

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* by Martin Duberman

Review by: Savannah Paige Murray

Source: *Appalachian Journal*, Vol. 44/45, Vol. 44, no. 3-4/Vol. 45, no. 1-2 (2017/2018), pp. 632-635

Published by: Appalachian Journal and Appalachian State University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45124323>

Accessed: 08-03-2022 14:28 UTC

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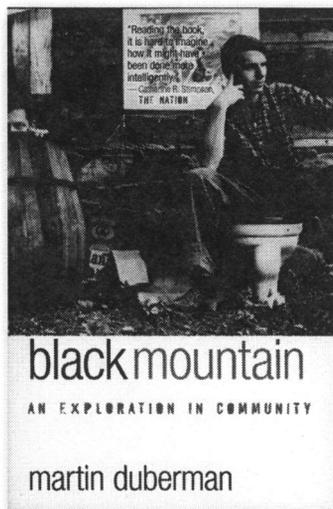
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### **Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community**

by Martin Duberman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2009)

\$24.95, paper. ISBN 9780810125940, 616 pp.

Drawing on archival materials, dozens of interviews, and personal correspondence, historian Martin Duberman, in *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, leads readers through a detailed history of the 24-year educational experiment known as Black Mountain College. Duberman explores Black Mountain College by moving beyond the traditional, objective bounds of his discipline. In his Introduction, he argues that while preaching the gospel of objectivity, many historians, whether conscious of the process or not, privilege information—manipulating narratives to conform to their own views and perspectives. Duberman suggests that the best way

to combat this corruption of historical inquiry is for historians to incorporate more of their own personalities and perspectives into their work. Thus, he describes *Black Mountain* as “an effort to let the reader see who the historian is and the process by which he interacts with the data—the actual process, not the smoothed-over end result” (xviii). Although *Black Mountain* largely succeeds in its aim to serve as a non-traditional history for an experimental, innovative community, overall, the execution of this particular style detracts from the book’s readability. While Duberman’s opinions and reflections are at times distracting, *Black Mountain* is nonetheless an excellent, complicated historical study of Black Mountain, one that nearly half a century after its initial publication in 1972, still serves as the reigning gold standard for Black Mountain scholarship.

In writing *Black Mountain*, Duberman felt compelled to include the ways in which he, as an historian, interacted with the subject matter. As a reader, I had high hopes for these segments, thinking they might provide more insight into both the study of Black Mountain and the author himself. On most occasions, however, I was disappointed. For example, in his chapter chronicling the move from Lee Hall to Black Mountain College’s more permanent home along the shores of Lake Eden, Duberman abruptly transitions from a description of the new campus to a personal reflection about how he nearly abandoned the *Black Mountain* book project altogether because he had trouble sorting through archival sources about the construction costs regarding the school’s second campus. Duberman’s description of the issue seems overly dramatic and frankly unrealistic, as he writes “I’m about ready to quit again. I feel mashed, pulverized, as if there’s nothing left of *me*, as if ‘it’ [the book project] has taken over” (162). The negative tone of this personal outburst seems out of place in the book’s narrative, accompanying his description of a time of activity and growth on campus. Duberman even concludes the book with his own reflection, allowing himself the final word, worrying if he has done justice to the efforts

of all those who were associated with Black Mountain College over time. He writes, "Have I done some of the individuals serious injustice?" (439). While at first this self-conscious introspection may be endearing, it seems odd that a book so focused on such a fascinating community would conclude in insecurity, rather than with a statement about the power of creativity, risk, and living a life of one's own design.

Although the autobiographical sections of the text might be distracting to some readers (including this one), the book itself is a fine work of historical, archival, and ethnographic research. Duberman's use of archival sources and his extensive collection of interviews from many individuals intimately connected with Black Mountain College allows him to successfully present a complicated, nuanced portrait. Although many of us interested in Black Mountain College may find ourselves name-dropping several of the major 20th Century artists and thinkers that played a role in the college community (i.e. Buckminster Fuller, Josef Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, etc.), Duberman argues that "A full history" of Black Mountain College, "is more intricate and poignant than a recitation of the famous names associated with it" (xvi). Instead of chronicling a "who's-who" of Black Mountain, Duberman argues that Black Mountain College is "the story of a small group of men and women—ranging through time from a dozen to a hundred, most of them anonymous as judged by standard measures of achievement" (xvi). While these disparate members varied in background, fame, and skill level, for Duberman, they all "attempted to find some consonance between their ideas and their lives," they "risked the intimacy and exposure that most of us emotionally yearn for and rhetorically defend, but in practice shun" (xvi). Duberman successfully highlights the efforts of those involved with BMC to negotiate a lived experience that falls somewhere between the ideal and the real.

In *Black Mountain*, Duberman not only succeeds in presenting a diverse and rich history of Black Mountain College, he also offers an invaluable tool for future researchers. My critique of Duberman's autobiographical writings should not overshadow the value and accessibility of his work as a whole. *Black Mountain*, coming in at more than 500-pages in length, offers a wealth of information about many figures involved through the years with the inspiring and experimental arts school that shares the book's name. Duberman's high-quality work is easy to approach not only in his confident and well-researched writing, but also thanks to his lengthy 29-page index. The index of *Black Mountain* is a vital research tool as it allows quick access to particular names as well as interesting themes for BMC research, including "communism," "freedom," and "labor," among others.

This review also aims to highlight some of the ways in which current and future scholars can build upon and expand Duberman's work—highlighting topics, themes, and people that are largely unexplored in *Black Mountain*. One particular theme is the idea of place. As the editor's note to this issue of *AppalJ* indicates, there are not many published analyses of the connections between

Black Mountain, the College, and Black Mountain, the Appalachian landscape. Duberman does sprinkle some of these connections throughout the text, perhaps most interestingly when describing a former student's explanation of the ways the move from the College's first home upon a hill at Lee Hall to the nearby valley location at the Lake Eden campus affected the campus community. Although the move was not very far geographically, it had a profound impact on the students and the community. A former student informed Duberman that the College's original hillside location "forced people to look at each other, as did the physical unity ... you were faced with yourself and your companions, to make a life" (161). In contrast, at the Lake Eden campus, "it was easier to get away" and remove oneself from the community (161). Similarly, former BMC faculty member Ted Dreier relayed to Duberman, "Once we were at the new college ... the faculty were much more separated somehow from students than before ... the living quarters were in entirely different buildings ... in Lee Hall they were around the corner, in the same hall" (161). Future research could further explore the ways in which Black Mountain College was affected and shaped by the surrounding landscape.

While Duberman's depiction of Black Mountain College is complex, it is not comprehensive—the role of trauma and tragedy on campus is not adequately explored. For example, Duberman briefly discusses the "Quiet House," the small stone building used for meditation and reflection, writing that it is "a memorial to the Dreiers' son Mark (killed in an automobile accident at the College) and had remained close to the Alberses—almost a surrogate son, some have said—through the years" (324). Duberman does not afford this tragic death and the following memorial sufficient detail to convey the extent of suffering that Mark's death had on the faculty, students, and staff of the tight-knit Black Mountain College community. As Basil King's essay in this issue of *AppalJ* illustrates, the Quiet House, which has since been modified by the current owners of the Lake Eden property, was an extremely important, sacred space to BMC students, even those who arrived years after its construction. A more thorough examination of the Quiet House and the tragic circumstances surrounding it would provide a richer understanding of the ways in which the Black Mountain College community supported itself in the hardest of times.

The importance of place and the significance of the Quiet House are just two topics that Duberman does not fully address in *Black Mountain*. Future researchers would find plenty to study regarding the female faculty and students of Black Mountain College, as well as the students and workers that were local residents of Appalachian North Carolina and their interactions with the diverse Black Mountain College community. Additionally, Duberman does not even mention Alma Stone Williams, the College's first black student, whose personal letters are published in this issue of *AppalJ*. These topics, and many more, would undoubtedly provide fertile ground for new in-depth studies of Black Mountain College.

Although his autobiographical asides will be intrusive to some, Duberman's *Black Mountain*, is overall an informative, thoughtful history of Black Mountain College. While it is perhaps impossible for any single book, even one of nearly 600 pages, to comprehensively chronicle a complex community like Black Mountain, Duberman's book remains a highly valuable resource for writers, researchers, and students alike. It makes a fantastic starting point for readers new to Black Mountain College, offering a broad, wide-ranging exploration of an exceptional educational experiment. *Black Mountain* was first introduced to me as the "Bible" of Black Mountain College. After reading the text for myself, it is clear why Duberman's work still holds that lofty title.

### Savannah Paige Murray

Savannah Paige Murray is a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric & Writing at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. She recently completed her M.A. in Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University where her thesis examined the connections between post-pastoral theory, John Muir, and Appalachian fiction writer John Ehle. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Wofford College with a B.A. in history and a B.S. in environmental studies. Her research interests include Appalachian Studies, oral histories, documentary film, nature writing, ecocriticism, and environmental rhetoric(s).

### Black Mountain Days

by Michael Rumaker (Asheville, NC: Black Mountain Press, 2003)  
\$25.00, paper. ISBN 9780964902084, 542 pp.

In his memoir *Black Mountain Days*, Michael Rumaker poses a question in the final chapter about some personal questionable behavior: "What would Olson have thought?"

If ever a figure appeared God-like to Rumaker, then that figure was Charles Olson. Although this is a memoir that recounts Rumaker's days at Black Mountain College (BMC) with fine, detailed, crisp accounts of various professors, students, sexual shenanigans, and dramatic incidents, the overwhelming presence of Olson permeates virtually every page.

Rumaker had a rough upbringing with his blue-collar, hard-drinking, first-generation Polish-Lithuanian father in South Philadelphia who eventually kicked him out of his house (with his mother's consent) when he discovered his son was a homosexual. Ever since then, Rumaker had been seeking a father figure, which he found in Olson. Rumaker is perfectly aware of this, because very early on in his memoir, he writes, "Later, after my own struggles with [Olson], I was to learn when Charles liked you there was no escaping him and, as in my case, there was no desire to. It was like my chance to have another father at last, a beloved and loving master to serve and learn from" (26).

Olson was not only a father figure, but quite God-like: omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. He was the true patriarch. He was everything

