

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT ASHEVILLE

“WE RUSH TO IT DROOLING AT THE MOUTH”:
JONATHAN WILLIAMS AND THE JARGON SOCIETY

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He doesn't know, he can't say,
before the facts, and he doesn't even
want to know or to say:
the facts themselves loom,
before the understanding in too
large a mass for a mere mouthful:
it is as if the syllables were too
numerous to make a legible word.
The illegible word, accordingly,
the great inscrutable answer
to questions, hangs in the vast
American sky, to his imagination,
as something fantastic and
abracadabrant, belonging to no
known language, and it is under
this convenient design that he
travels and considers and
contemplates, and, to the best of
his ability, enjoys. The interesting
point, in the connection, is
moreover that this particular effect
of the scale of things is the only
effect that, throughout the land,
is not directly adverse to joy.

– Henry James, *The American Scene*, quoted in the
introduction to *Clarence John Laughlin: The Personal Eye*
(New York: Aperture, 1973)

In a letter from 1956, the modernist poet William Carlos Williams wrote to the younger poet and publisher Jonathan Williams, "it's a strange thing about the 'new,' in which category I place what you do. At first it shocks, even repels, such a man as myself, but in a few days, or a month, or a year, we rush to it drooling at the mouth, as if it were a fruit, an apple in winter."¹ The elder Williams was referring to The Jargon Society, the younger Williams' underground small press. At the forefront of the American avant-garde, The Jargon Society published over a hundred volumes outside the mainstream of American literature between 1951 and 2009, focusing on the early work of major writers, overlooked modernist poets, first books by emerging authors, photography, and Southern culture. Jonathan Williams published marginalized aspects of cultural production through The Jargon Society gaining the accolade the "truffle hound of American poetry" by literary critic Hugh Kenner.² Originating from the context of Black Mountain College and the late twentieth century small publishing revolution, Jargon was sustained through correspondences with other writers and artists linked to late-twentieth century experimental literary and art movements. Yet, beyond this historic context, Williams' hunger for the vanguard led him to the outskirts of the cultural realm, deep within his native American South, reconciling his Southern Appalachian roots with avant-garde culture. Contrary to other small presses, the intellectual and cultural exchanges of The Jargon Society, demonstrated a desire to enunciate and visualize both the historical past and the ephemeral present, publishing neglected modernist poets from the early twentieth century and photographic books. The Jargon Society is an unacknowledged chapter in the story of American literary movements, providing a historical foundation for experimental literature, a link to the documentary traditions of photography, and critical bridge from the avant-garde to the vernacular traditions of the American South.

1 Jonathan Williams, *A Palpable Elysium: Portraits of Genius and Solitude* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2002), 98. This quote also appears in Tom Patterson, "Fun and Doom: Jonathan Williams, Maverick Poet of the Nantahalas," *Brown's Guide to Georgia* 8, no. 6 (June 1980): 108. William Carlos Williams and Jonathan Williams shared the same surname but were unrelated.

2 Dennis Hevesi, "Jonathan Williams, Publisher, Dies at 79," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/30/books/30williams.html?_r=1 (accessed October 25, 2010).

Like William Carlos Williams whose primary occupation was a physician rather than poet, Jonathan Williams' professional life reflected his interdisciplinary interests. In addition to acting as publisher of The Jargon Society, Williams was known as a post-modern poet, essayist, photographer, graphic artist, Black Mountain college alumni, art collector, gourmand, raconteur, gadabout, and self-proclaimed "Southern fried bourgeoisophobe."³ His life partner, Thomas Meyer compared him to Proust, describing both men as *flâneurs de mots*, whose omnivorous appetites for details, places, and human connections were almost erotic in their fervency.⁴ Williams was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1957 and grants from the National Endowment of the Arts from the late 1960s, amongst other honors.⁵ Yet despite these significant achievements in American arts and letters, Williams and The Jargon Society are relatively unacknowledged compared to similar small presses such as Barney Rosset's Grove Press and James Laughlin's New Directions. Unlike other avant-garde figures active in the small press movement like Wallace Berman or Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Williams and The Jargon Society have attracted scant scholarly recognition.⁶

Incessantly prolific, Jonathan Williams moved through many circles of late-twentieth century culture. As a result, his name is cited in passing in numerous texts. This previous scholarship includes secondary source histories of Black Mountain College, such as Martin Duberman's *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, Mary Emma Harris' *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, and Vincent Katz's *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*.⁷ Such citations indicate Williams' role amongst the

3 Ronald Johnson and Jonathan Williams, "Nearly Twenty Questions," *Conjunctions* no. 7 (1985): 225; Jonathan Williams, *Blackbird Dust: Essays, Poems, and Photographs* (New York: Turtle Point Press, 2000), vii.

4 Thomas Meyer, introduction to *The Magpie's Bagpipe*, by Jonathan Williams (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), xv.

5 Jonathan Williams, "A Resumé," 1992. Unpublished curriculum vitae authored by Jonathan Williams from the collection of Jeffery Beam.

6 Wallace Berman (1926-1976) was an artist associated with the California Assemblage movement who published the counter-cultural journal *Semina* from 1955 to 1964. Poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919) founded City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco in 1955 and published the Pocket Poets Series. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*, printed in the Pocket Poets Series in 1956, provoked the infamous obscenity trial.

7 Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1972); Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987); Vincent Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002). In addition to these sources University of North Carolina at Asheville history student Laura Ketchuck submitted an undergraduate thesis entitled "Divided We Survive: The Impact of Dissent on the Black Mountain College Community" in 2010. Black Mountain College, located in the foothills of Western North Carolina was an incubator for American avant-garde culture between 1933 and 1956.

Black Mountain school of poets and the influence of the college on Williams' small press. Literary histories such as Donald Allen's seminal *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, Michael Davidson's *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*, and *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980* edited by Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips also provide secondary source material.⁸ These works establish a historical background, setting The Jargon Society within the cultural context of the late-twentieth century and demonstrating its ever-widening cultural reach. Texts on the small press movement, such as *The Art of Literary Publishing: Editors on Their Craft* edited by Bill Henderson and *Against the Grain: Interviews with Maverick American Publishers* edited by Robert Dana, delve deeper into the story of Jargon through interviews with Williams.⁹

While these sources place Jargon within the American counter-culture of Black Mountain and the small press revolution, biographical accounts of Williams lend further evidence. These primary sources include Williams' autobiographical essays in *The Magpie's Bagpipe: Selected Essays of Jonathan Williams*, *Blackbird Dust: Essays, Poems, and Photographs*, and *A Palpable Elysium: Portraits of Genius and Solitude*, as well as unpublished essays archived on The Jargon Society website.¹⁰ Thorough biographical research and a chronology of The Jargon Society have been undertaken by Jeffery Beam and Tom Patterson.¹¹ Beam's *Visions of a Dame Kind* was published as

John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Charles Olson, Josef Albers, and Robert Rauschenberg were all associated with Black Mountain College.

8 Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1999); Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1998).

9 Jonathan Williams, "A Quarter Century of The Jargon Society: An Interview with Jonathan Williams," in *The Art of Literary Publishing: Editors on Their Craft*, ed. Bill Henderson (Wainscott, NY: The Pushcart Press, 1980); Jonathan Williams, "Jonathan Williams Interview," in *Against the Grain: Interviews with Maverick American Publishers*, ed. Robert Dana (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 1986).

10 Jonathan Williams, *The Magpie's Bagpipe: Selected Essays of Jonathan Williams*, ed. Thomas Meyer (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982); Jonathan Williams, *Blackbird Dust: Essays, Poems, and Photographs* (New York: Turtle Point Press, 2000); Jonathan Williams, *A Palpable Elysium: Portraits of Genius and Solitude* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2002). The Jargon Society's website, <http://www.jargonbooks.com>, provides an archive of published essays by Williams dating from 1998 to 2006.

11 Jeffery Beam, "Remembering Jonathan Williams (1929-2008)" The North Carolina Arts Council, http://www.ncarts.org/freeform_scrn_template.cfm?ffscrn_id=364 (accessed January 18, 2011); Jeffery Beam, "A Snowflake Orchard and What I Found There," The Jargon Society, <http://jargonbooks.com/snowflake1.html> (accessed

Jargon 113 in 1995 and Tom Patterson's *St. EOM in the Land of Pasaquan: The Life and Times and Art of Eddie Owens Martin* was published as Jargon 64 in 1987, and their articles on Williams and The Jargon Society, while offering a depth of critical interpretation, nonetheless impart a tinge of personal bias.¹² Further, neither Beam nor Patterson address the historic context within which Williams published or utilize the methodology of historic scholarship to guide their research.

Other primary evidence of The Jargon Society abounds. As a historic documents, the one hundred and thirteen titles published by the press visually manifest both its permutations and quiescent commitment to marginal culture. While each Jargon publication was numbered, the titles were not necessarily published in chronological order. Bibliographies of the press compiled by Williams and James S. Jaffe aid in discerning the publishing history of The Jargon Society.¹³ The preeminent repository of primary sources is The Jargon Society Collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Purchased in 1991, the collection containing approximately eight hundred boxes of material is an invaluable resource to future historians and literary critics.¹⁴ Due to the contemporary scope of the press, numerous individuals associated with Jargon are still accessible to historians in the form of potential oral histories. An interview with Thomas Meyer, Williams' partner of over forty years, conducted in January 2011 is an initial attempt in this otherwise uncharted body of historic research.¹⁵

January 18, 2011); Tom Patterson "Fun and Doom: Jonathan Williams, Maverick Poet of the Nantahalas," *Brown's Guide to Georgia* 8.6 (June 1980): 34-39; 108-114; Tom Patterson, "If You Can Kill a Snake With It, It Ain't Art!: The Art History of a Maverick Poet-Publisher," *Jacket* 38 (2009), <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/38/jwd03-patterson.shtml> (accessed January 15, 2011).

12 Jeffery Beam, *Visions of a Dame Kind* (Winston-Salem, NC: The Jargon Society, 1995); Tom Patterson, *St. EOM in the Land of Pasaquan: The Life and Times and Art of Eddie Owens Martin* (Winston-Salem, NC: The Jargon Society, 1987).

13 Jonathan Williams, *An Attempt at a Complete List of Jargon Society Publications, Including Titles in Press and Projected, as of January 1974* (Yorkshire, England: Jargon Society, 1974); Jonathan Williams, *Uncle Gus Flaubert Rates the Jargon Society: In One Hundred One Laconic Présalé Sage Sentences* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1989); James S. Jaffe, *Jonathan Williams: A Bibliographic Checklist of His Writings, 1950-1988* (Haverford, PA: James S. Jaffe Rare Books, 1989); Richard Owens, "The Jargon Society: A Check List," *Jacket* 38 (2009), <http://jacketmagazine.com/38/jw-jargon-soc-check.shtml> (accessed November 30, 2010).

14 The State University of New York at Buffalo's The Jargon Society Collection is composed of approximately 750 boxes with an additional fifty storage boxes of unsorted material, comprising more than 300 linear feet of manuscript. The collection is organized in seven categories: manuscripts by Williams, manuscripts by others, business records, letters to Williams, letters from Williams, art and photographs, and ephemera. Williams' photographs reside in the collection of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

15 Thomas Meyer, interview by Melanie English, Asheville, NC, January 27, 2011, transcript, Special Collections, Ramsey Library, The University of North Carolina, Asheville, NC.

Building upon these secondary histories and primary sources, this paper connects Jargon to the broader time line of American arts and letters, lends precedence to Williams' visual acumen in the emerging field of photography, and argues that Jargon was a bridge from the bohemian counter-culture of the post-war era to the visionary folk culture of the South.

As these sources demonstrate, the history of The Jargon Society is the story of Jonathan Williams. Jonathan Chamberlain Williams was born March 8, 1929 in Asheville, North Carolina to Thomas Benjamin Williams (1898-1974) of Hendersonville, North Carolina and Georgia Chamberlain Williams (1904-2000) of Cartersville, Georgia. He was raised an only child in the District of Columbia, where his father devised office systems for the government. His small town parents developed urbane predilections. It was his father, a true Southern gentleman, the “class poet” at the Fruitland Academy in his native Henderson County, who introduced his son to literature. The young Williams devoured children's books such as the *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* series by L. Frank Baum, Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Doolittle*, Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, and Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus stories.¹⁶ Jonathan Williams often stated that Jargon emerged from a kind of childhood desire. He disclosed, “Jargon has allowed me to fill my shelves with books I cared for as passionately as I cared for the beloved books of childhood.”¹⁷ As Thomas Meyer revealed, Williams made the books for himself in a way. Meyer said, “He wanted to want the books.”¹⁸ When a Jargon book came out of the bindery, Williams spent time just looking at the book as a physical object; the combination of words and image in a corporeal form.¹⁹

Williams attended the prestigious private boy's school St. Alban's of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. between 1941 and 1947, along with fellow classmate Gore Vidal. At St. Albans, he indulged his adolescent infatuation with Aldous Huxley, C.S. Lewis, H.P. Lovecraft, and Henry Miller.

16 Williams, *Blackbird Dust*, 117; Williams, *The Magpie's Bagpipe*, 184. Joel Chandler Harris' home Wren's Nest was located two blocks from Williams' grandmother's home on the West End of Atlanta.

17 Jonathan Williams, *Blackbird Dust*, 117.

18 Thomas Meyer, “Interview.”

19 Thomas Meyer, “Interview.”

He confessed, upon reading a scathing review of Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* in *Time* magazine, he naturally had to rush to the bookstore to acquire a copy, in defiance of his proper schoolboy upbringing.²⁰ In the early 1940s, his parents purchased a forty-acre property, christened Skywinding Farm by his father, the amateur poet, in the Southern Appalachian community of Scaly Mountain outside the resort town of Highlands, North Carolina. This family retreat would provide Williams with a decisive link to the culture of the American South for the remainder of his life.²¹

Upon graduating from St. Albans, Williams enrolled at Princeton University, taking courses in Art History and formulating a personal viewpoint outside the norm. His interest in art collecting led him to contact the poet Kenneth Patchen in nearby Old Lyme, Connecticut, who shared an interest in modern art. Yet, Williams found the Ivy League institution stifling and withdrew after three semesters in 1950. Much to the dismay of his conservative parents, Williams dropped out of Princeton to pursue his interests in art and literature.²² Williams explained,

Was I certifiably nuts? Was I simply a 'loser'? Was I merely paying my conservative Southern parents back for their heavy investment in upward family mobility by turning out queer, disinterested in money and economic competition, disinterested in guns. A more pleasant interpretation (at least for me) would be to say that by the age of 19 I simply felt like a fugitive from what they call modern American life. I wanted a literary vocation and I wanted to be a part of a community of a few like-minded people— a few idiots, the Greeks would have called them, not members of the body politic. A few caitiffs, loners, and self-initiators.²³

After leaving Princeton, Williams returned to Washington, D.C. to study painting at the Phillips Collection with Carl Knauths. Next, he studied graphic art at Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17 New York City's West Village. In early 1951, Williams enrolled for a semester at the Institute of Design in Chicago. László Moholy-Nagy, formerly of the Bauhaus, was the director and the faculty was composed of European Jewish refugees. Williams studied under Lorna Zerner, who had been a student of typographer and book designer Jans Tschichold, a German Swiss, renowned for his simple and

20 Williams, *The Magpie's Bagpipe*, 3.

21 Patterson, "If You Can Kill a Snake With It, It Ain't Art!"; Jonathan Williams, "A Resumé"; Williams, *Blackbird Dust*, 115; Williams, *A Palpable Elysium*, 42.

22 Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: Norton, 1991), 228.

23 Williams, "JW Quoted," The Jargon Society, 2004, http://jargonbooks.com/JW_dossier_quotes.html (accessed January 25, 2011).

elegant graphic designs for Penguin Books. He also became acquainted with visiting instructor M.C. Richards from the experimental Black Mountain College located in Williams' native mountains of western North Carolina, and the photographers Art Sinsabaugh and Harry Callahan, who prompted Williams' interest in the medium. As an underclassman, Williams was ineligible to enroll in these photographer's courses in Chicago. However, Callahan encouraged Williams to sign up for a summer session he was teaching at Black Mountain along with Aaron Siskind. Williams knew little of the college at the time. Amongst the prudent Southern aristocrats in Highlands, Black Mountain College had the bad reputation of a place of "free love, communism, and nigger-lovers."²⁴

Prior to arriving at Black Mountain College, Williams visited San Francisco to meet his mentor Kenneth Rexroth, a central figure in what is dubbed the San Francisco Renaissance, with whom he been corresponding with since 1950. The term "Renaissance" implies a literary revival of the romantic movement or Paris in the 1920s, yet as Michael Davidson contends, it was ill-suited to describe the bohemian political and social iconoclasm of the literary movement on the west coast.²⁵ Williams also took the opportunity to visit his early literary idol, Henry Miller, in Big Sur.²⁶

In June 1951 while in San Francisco, Williams published the first broadside under The Jargon Society imprint, *Garbage Litters the Iron Face of the Sun's Child*, a self-authored Patchen-esque poem with a copper plate engraving in the style of William Blake by David Ruff, dedicated to Rexroth. He modeled the press after New Directions. This first title set a precedent for Jargon in its visual interplay of word and image and the collaboration of writer and artist. Williams chose the name Jargon from Paul Ellsworth, a fellow student at the Institute of Design, with whom he often talked about making books and putting art next to words. Ellsworth would frequently remark on "life's jargon." When asked to elaborate, he would reply, "I mean in my own speech. My language, as opposed to the tribe's

24 Patterson, "If You Can Kill a Snake With It, It Ain't Art!"; Williams, "Jonathan Williams Interview," in *Against the Grain*, 201.

25 Davidson, xiv, 2.

26 Hamalian, 228-229; Beam, "Remembering Jonathan Williams (1929-2008)." Miller's *The Red Notebook* was published by Jargon in 1958.

language.” Williams looked up the word's origin in a dictionary and appreciated its ironies. In French, *jargon* means the twittering of birds, while *jargonelle* is a kind of spring pear. In psychiatric language, “jargon” refers to the language of an infant before it learns social conventions. Williams preferred to call Jargon a society rather than a press, emphasizing the communal dynamics of the alternative publishing revolution. He explained there's “always been a kind of group or community aspect of it. It's not a one-man band, it's a backwoods symphony.”²⁷

Emblematic of the post-war small press revival and mimeograph revolution, The Jargon Society served as an interdisciplinary cultural intersection of experimental writers and artists working in the historic context of the Black Mountain poets, the San Francisco Renaissance, and the Beat Generation. The collaborative nature of The Jargon Society was characteristic of mid-twentieth century American literature. In *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* Donald Allen distinguished five categories of poets comprising the post-World War II avant-garde. These loose groupings included poets who published in cutting edge periodicals such as Cid Corman's *Origin* and *The Black Mountain Review* published out of Black Mountain College, members of the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beats, poets of the New York School, and other poets with unique voices who didn't fit neatly into any of the previous four groups. Williams' poems were included with the Black Mountain poets. Allen notes that there was a considerable amount of crossover between groups, and all shared the defining characteristic of rejecting wholly the qualities of academic verse.²⁸

In his 1950 essay “Projective Verse,” poet and rector of Black Mountain College, Charles Olson decried the academic establishment and the then in vogue New Criticism literary movement. “Projective Verse” drew a following of writers such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, Louis Zukofsky, and Paul Blackburn, all of whom would be associated with Jargon.²⁹ Olson emphasized the visual aspects of the text, the space between words on the page, in the

27 Williams, “Jonathan Williams Interview,” in *Against the Grain*, 200-204.

28 Donald Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, xi-xiv.

29 Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” in *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1960), 386-400. Other writers associated with the ideas espoused by Olson are Larry Eigner, Vincent

manner of the contemporary Concrete poets, and the spontaneity of poetry, relating writing to abstract painting and musical improvisation.³⁰ Williams considered the lumbering, august Olson his most influential teacher. He taught Williams, “You’ve got to take hunches, you’ve got to jump and then see what— you’ve got to operate as though you knew it. Take chances, jump in there and see what happens.”³¹

Through correspondence, the exchange of manuscripts and small journals, a sense of community emerged among those outside the margins of academic journals and mainstream literature in the post-war era.³² Mary Emma Harris asserts, “the twentieth-century concepts of interaction (what happens between things) in space and time, the relative nature of forms, a nonlinear sense of continuity and coherence, and the importance of process and chance in the creation and experience of a work of art all contributed to the conceptual foundations of the new American art.”³³ Post-war literary movements demonstrated a shift in the meaning of culture away from Enlightenment rationalization, recalling instead an earlier anthropological process of knowledge shared within a community. Through this process, formal literary innovations emerged, as well as, new alternative social forms.³⁴

This collaboration of writers and artists was a catalyst for a “mimeograph revolution”— a period of experimental literature in the form of little magazines and small press publishing outside the mainstream beginning in the post-war years and existing through the 1970s. The term “mimeograph revolution” is a misnomer, as not all publications were produced on a mimeograph machine. In the post-war period, the availability of inexpensive printing techniques, such as mimeograph machines, letterpress, and offset printing, meant that anyone could be a publisher. The immediacy of the production garnered an instant response amongst readers. Hot off the press these homemade

Ferrini, Gael Turnbueell, Kitasona Katue, Raymond Souster, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, and Rainer Gerhardt. *New Criticism* was spearheaded by critics Allan Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Lionel Trilling, and writers T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, William Butler Yeats, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Karl Shapiro, Elizabeth Bishop, and Randall Jarrell.

30 Katz, 183.

31 Duberman, 383.

32 Harris, 196.

33 Harris, 182.

34 Davidson, x-xi.

publications flew off the shelves of independent bookstores and circulated in the post via mailing lists to a network of like-minded adherents that grew exponentially. Poets forged an underground economy, re-appropriating the means of production and distribution.³⁵

Olson recognized the potential of the underground press and Black Mountain College served as a center for the small press revolution. The college published *The Black Mountain Review* between 1954 and 1957, and Robert Creeley established his own press called Divers. Olson championed the autonomy of the writer, inducing his students to engage in self-publishing ventures. He urged them, “don't ever be intimidated by the disdain or the disinterest of the world. Get yourself some type, get yourself some paper, and print it.”³⁶

The publications of the mimeograph revolution were devoid of professional gloss and inexpensively offset. As Meyer explained, Jargon diverged from these alternative magazines and books, evoking instead the tradition of the fine press. Jargon books evince a salient visual aesthetic. The fine paper, typography, illustrations, and binding made each title a work of art. Despite the quality of fine printing, Jargon publications were marketed at reasonable prices.³⁷ The books were frequently typeset and printed by William Loftin of Heritage Printers in Charlotte, North Carolina, a printer now used by major publishers such as Knopf.³⁸ Jargon 45, *Six Mid-American Chants* illustrates this design aesthetic.³⁹ This tome presents poems of Sherwood Anderson formerly overlooked by literary critics, complimented by black and white panoramic photographs of the midwest by Art Sinsabaugh, whom Williams had met in Chicago in 1951. Both Rexroth and Dahlberg suggested Williams reprint the

35 Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips, ed., 14-15; Jerome Rothenberg, Preface to *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, ed. by Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips (New York: The New York Public Library, 1998), 9. Other prominent titles of little magazines included *Ark II*, *Beatitude*, *Big Table*, *Big Sky*, *C Comics*, *City Lights Journal*, *Floating Bear*, *Folder*, *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, *Kulchur*, *Moby I*, *Neurotic*, *The Outsider*, *Semina*, *Unmuzzled Ox*, *Yugen*, and *World*.

36 Katz, 198. The quote is derived from an interview with Jonathan Williams conducted by Martin Duberman on November 3, 1968, included in the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh. As Harris notes, other Black Mountain College students founded presses. These included Joel Oppenheimer's Sad Devil Press, Carroll Williams' Black Cat Press, Tommy Jackson's Grapnel Press, Nick Cernovich's Black Mountain Graphics Workshop, and Stan Vanderbeek's One-Thumb Press.

37 Meyer, “Interview.”

38 Michael McFee, “Reckless and Doomed: Jonathan Williams and Jargon,” *Small Press* (September/October 1985), 104.

39 Sherwood Anderson, *Six Mid-American Chants* (Highlands, NC: The Jargon Society, 1964).

poems. The book was printed in an edition of 1550 copies at the price of \$6.50 each. Olson mused on the book's unusual elongate design, "my god, it's like a train, like getting a train for Christmas, even including the tracks..."⁴⁰ Yet, the long horizontal format enhances the sense of the flatness of the Great Plains and the enormity of the sky. Of the book Williams wrote, "let the bookmaking disappear— by its grace, simply disappear, leaving these good, honest words, and these direct and simple photographs."⁴¹ As a fine press Jargon ran counter to the nitty-gritty presses of the mimeograph revolution. Amongst members of the poet community this elitist stance provoked controversy, as when Robert Duncan's *Letters: Poems, 1953-1956* was published as Jargon 14 in 1958. Duncan objected to the elaborate production quality of the text and he and Williams had a falling out.⁴²

Williams arrived at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1951. His classmates included Fielding Dawson, Joel Oppenheimer, Francine du Plessix, Dan Rice, Joseph Fiore, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly, many of whom he would collaborate with. As a publishing venture, The Jargon Society participated in the creation of alternative forms of community within the American avant-garde, constructing social relationships and collaborating with other writers and artists. The second Jargon publication, *The Dancer*, a broadside poem by Joel Oppenheimer and a drawing by Robert Rauschenberg was issued in 1951. *Red/Gray*, a folio of self-authored poems with drawings by Paul Ellsworth, and *The Double-Backed Beast* featuring poems by Victor Kalos and drawings by Dan Rice both appeared in 1952.⁴³ After losing his conscientious objector appeal, and rather than risking a prison term for draft evasion, Williams enlisted in the U.S. Army Medical Corps in 1952. He served as a neuropsychiatric technician at the General Hospital in Stuttgart, Germany. Coincidentally, Williams remembered the printer used by New Directions during the 1940s and 1950s was located in a nearby suburb. Williams proceeded to issue Jargon publications printed on this and other fine German presses in 1953, including *Four Stoppages/A Configuration*, featuring his own poems with drawings by

40 Williams, *Blackbird Dust*, 200-201.

41 Beam, "A Snowflake Orchard and What I Found There."

42 Sherwood Anderson, *Six Mid-American Chants* (Highlands, NC: The Jargon Society, 1964).

43 Williams, *Blackbird Dust*, 116-117.

Charles Oscar, *Fables and Other Little Tales* by Kenneth Patchen, *The Maximus Poems* by Charles Olson, and *The Immortal Proposition* by Robert Creeley with drawings by René Laubiès. These publications were funded by an inheritance of \$1,500 from Charles Neal of Demorest, Georgia, a family friend. With this windfall Williams deliberated his options. He could purchase a Porsche automobile, buy a Max Beckmann painting, or invest in publishing books.⁴⁴

After his discharge from the Army in the fall of 1954, Williams returned to North Carolina where he continued to publish Black Mountain College writers and artists, for example *All That is Lovely in Men* by Creeley with drawings by Dan Rice and a photograph by Williams and *The Dutiful Son* by Joel Oppenheimer with a lithograph by Joseph Fiore in 1955, as well as *Will West* by Paul Metcalf, the great-grandson of Herman Melville, in 1956. Black Mountain considered appointing Williams as the college's publisher. Yet, Williams had reservations. He confided in the artist Ben Shahn in April 1954 that accepting the position at the college would compromise his own unique literary aesthetic. He differed in opinion from Olson and Creeley, and only through Jargon was Williams able to execute his visionary ideals as a publisher. Nonetheless, his central involvement in the college's publishing history deserves merit.⁴⁵

Following Black Mountain College's closure in 1956, Williams considered discontinuing his Jargon Society. Small publishers like Williams struggled with distribution difficulties. He had only thirty-five subscribers and likened selling books to trying to "squeeze an audience out of a turnip patch." During this period, Williams turned down the chance to publish Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, a decision he didn't regret. He estimated Jargon would have tragically only have sold a few hundred copies. Instead, *Howl* was published by City Lights and became a Beat generation classic. In late 1956, Williams embarked on the first of many cross-country road trips in his old Pontiac station wagon, and

44 Duberman, 382; Richard Owens, "Jonathan Williams in Conversation with Richard Owens, June 1, 2007" *Jacket* 38 (2009), <http://jacketmagazine.com/38/jwd06-iv-jw-ivb-owens.shtml> (accessed March 5, 2011); Jonathan Williams, "Jonathan C. Williams Interviews Jonathan Chamberlain Williams," The Jargon Society, 2000, <http://jargonbooks.com/jcw.html> (accessed February 8, 2011).

45 Harris, 197; Williams, "A Quarter Century of The Jargon Society: An Interview with Jonathan Williams," in *The Art of Literary Publishing: Editors on Their Craft*, 120.

later a Volkswagen Beetle, giving readings, selling, and if necessary, giving away books by Jargon, City Lights, Divers Press, New Directions and Evergreen.⁴⁶ R. Buckminster Fuller remarked on Williams' perspicacity for dispersing cultural knowledge through The Jargon Society, "he is our Johnny Appleseed— we need him more than we know."⁴⁷

In 1958, Williams received a Guggenheim Foundation grant to read at the Library of Congress and publish the Duncan book and *Overland to the Islands* by Denise Levertov. Throughout the 1950s Jargon published early works by writers who would eventually become canonical figures in American literature, like Duncan, Levertov, Olson, and Creeley. Williams published Levertov on the recommendation of Rexroth after James Laughlin at New Directions had passed on the manuscript. *Overland to the Islands* helped establish Levertov's reputation as a major poet and New Directions would issue many of her future publications.⁴⁸ The Jargon Society also published first books by emerging authors, instilling their work with credibility. Michael McClure's *Passages* was published in 1956. Ronald Johnson's *A Line of Poetry, A Row of Trees* appeared in 1964 and Thomas Meyer's *The Bang Book* was issued in 1971.⁴⁹ Originally from Seattle, Washington, Meyer was an undergraduate when he met Williams through his colleagues at Bard College. Williams had expressed interest in publishing younger, queer poets. The publication of *The Bang Book* fundamentally altered the course of Meyer's life. He became Williams' partner and for the next four decades played a significant editorial role in The Jargon Society. With impressive foresight, Williams perceptively discerned great talent, introducing these emerging writers to the literary world.⁵⁰

Following his six month stint in Washington, D.C., Williams moved to Manhattan, hired to work at Greenwich Village's famous Eighth Street Bookshop. He frequented the Cedar Tavern, a

46 Williams, "Jonathan Williams Interview," in *Against the Grain*, 224-225; Harris, 200-202; Williams, *The Magpie's Bagpipe*, 26.

47 Fuller is quoted in Guy Davenport, introduction to *An Ear in Bartram's Tree*, by Jonathan Williams (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969). Jargon 44 was an *Untitled Epic Poem on the History of Industrialization* by R. Buckminster Fuller. Fuller taught at Black Mountain College during the summers of 1948 and 1949, where the first geodesic dome was erected.

48 Meyer, "Interview."

49 Williams, *Blackbird Dust*, 119.

50 Meyer, "Interview."

popular hang-out for hip bohemian-types, associating with a cadre of writers and artists many of them old Black Mountain College chums. Yet, from these avant-garde circles Williams deviated, self-resolute, refusing to become immersed in any particular movement. On the fringes of these movements, Williams retreated, alienated from even these alternative cultural manifestations. One anecdote demonstrates this incongruity succinctly. In 1958, Williams walked into the bar wearing a brown worsted suit, an Oxford shirt, a striped tie, and well-polished brown shoes, much in the fashion of the conservative prep school dress code of his youth. Immediately upon entering the bar, he was accosted by the Beat poet Gregory Corso, whom he had never met before, who chided laughingly, "Why are you wearing those silly, awful clothes?"⁵¹ Even Williams' formal attire evinced a quintessential elitist aesthetic.

This aesthetic was shaped through correspondences with elder mentors Patchen, Rexroth, William Carlos Williams, Dahlberg, and Louis Zukofsky. Demonstrating Williams' reverence for his predecessors, The Jargon Society published works by forgotten American modernist poets from the 1910s to the 1940s, such as Patchen, Lorine Niedecker, Zukofsky, and Mina Loy. Jargon issued Patchen's *Fables and Other Little Tales* in 1953, *Hurrah for Anything* in 1957, and *Poem-Scapes* in 1958. Objectivist poet Zukofsky was a professor at Brooklyn Polytech, but his poetry hadn't been published since the 1930s. Jargon issued Zukofsky's *Some Time* in 1956 and *A Test of Poetry* in 1964.⁵² Zukofsky's protege Niedecker, a poet of the tradition of Emily Dickinson, resided in isolation and relative poverty on the outskirts of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Niedecker's *Tenderness and Gristle* was published as Jargon 48 in 1968, while *From This Condensery: The Complete Writings of Lorine Niedecker* appeared as Jargon 100 in 1985. Indeed, Niedecker was so obscure Williams received a telephone call from the Academy of American Poets requesting her phone number. He had to explain to

51 Jeffery Beam, "Jonathan Williams' Nation of Has, For Those Who Haven't," The Jargon Society, 2003. http://jargonbooks.com/jw_interview.html (accessed March 8, 2011).

52 L.S. Dembo and Paul Blackburn, "An Interview with Paul Blackburn," *Contemporary Literature* 13, no. 2 (1972): 133-143. <http://www.jstor.org> (accessed January 18, 2011).

the caller that, unfortunately she had been dead for twenty years.⁵³

Poet and artist Mina Loy had once been considered along with T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore, as one of the foremost modernist poets of the 1920s, publishing in *The Dial* and *The Little Review*, exhibiting at the Salon d'Automne, and circulating amongst the Lost Generation expatriates and European intellectuals of Paris. Yet she had disappeared into oblivion, advanced in years and living in Aspen, Colorado. At the urgency of Rexroth, Williams wrote to her in 1955, but his letters went unanswered. In 1957, on another cross-county trip, he sought her out in person. Mina Loy's *Lunar Baedeker and Times-Tables* was published in 1958. Rexroth lauded the publication as "a real EVENT, like the opening of King Tut's tomb."⁵⁴ Through the rediscovery of Loy and these other modernists, Jargon forged a connection to the avant-garde of Paris and the little magazines of the 1920s.

Williams relocated to England in the early 1960s, living briefly at the London flat of writer Barbara Jones, and encountering overlooked British poets like Basil Bunting, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Thomas A. Clark, and Simon Cutts, whom he published through Jargon. In the late 1960s, after hiking the Appalachian Trail and walking the Lake District of England, Williams yearned for a Jeffersonian rural idyll outside the metropolitan cultural centers, returning to his remote Skywinding Farm, and spending half the year at a seventeenth century stone cottage in Dentdale, Cumbria, England, thanks to the patronage of American oil tycoon Donald B. Anderson.⁵⁵ The irascible Williams quoted Henry Miller, "one of the things Jargon is devoted to is an attack on urban culture. We piss on it all from a considerable height."⁵⁶ The cities bespoke of a restless youth culture rebelling against the conformity of the Cold War military-industrial complex, erecting new bohemian enclaves and disseminating the past. In defiance, Williams endorsed the sentiments of Herodotus opining that humanity cannot achieve the

53 Jonathan Williams, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, vol. 12 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), 346.

54 Mina Loy, *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (Highlands, NC: The Jargon Society, 1982), xix-xxii. Rexroth is quoted in Williams, *The Magpie's Bagpipe*, 28.

55 Meyer, "Interview."

56 Henry Miller quoted in Beam, "Remembering Jonathan Williams (1929-2008)."

up most heights of civilization without thoroughly considering the past. He elaborated,

We live in a society which wipes out as fast as it builds. Robert Kelly suggested one time to me, that the real misery of this country was the fact that just about the time somebody got serious about Edward Arlington Robinson, they would bulldoze him in favor of William Carlos Williams, and suddenly, Williams wasn't interesting anymore. So you'd go on to Robert Creeley, and then someone would say 'Well, gee, Bob Dylan is really better than those people and you wouldn't bother anymore.'⁵⁷

The views Williams espoused were antithetical to the post-modern flux of the late-twentieth century avant-garde. He venerated the unnoticed cultural production happening outside the cities. These places emanated a timelessness and a continuity of memory. Williams sought to preserve this tradition through Jargon publications. Just as he resurrected the reputations of great writers of the past, Williams sought to document the cultural history of the rural backwaters through his fine press, particularly conscious of his own heritage in the remote Southern Appalachian mountains. This notion of preservation distinguished The Jargon Society from other small presses and little magazines.

Jargon's contradistinction led to the incorporation of the press as a nonprofit and three grants from the National Endowment of the Arts in the late 1960s, when Carolyn Kizer was head of the Literature Panel, a sum totaling 35,000 dollars over the course of three years. Later, the Visual Arts program provided an additional grant.⁵⁸ The approval of the National Endowment legitimized Jargon in the eyes of patrons who contributed more funding. Prominent amongst these patrons were heirs to the Hanes Company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The sway of the National Endowment is also evident in the enhanced production of Jargon publications. For instance, Jargon 37 Russell Edson's *What a Man Can See and Other Fables* and Jargon 38 G.G. Belli's *The Roman Sonnets of G.G. Belli* each featured a drawing by Ray Johnson. While proposed at roughly the same time, the Edson book didn't appear until 1969 and its high caliber production quality in contrast to the minimal Belli book from 1960, demonstrates the influence of the National Endowment.⁵⁹

57 Williams, "A Quarter Century of The Jargon Society: An Interview with Jonathan Williams," in *The Art of Literary Publishing: Editors on Their Craft*, 117, 130.

58 Williams, "A Quarter Century of The Jargon Society: An Interview with Jonathan Williams," in *The Art of Literary Publishing: Editors on Their Craft*, 119.

59 Meyer, "Interview."

