn and Wieners had relatively little association.

Not only was the Black Mountain arts community esthetically diverse, but the Black Mountain poets sustained friendships of comparative intensity with other New American poets—for example, Duncan with Helen Adam, Creeley with John Ashbery, Dorn with LeRoi Jones, and Leverlov with Adrienne Rich. The poetry and critical discussion in the magazines vary considerably, at times representing conflicting poetics. Alan Golding's study of the correspondence between *Origin* editor Cid Corman and contributors Olson, Creeley, and Duncan reveals the arguments and differences that shaped what may appear to be poetic consensus published in *Origin*.<sup>6</sup> Blackburn noted a difference between the first four issues of *Black Mountain Review* and the next three, and a change in the interests of the core group: "the range of critical prose widens, as does the general contents. The ring of contacts spread far beyond *Origin* people, the Black Mountain [College] contacts were taking over the center."<sup>7</sup> As late as 1968, Olson denied the existence of a Black Mountain school of poetry,<sup>8</sup> and Creeley refused to state a unifying poetics.<sup>9</sup>

Critical reception has perpetuated but further complicated the term. Due to the influence of Olson's "Projective Verse," Black Mountain poetry was initially associated with field and open form poetry. Both were seen as influential and typical in inspiring shifting local structures in poetic form, one critical rubric formulated to define a metaphysics or epistemology underlying Postmodern poetics. Such reception frequently elides "Black Mountain" with "composition by field," due both to assumptions of Olson's influence at Black Mountain and to the powerful influence of the idea of the force field on some of these poets' work. Noting the frequent reference to Olson's image of the force field and "Projective Verse" in the poetics statements of contributors to his anthology, Allen writes that "composition by field" is "the dominant new concept."<sup>10</sup> In 1974, Don Byrd wrote that "[t]he analogy of the field [for poetic structure] has begun to appear as suggestive of the twentieth century poets as the analogy of organism was for the Romantics."<sup>11</sup> Critics and poets of this first generation of interpretation were often concerned with defining the poetics of "composition by field" or "open form" as a significant formal innovation, sometimes reproducing the territoriality characteristic of the marginalized avant-garde movement.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, field poetics became a key element of Postmodern poetics, but critical reception reinterpreted field poetics, moving away from the communities that grew up around Black Mountain College or the little magazines *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*. Critics such as Sherman Paul, Ekbert Faas, Stephen Fredman, Robert Von Hallberg, and Lynn Keller followed Olson in interpreting surrender to the physical force field as the way to free language from a restrictive intellectual tradition, but they broadened the range of poets that they associated with this new poetics beyond the historical Black Mountain College or *Review* communities. Faas emphasizes “physio-linguistic empathy” or body-based rather than “intellectual organization” of language that can fuse an “original language with the flow of creation.” Fredman shifts focus from “composition by field” to a cluster of practices “grounding” poetics that Olson adapted from Emersonian and Modernist traditions and transmitted to other “projectivist” poets.<sup>13</sup> Von Hallberg argues that the theory of the force field erodes the world of sense objects, encouraging poets to challenge conventional structures of being implicit in closed syntax. Keller identifies ways the poem seeks to reflect the shifting nature of being and truth in the flux of the force field by tracking the open-ended flow of consciousness.<sup>14</sup> For these critics, field poetics is related to and representative of post–World War II poetry.

More recent studies have further attenuated this focus. By reading the poets’ works from hindsight, often through their different affiliations since the 1970s, studies like Peter Quartermain’s *Disjunctive Poetics* (1992), Sandra Kumamoto Stanley’s *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (1994), and Michael Davidson’s *Ghostlier Demarcations* (1997) trace significant differences blurred by the earlier solidarity of these poets within the New American Poetry’s counterculture. They place field poetry in an experimental tradition of twentieth-century American writing from Stein, Williams, and Pound through Zukofsky to some Black Mountain poets and finally the Language poets of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>15</sup> Literary history has also complicated definition of a Black Mountain poetic community. Recent historical and archival research questions the delineation of the period’s poetry into geographical or esthetic groupings widely accepted since *The New American Poetry* by demonstrating the fluidity of these groups.<sup>16</sup>

In focusing on the physical force field as a metaphysical or natural

model for experimental poetics, critics have interpreted Olson and the first generation of writers he influenced primarily on their own terms. Field poetry sought to eliminate traditional symbols and meter to render the poem as visual scoring of the rhythm of body and breath. The poet, conceived not as order-imposing artificer but as transmitter of environmental forces, provided a new, nonsubjective view of the world whose decentering of the subject may be aligned with other Postmodern or poststructuralist projects. Such interpretations tend to focus on early work by Olson, Creeley, and Duncan and to include a range of other poets—among them, Zukofsky, George Oppen, Blackburn, Robert Bly, and Gary Snyder—while omitting poets whose careers later departed from this model of nature or took a more explicitly political turn in the 1960s, like Levertov and Dorn, and a “second generation” of Black Mountain College students such as Oppenheimer or Wieners.

Building on this combination of literary history and critical reception, I would locate the term *Black Mountain* somewhere between Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain’s interpretive “nexus” and Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community.” DuPlessis and Quartermain use the word *nexus* to describe the relation among the Objectivist poets. They define “nexus” as a group of poets who share a historical association (for DuPlessis and Quartermain’s Objectivists, a community of predominantly but not exclusively New York City Jewish writers), sense of common interest, and varying reception of a central statement of poetics, all of which taken collectively constitute an important influence on literary tradition.<sup>17</sup> This concept describes quite well the relation between writers who gathered around *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*, poets who shared an interest in field poetics, and the recovery of a Modernist tradition based on the experimentation of Pound, Williams, and in some cases H. D. and Zukofsky. The term *nexus* may fit so well because it reflects institutional structures shaping the publication of poetry, particularly avant-garde poetry, in the twentieth century. Both the Objectivist and the Black Mountain communities formed around little magazines professing a new poetics as influential vehicles of publication.

Although “nexus” describes many features of Black Mountain poetry, this historical focus requires the added dimension of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community,” a collective identity formed through imaginative participation in or identification with common symbols that unite people

beyond local community.<sup>18</sup> The poetic community that emerged around the little magazines *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review* was less homogeneous geographically and ethnically than the Objectivists, to whose New York City Jewish majority DuPlessis and Quartermain attribute some of their common concerns. The writers associated with Black Mountain poetry came from different regions and were rarely in the same place at the same time. Their intensive interaction was carried out predominantly in one-to-one interaction through visits and letters. As with Anderson's imagined community, commitment to "composition by field" bound both poets and critics through feelings of solidarity beyond local allegiance. "Composition by field" also played a significant role in the poets' work, as attested by their concern with its definition in *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*, their loyalty to other little magazines supportive of field poetics, and their publication of mutually enthusiastic reviews and statements of influence and shared poetics. The dynamic of an "imagined community" has generated critical debate as well, for literary critics and historians continue to invoke the common term *Black Mountain* while ascribing it different meanings locally.

The poets often expressed their sense of shared purpose and concern for maintaining it more powerfully in published texts than on the local level, where tensions in individual interpretations and face-to-face social relations challenged solidarity felt from a distance. This imagined dimension of solidarity stimulated intense epistolary discussions of the nature of field poetics as well as individual interaction between the poets. Alan Golding has traced the concern Corman, Olson, and Creeley expressed about the form of *Origin* as an embodiment of their interpretation of field poetics and various Black Mountain poets' concern about the company in which Allen's anthology would publish them.<sup>19</sup> Libbie Rifkin observes that Olson's and Creeley's ideas of the "polis" "appeared to function most ideally on the epistolary page where it began."<sup>20</sup> The poets' sudden, unexpectedly explosive responses when they realize their differences of opinion (in Olson's and Creeley's irascibility in letters despite their mutual enthusiasm, Olson's and Duncan's sparring over the nature of "wisdom" in the mid-1950s, Duncan's and Levertov's intense debate about political poetry during the Vietnam War, and Creeley's and Duncan's discussion of what they see as Dorn's departure from field poetics in *Gunslinger*) erupted because of this implicit sense of shared purpose.

Imagined community also becomes evident in group loyalty and jockeying for distinction among poets who identified with other poetic subcultures. As leader in his Berkeley coterie, Jack Spicer expressed face-to-face hostility to poets he praised in other contexts. He chose, for example, to read his misogynistic "For Joe" at a party honoring Helen Adam and Levertov on the occasion of the latter's 1958 visit to San Francisco. Michael Davidson reads Spicer's act as a test of his community's loyalty against the perceived threat of a figure from the growing national avant garde.<sup>21</sup> Creeley, Duncan, and Levertov criticized "Beat" fame and the satiric urbanity of the New York scene in letters, strengthening their feeling of solidarity through contradistinction from different local scenes, however vaguely defined the sense of scene or difference. Despite the poets' feeling, especially after the 1960 publication of Allen's anthology, that they were part of a national avant garde, their identities remained strongly grounded in these local, if shifting, subcultures. They often corresponded enthusiastically with the very writers they criticized to others. Rifkin's analysis of Olson's frenetic all-night speech at the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference shows how his need to address a gathering of writers from different geographical and literary scenes brought these tensions to a head. She argues persuasively that Olson, in his alternately grandiose, domineering, and self-deprecating filibuster, attempted to negotiate his role as "boss poet" of this wider counterculture while fully aware that its diverse members expected different styles from him.<sup>22</sup>

The sense of a common project inspired by "composition by field" fueled intensive correspondence that remains a fruitful resource for understanding the extremely widespread and varied reception of field poetics and its significance, both to the work of individual poets and to the period. Within current multiple, fluid understandings of Black Mountain and field poetry, I will analyze a grouping significant yet increasingly obscured by recent criticism: poets who developed the social significance of the force field as a model of historical and cultural force.<sup>23</sup> This focus is intended to complement, not displace, the excellent critical work on the force field as a natural/scientific and metaphysical model of agency. While "Projective Verse" inspired much poetry with a natural and metaphysical focus, field poetics also drew writers into socially committed positions and shaped their approach to political poetry. My intent is not to define Black Mountain or field poetics narrowly or exclusively, but rather to trace a sig-



nificant strand of the reception of this tremendously fertile image. Interpreting the physical force field as a model of social force complements attention to the philosophical and visual-metrical experimentation of field poetry. Field poetics helped poets to articulate and respond to changing conceptions of poetic subject and agency by providing a model of social force to explore the social agents that they perceived as influencing the poem. Field poetics thus illuminates social pressures motivating not only field poetry's innovations but also the public sphere shaping poetic production and reception—to use Christopher Beach's term, the “poetic culture”<sup>24</sup>—of the New American Poetry.

Among the many poets who develop or invoke the force field at some point in their careers, Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Levertov, and Dorn constitute a significant grouping in the reception of field poetics as a model of social force for reasons both formal and historical. These five poets engaged “composition by field” more intensely and consistently throughout their careers than most of their contemporaries. Olson's “Projective Verse” influenced profoundly the poetic maturity of the other four. Also influenced by Pound and Williams and in some cases H. D. and Zukofsky, these poets incorporated field poetics into a Modernist view of the poet's calling as seer and critic of his or her culture. They adapt the legacy of this tradition to the mass culture emerging in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and explore poetry's potential as a force for social change within this culture. Their work transforms the Modernist legacy of the poet as crafter of cultural forms to acknowledge a richer spectrum of social agents as factors determining poetic structure in mass culture and confronts the problem of poetic authority in this culture head-on. Within this grouping, Creeley, Duncan, and Levertov share a distinctive core of beliefs about the social role of experimental poetry in the varied New American counterculture, whereas Olson's and Dorn's adaptations of the force field establish links to earlier and later generations, respectively. While the poets adapted field poetics to increasing political engagement in the 1960s, the Vietnam War brought a poetic crisis that destroyed both friendships and a sense of poetic affiliation. In seeking to make poetry a force in the growing counterculture, these poets reveal their belief in poetry's potential to work political change and their experience of the perils of their generation's political engagement.

Focus on the reception of the force field as a model of social force

provides a significant revision of these five poets' full careers. It helps not only to recover the common ground that once united them but also to explain the reasons for their divergence from one another and current association with different poetic communities: Creeley with Language poets, Duncan with some Language poets and some poets who share his mystical vision of literature, Levertov with Christian poetry and ecocriticism, and Dorn with Western regionalism and controversial political poets. Nature-based interpretations of the force field describe well the similarities of these poets' early experiments, but they do not explain each poet's subsequent divergence or the emergence of their new affiliations after the 1970s. Poetic reception of the force field as a model of social agency reveals the intense responsiveness of poetry to public language informing many of the period's formal innovations. By recovering the social and esthetic discussion in which Black Mountain poetry emerged and the issues that divided the poets in the late 1960s, we can understand the attempts at a difficult alliance between experimental poetics and public voice that made Black Mountain poetry a crucial element—and the force field a significant element—in the New American Poetry's artistic and political struggle.

My analysis of the social reception of the force field builds on recent studies of American poetry since World War II that focus on constructions of voice and authority in relation to projected audience. Edward Brunner's *Cold War Poetry* traces the demands that the expanding audience of GI Bill students and Creative Writing/MFA programs made on 1950s poetry. Rifkin shows how avant-garde poets bidding for membership in the canon constructed "professional" identities. For Terrell Scott Herring, Frank O'Hara's intimate yet impersonal "personal poem" creates a homosexual public sphere within mass culture.<sup>25</sup> Michael Davidson's *Guys Like Us* theorizes that poetry of the Cold War period implicitly forges alliances of homosocial community to counteract poetry's marginality.

The reception of the force field as a model of social force from the 1950s through the early 1970s adds a valuable dimension to this discussion of multiple public spheres.<sup>26</sup> By using the poem to register social forces acting on the imagination, the poets articulated changing perceptions of cultural media and thus of the space and role of poetry as a social institution. Theoretical discussion of the force field and innovative poetic forms reveal the hopes and fears for the social and political role of poetry within the rapidly changing public sphere of mass culture. Whereas other New

American poets (O'Hara and the Beats, as Herring and Davidson have shown) "work strategically *within*" (Davidson's phrase)<sup>27</sup> this mass public sphere, Black Mountain poets who develop the force field as a model of social force reveal the radical, often violent transformation of poetic and political subjectivity accompanying participation in this new public sphere.

Such studies recontextualize James Breslin's influential argument that Olson's "Projective Verse" was a crucial element in the New American poets' rebellion against the traditional critical decorum praised by figures of the New Critical literary establishment.<sup>28</sup> For Breslin, Olson's call to eliminate the "lyric interference of the individual as ego"<sup>29</sup> by rejecting the hierarchy of spirit over matter inspired many writers to abandon the New Critics' emphasis on traditional forms. Such an interpretation fits the sense of shared purpose among poets attracted to *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*. These poets had little faith that traditional forms would confer value or dignity on human experience.<sup>30</sup> Many of the pieces they published treat the breakdown and transgression of social norms through themes like adultery and madness.<sup>31</sup> Poems by Richard Eberhart and William Bronk voice the alienation and dislocation of human beings in a meaningless universe.<sup>32</sup> Special issues on the "New German" and "New French" writing, particularly writing by Gottfried Benn and Antonin Artaud, communicate the European struggle against nihilism and irony in the wake of the war.<sup>33</sup>

The sea becomes a pervasive image for this experience of chaos and power, as in Theodore Enslin's "seaview," "penetrable by so many winds that charts / of probability are useless."<sup>34</sup> Poets frequently expressed their disorientation in imagery of the wanderer, whose quest for an ordering principle in the cosmos structures their early work.<sup>35</sup> Contributors to *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review* rejected traditional forms as signs of the culture's lack of vitality and sought forms that emerged more directly from the rhythms of their contemporary experience and speech. Reviews by Martin Seymour-Smith and Corman criticize Theodore Roethke and Karl Shapiro, then editor of *Poetry*, for their "self-effacing" style, "using old rhythms and imposing no sign of personal diction." For Seymour-Smith and Corman, these poems do nothing but translate philosophical or psychological platitudes into meter.<sup>36</sup>

However much this counterculture conceived itself as rejecting mainstream forms, research on American culture in the 1950s and 1960s

has begun to find continuity as well as difference between Cold War conservatism and subsequent liberal and radical protest movements. Field poetics' focus on tracking "force," particularly new or unacknowledged agents influencing the imagination, reflected and provided a way for writers to explore widespread social anxieties of the Cold War period and the emerging mass and global culture. Tom Engelhardt's *The End of Victory Culture* argues that after World War II confidence in the United States' ethical superiority and in clear national boundaries gave way to fear of the invisible yet immediately threatening forces of the atomic bomb and communism, with their power to invade from afar. Engelhardt traces this feeling from the 1940s aftermath of nuclear holocaust and the beginning of the Cold War through the Vietnam War, with its elusive guerrilla enemy, and the United States' increasing embroilment in global politics.<sup>37</sup> Terence Ball and Sean McCann identify similar concern with new agents and social forces in postwar political science paradigms. Both academic/theoretical and practical/activist theories de-emphasize the agency of individuals and the political state in favor of more diffuse "systems" or power flows that render agency and accountability impersonal and invisible.<sup>38</sup>

The feeling of heightened vulnerability from abroad was intensified by perceived threat from forces at home. Widespread surveillance and interrogation in the McCarthy era and Johnson's welfare state extended the arm of the government farther into private life. Deborah Nelson's study of legal and literary constructions of privacy 1959–73 describes the "death of privacy" as "a topological crisis in which bounded spaces of all kinds seemed to exhibit a frightening permeability."<sup>39</sup> The growth of mass culture that magnified celebrities to superhuman proportions and entered the home in the vivid media of radio and television further blurred the boundary between public and private. Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy* reveals the intense pressure that the political culture of mass media exerted on conventional conceptions of selfhood. Melley traces the pervasive paranoia or "agency panic" in many areas of popular culture, the fear that the media could erode "a long-standing model of personhood."<sup>40</sup>

From this perspective, both the New Critical attempt to contain self and literary tradition by insulating them from historical forces<sup>41</sup> and field poetics' concern with tracking these forces, albeit at first in natural settings, emerged as different responses to a similar consciousness of public forces intruding on the private individual. Both responded to a deep con-

cern with environmental influences that seemed to render the individual a mere node within or vehicle for transfer of social force. Both New Critical standards of taste and the Black Mountain adaptation of the Modernist image of the poet as social visionary seek to uphold the poet's authority and social role in the political and poetic cultures of the 1950s and 1960s. The force field provides a significant topos for studying changing conceptions of poetic agency in what Habermas calls the transition from the "bourgeois" public sphere of rational, autonomous individuals to one in which individual debate and alliance formation are mediated by other systems. The reconfiguration of the poetic subject around newly acknowledged social forces makes visible what Wendy Brown calls "post-liberal" subjectivities emerging from a crisis of faith in the liberal democratic subject and the new public sphere composed of these post-liberal subjects.<sup>42</sup>

In articulating new modes of poetic agency for a changing public sphere, the five Black Mountain poets that form the subject of this book both exemplify and influence the transition from the mainstream 1950s poetic culture that Brunner traces in *Cold War Poetry* to the greater political reach of poetry in the 1960s counterculture. Their early work was shaped by the ideologies informing the Cold War poetry that Brunner describes, particularly the depoliticization of poetic culture and an ideology associating poetry with the domestic sphere. While tensions in Olson's *Maximus Poems* reveal the shrinking public and "monumental" dimension of poetry since the Modernist period and the difficulty of the poet's role as epic bard, Creeley, Duncan, and Levertov are typical of their generation in initially developing their experimental poetics in domestic contexts. In an era that severed poetry from politics so effectively that for many poets "there was no model for political action," these three poets adopted the stance of Brunner's exemplary "citizen poet,"<sup>43</sup> whose ethically responsible actions in the private sphere address public tensions obliquely. Like the mainstream culture Brunner describes, they believed that poetry should act as an "improving" antidote to emerging mass culture.<sup>44</sup>

As Creeley, Duncan, Levertov, and Dorn attempted to forge a socially engaged poetry for the growing counterculture of the early 1960s, they also registered the changing authority of language and other cultural media and developed new poetic forms to respond to them. By focusing attention on the poem as a transfer of energy from the environment through the poet to the poem, "composition by field" encourages the poet

to articulate influences other than consciousness shaping the poem. Tracking the public forces encroaching on the poetic subject allowed these poets to voice ways that private self is eroded and to seek new ways of preserving imaginative autonomy to resist such invasion. Their constructions of self and agency transformed what Marianne DeKoven, in her analysis of 1960s cultural texts, has termed a modern faith in the individual as an agent of social change into a Postmodern view of the individual as embedded in subterranean or individual systems of power. They reflect what DeKoven terms the “modern/postmodern Möbius strip,” the simultaneity and entwining of these positions characteristic of a wide range of 1960s cultural production, from experimental theater and poetry to political treatises and sociology.<sup>45</sup> Their crises and innovations reveal the profound reorientation of poetic subjectivity this shift requires and the accompanying unique openness of self to public sphere that inspires the period’s idiosyncratic forms.

After tracing the changing reception of the physical force field as a model of social force from the Modernists to Olson in Chapter 1, I will analyze the Black Mountain poets’ conceptualization of this field as a model of social force and interpret their poetry as a response to their perceived social context. Each chapter will focus on a key issue in the poets’ correspondence to reveal their changing conceptions of field poetics. Chapter 2 discusses early adaptations of field poetics that depart from Romantic and Modernist conceptions of culture grounded in natural order to define self through culturally defined place. In the 1950s, Olson’s and Creeley’s intense discussion of place and their experiments with colloquial speech, popular myth, and social convention reveal the growing authority of collective over natural and personal voice.

Chapter 3 traces Creeley’s and Duncan’s shift in the late 1950s and early 1960s away from exploring the expressive possibilities of colloquial speech that they and many of their contemporaries embraced as more authentic than literary diction. For Creeley and Duncan, colloquial language lost its authenticity and could no longer provide a safe experimental space in which to renovate their impoverished culture. Seeking to expand linguistic meaning through literary transformation of everyday speech, Creeley, Duncan, and Levertov developed strategies to separate poetic language from popular culture and colloquial idiom. The close bonds of friendship and mutual admiration that united Creeley, Duncan, and Levertov from

the late 1950s through the mid-1960s were nourished by their shared conception of the poem as a linguistic field where imagination can act on these social forces, re-creating ordinary language to enrich collective language and perception.

While Creeley and Duncan's discussion of abstract form theorizes this changing perception of field poetics, Duncan and Levertov's correspondence, particularly their discussion of Vietnam War poetry, articulates the social role of the poet and the perception of the public sphere to which this abstraction responded. Experiencing the power of political rhetoric during the Vietnam War shook the poets' belief that the poetic imagination could transform other social forces. Like many of their contemporaries, Duncan and Levertov engaged a popular or mass audience and modes of communication in the attempt to challenge the authority of public rhetoric. Chapter 4 analyzes the dramatic changes in their Vietnam War writing to expose the different constructions of authority each believed would give poetry force in the public arena. The strain this attempt produced led Duncan and Levertov to conceive the polis and thus the poet-audience relation as situations in which social and individual agency, public and private voice seemed radically different, so different that the model of the force field could no longer hold them in productive interaction.

If the idea of the poet as renovator of communal language united the Black Mountain poets during their period of greatest solidarity, Dorn's perspective from a younger generation departs from the Modernist high calling of the poet to express the critical distance of a changing poetic climate. Duncan's and Levertov's troubled wartime poetry and the increasingly dominant agency Dorn attributes to popular culture rather than poetic imagination signal the difficulty of balancing social forces in the field of the poem and the declining use of the force field as a model of poetic structure in such a public arena. Chapter 5 shows how the divergence between Levertov's and Dorn's work of the 1970s illustrates the erosion of field poetics as the common ground of Black Mountain poetry and forecasts the emergence of different conceptions of poetic agency and poetic forms.

Together, the five poets initially expressed surprising optimism and innocence about the power of popular and emergent mass culture to disseminate their ideas and make art a significant force for social change.

In so doing, they expressed beliefs about the social potential of poetry shared by the little magazines and larger counterculture of which they were a part.<sup>46</sup> This confidence led them to imitate new forms and media of massified popular culture in the attempt to exploit its authority and reach. While initial optimism nurtured powerful friendships and collaboration, the ways each poet adapted “composition by field” to register the social (especially linguistic) forces acting on the poet and thus the forms each poet develops imply different conceptions of the public arena. The divergence of their later writing stems from their different conceptions of the cultural forces competing with the poet’s craft to influence poetic form. The poets’ discussion of these cultural forces in their letters provides a valuable framework for interpreting the development of their careers as a response to the changing status of language and poetry in the United States’ emergent mass culture. Their spectrum of responses—comprehension, adaptation, and resistance—to this social context helps to distinguish them from each other and to provide a framework for relating their formal innovations to those of their contemporaries. These Black Mountain poets’ eventual divergence helps to explain the tensions that motivated younger poets’ rejection or transformation of field poetics and the emergence of the new, more fragmented and local poetic cultures of the 1980s and 1990s, from ecopoetics to Language poetry.