

Charles Olson and the Counterculture of the 1950s and '60s by Craig Stormont

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Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* include frequent mention of polis, taken from the ancient Greek city/state, but his use of the term polis refers to a more rewarding and beneficial way of life than that which he observed, particularly in Washington D.C., where he abandoned a promising political career. His idea of polis refers to "a new kind of nation" in which all members of the extended community strive to accomplish common goals intended to enhance their shared experience. Those who were familiar with Olson's work and valued his ideas, as well as those who were effected by them, should be recognized as participants in his extended polis, and when they are, it is clear that much of Olson's ideology contributed significantly to the counterculture of both the 1950s and the turbulent 1960s.

In Henry Ferrini's film titled *Polis Is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place*, folksinger Pete Seeger is interviewed in reference to an occasion when he met Olson, in 1942, on Eighth St. in Greenwich Village and invited him home to "have supper." As Seeger recalls:

There he met Woody Guthrie, and he asked Woody would he like to write a little article for a little magazine called *Common Ground*. Woody's article was called "Ear Music," and he started off by saying, 'I don't mean you pluck the guitar with your ear. I mean you don't need any paper to learn this kind of music.' A beautiful description of folk music by one of the folks. And Charles Olson printed it, Angus Cameron of Little, Brown read it. Next thing you know Woody was writing a book called *Bound for Glory*.

Olson's generosity to fellow writers and artists in this regard is never addressed in Tom Clark's biography of the poet, *Allegory of a Poet's Life*, yet it attests to the important role Olson played in shaping the "new kind of nation" he wrote of. It's conceivable that *Bound for Glory* (1943) would never have been written or published if not for Olson's suggestion that Guthrie write the aforementioned article. Bob Dylan, who emulated Guthrie in his youth, states in his autobiography titled *Chronicles: Volume One*: "Woody Guthrie ruled my universe" (49). Dylan suggests that *Bound for Glory* affected him deeply in the following lines:

One of the Svengali-type Beats on the scene happened to have Woody's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, and he lent it to me. I went through it from cover to cover like a hurricane, totally focused on every word, and the book sang out to me like the radio [...] Guthrie divides the world between those who work and those who don't and is interested in the liberation of the human race and wants to create a world worth living in. *Bound for Glory* is a hell of a book. It's huge. Almost too big. (245)

Clearly, Guthrie and Olson shared the idea of creating "a world worth living in," and Dylan, whose songs are central to the 1960s counterculture, to some extent can be viewed as a member of Olson's extended, ideological polis, whether he recognizes it or not. The songwriter's close

association with Allen Ginsberg supports that contention, which is underscored by the fact that Ginsberg was a pallbearer at Olson's funeral.

Olson's idea for "a new kind of nation" resonated with Ginsberg and his fellow Beats who rejected mainstream American culture since it did not accurately reflect their own experience in this country at that time. Diane di Prima, a poet associated with the Beats, as well as the Diggers and the 1960s counterculture, was happy to discuss her involvement with the *Grateful Dead* when I asked her about her poem titled "Pigpen," named after their keyboardist and harmonica player who died in 1973, at the Charles Olson Centennial held in Gloucester in October of 2010. She specifically mentioned how she was present during Ken Kesey's Acid Tests where the *Dead* performed as the house band. The LSD was provided by Owsley Stanley, a friend of di Prima's, who manufactured it and worked as a sound engineer for the band. Considering the fact that *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), Olson's first book, begins with the statement: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America" (*Collected Prose* 17), the following comments from Jerry Garcia, the late lead guitarist and vocalist of the *Dead*, suggests that he was familiar with Olson's ideas:

Music is a thing that has optimism built into it. Optimism is another way of saying 'space.' Music has infinite space [...] Music is an infinite cylinder, it's open-ended, it's space. The *form* of music has infinite space as a part of it and that, in itself, means that its momentum is essentially in that open place. (*A Signpost to New Space* 97)

Garcia's comments correlate directly with Olson's dictum, borrowed from Robert Creeley and stated in "Projective Verse," that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" as well as his practice of "open field" poetics. Garcia goes on to say,

We were doing the Acid Test, which was our first exposure to formlessness. Formlessness and chaos lead to new forms. And new order. Closer to, probably, what the real order is. When you break down the old order and the old forms and leave them broken and shattered, you suddenly find yourself a new space with new form and new order which are more like the way it is. More like the flow. (101)

The "new space with new form and new order" that Garcia mentions correlates directly with Olson's entire approach to poetics, human experience, and nation building. The following rare footage of Neal Cassady, in which he speaks primarily about form, suggests that he was also quite familiar with Olson's views: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXitvt24Q6w> . When di Prima's friendships with Olson, the *Dead*, and Cassady are considered, it becomes difficult to dispute the contention that Garcia's opinions can be traced to Olson through di Prima, who along with Leroi Jones, later Amiri Baraka, consistently published Olson's work in *The Floating Bear*, a poetry magazine they edited throughout the 1960's.

Olson's example was clearly far reaching, and di Prima, in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (2001), twice cites Olson stating, "A man is what he *does*" (107, 343). Her esteem for the elder poet is clarified in the following footage by Henry Ferrini filmed at the Olson Centennial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCTfuJOT9sc> . She had traveled to Gloucester in order to meet Olson, as many younger writers had, and they visited Dogtown together. Not

surprisingly, there is no mention of di Prima in *Allegory of a Poet's Life* which is a problematic omission on Clark's part. As di Prima states of Olson in *Recollections*:

Years later, Charles Olson told me how important it was to him to know in those early years of the *Bear*, that he could send us a new piece of, say, *The Maximus Poems*, and within two weeks a hundred and fifty artists, many of them his friends, would read it. Would not only read it, but answer in their work – incorporate some innovation of line or syntax, and build on that. Like we were all in one big jam session, blowing. The changes happened that fast. (254)

One of the “hundred and fifty artists” di Prima refers to – who should all be recognized as participants in Olson's extended, ideological polis – is Michael McClure, who read at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, in 1955, in what is widely considered the first important Beat poetry reading since it is where Ginsberg first read *Howl* publicly. In *Recollections*, di Prima discusses her initial meeting with McClure in New York by stating: “It was a blast” (246). The fact that McClure is seen enthusiastically applauding in film footage of di Prima being named Poet Laureate of San Francisco in 2009 suggests that they remain friends.

McClure visited Olson in Gloucester, in 1959, though they had previously corresponded and met in San Francisco in 1957 while the elder poet was giving a lecture on *The Special View of History*. Clark states that “McClure [...] reacted negatively to the wholesale intellectualism of the lectures. (McClure was reported to have gone out and ‘sold his library’)” (264). Clark offers no indication of who he is purportedly quoting here, and the fact that McClure would travel to Gloucester to visit Olson two years later suggests that his assertion is contrived. Clark refers to those from Black Mountain College in Olson's audience for the lectures in San Francisco as “the survivors of his *polis*” (264) clarifying his misunderstanding of the importance of Olson's extended, ideological polis in the poet's work.

Olson is frequently referenced in McClure's writing which focuses on “the biological basis of poetry,” discussed in detail in *Scratching the Beat Surface* (1982), a published version of McClure's talks in *The Charles Olson Memorial Lectures*, given at SUNY Buffalo in 1980. McClure builds on Olson's view of the poem as a “high energy – construct” (*Selected Writings* 16) – in which the poem is a transfer of energy from the poet, through the poem, to the reader – concluding that poems are “like an organism” and “organically complex works of art” (*Scratching the Beat Surface* 43). McClure states in an interview titled “Writing One's Body”: “Olson's recognition that the mind is a construct of the heart, of the nervous system, and his interest in the energy charge that we derive from the subject, whether in mind or in the world, as a motivating force, was a help” (*Lighting the Corners* 15).

Contrary to the misconception offered by Clark in regard to the two poets, Olson's work served as a foundation for McClure's own poetics. In “Projective Verse: The Spiritual Legacy of the Beat Generation,” Paul Nelson claims, “It is Michael McClure's use of Projective Verse, a method similar to but deeper than Kerouac's *Spontaneous Bop Prosody*, that future generations of writers and readers will come to appreciate as that movement's spiritual legacy.” McClure states: “When I discovered Olson's essay ‘Projective Verse,’ I found one of the bases for my own poetics” (*Lighting the Corners* 15). This admission by McClure is immensely important in regard to Olson's polis by extension when McClure's association with Jim Morrison and *The Doors* is considered. In an interview titled “Nile insect Eyes: Talking on Jim Morrison,”

McClure discusses his friendship with Morrison which began in 1968 and lasted until the singer and poet's death in 1971. McClure says, "What Jim had was not specific knowledge of, or readings in, a lot of poets but a large, stable, working, vivid, imaginative, and lively picture of what post-World War II poetry is" (238). Although Olson is never mentioned in the interview, the fact that McClure is recognized as Morrison's poetic mentor suggests a definite link, by extension, through McClure from Olson to Morrison where poetics is concerned, and Morrison, along with the other members of *The Doors* should be viewed as part of Olson's extended, ideological polis. The fact that McClure had been regularly reciting his own poetry to the accompaniment of *The Doors*' keyboardist Ray Manzarak from 1987 (*Lighting the Corners* 299) until the latter's death in 2013 underscores that contention. A performance can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1rooY2UReI> .

Had Morrison and *The Doors* never even heard of Olson, McClure's engagement with Olson's work, along with his association with Morrison, illustrates the specific manner in which Olson's extended, ideological polis functions. Olson was primarily a teacher, and his ideas were transfused to many important figures in the counterculture of the 1960's by other poets, thinkers and artists who valued his work. As he stated in 1951 in "Human Universe," "Man has made himself an ugliness and a bore" (*Selected Writings* 64). The Beat Generation and the counterculture of the 1960's should be interpreted as reactions to the same ugliness and boredom that Olson criticized.

Poet, musician, and political activist Ed Sanders, a self-proclaimed Yippie, is frequently referred to as a bridge between the Beat Generation and the anti-establishment Hippie movement of the 1960's. In an interview published as *American History, Line by Line*, conducted by Steve Paul, Sanders refers to Olson as his "mentor." Sanders owned and ran the *Peace Eye Bookstore* on the Lower East Side of Manhattan from which he published *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*. Sanders frequently included Olson's work in the magazine, and the two became close friends. As Paul states of Sanders:

He was present at enough important poet-activist culture clashes of the decade that he, too, seems now like the elder statesman of the crowd: the march on Washington (1963), the Pentagon march and 'exorcism' by music (1967), the siege of Chicago (1968), the set of William F. Buckley's 'Firing Line' with a drunken Jack Kerouac (1968), the bloody wake of the Manson family murder spree (1969), which he corralled into a still-vital work of narrative nonfiction, *The Family*.

Through following Olson's directive to "find out for oneself," Sanders developed what he terms "Investigative Poetry" which he applied in his research of Manson, detailed in *The Family* (1971). Sanders lived for a time with the remaining members of Manson's "family" following the arrest of their leader and those who took part in the Tate-La Bianca murders in 1969 in order to get a clearer sense of what led to the murders, as well as to arrive at an accurate understanding of what life in the Manson family was like. Sanders also attended the trial. Along with his radical band, The Fugs, which was well-respected in the 1960s counterculture, he attempted to exorcise the Pentagon in 1967 while demonstrating against the Vietnam War. Norman Mailer, in *Armies of the Night* (1968), describes the scene as a continuous chanting of "out, demons, out" while the demonstrators were being driven away by the military (125-27).

The connection between Olson and Sanders is immensely important in terms of Olson's influence on the counterculture of the 1960s when the fact that the younger poet adopted Olson's method of "finding out for oneself" and put it into action is considered. Sanders is not only a bridge between the Beats and Hippies, but he should also be viewed as a direct link from Olson to the 1960s counterculture. He even arranged a date for Olson with singer Janis Joplin. More importantly, Sanders stated in a panel discussion at the Charles Olson Festival in Gloucester, in 1995, that Olson was "the first guy that I ever knew that talked about preserving tidal wetlands (<http://charlesolson.org/Files/festival2.htm>). More information concerning Sanders and his relationship with Olson can be found here, in his own words, filmed by Henry Ferrini in Gloucester in 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r43qz9vMg1o> .

Olson in Connecticut (1975), written by Charles Boer, a former student of Olson's at SUNY Buffalo and his initial literary executor, also attests to Olson's role in the 1960s counterculture. Boer cites another former student of Olson's at Buffalo who had attended the Woodstock Festival (1969) in upstate New York, Charles Brover, stating to Olson in reference to the event: "I'm surprised you didn't go to it yourself – all your people were there." Boer also states that, at that time, Olson held the "view of pan-hippieism as the key to our national salvation" (47). What is frequently referred to as the Woodstock nation correlates with the "new kind of nation" that Olson was proposing, and regardless of whether or not they had ever heard of Olson, all who attended Woodstock should be recognized as members of his extended, ideological polis for their participation in an event totally contrary to the established order.

Olson strove to initiate a "new kind of nation" because he concluded that humanity is capable of a more beneficial and rewarding experience than the rat race he observed around him headquartered in Washington D.C. that persists today. As he states in *Causal Mythology*, in order to accomplish that, "You have to put establishment out of business" (36). Olson is clearly an overlooked American icon of the anti-establishment movements of the 1950s and '60s, and it is my contention that his work is being systematically removed from poetry anthologies used in college classrooms for that very reason. Any threat to the status quo and those in control of power – who benefit from it financially – is systematically eradicated by those who regulate the system in place. For any who are interested in developing an understanding of how the human predicament came to be what it is, Olson's work offers clarification. Follow his directive and "find out for oneself."

[Charles Olson](#), [counterculture](#), [Craig Stormont](#)

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