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Author(s): Lorenzo Thomas

Source: *Callaloo*, Oct., 1978, No. 4 (Oct., 1978), pp. 53-72

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2930880>

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THE SHADOW WORLD: NEW YORK'S UMBRA WORKSHOP & ORIGINS OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

by *Lorenzo Thomas*

New York City is a death festival . . .

David Henderson

For the oldtime fancy-talking sporting man, it was the city so nice they had to name it twice. New York New York. To many others it's not quite so nice. Cold blooded, really. Still, in spite of or because of its congestion of horrors, there is a special dynamic magic to New York. Dynamic and decadent. Shyless and maddening. Fancy airs polluted with sighs of desperation.

One writer spoke of looking up under Miss Liberty's gown . . . only to discover that she don't wear no drawers! Well, if you ever lived in New York City you always knew. Just like Barney. As the white man's mastery of men dwindles, New York has become more of a mess than a mecca, but it is still the premier city of planet Earth under the present regime. Strangest place on the planet. Ornette Coleman said, "New York is now!" A meta-present . . . total living with the lights on 24 hours a day.

Personal life, though, has a much lower voltage. *Crawdaddy's* Peter Knobler suggested that "having to put up with *anything* is a New York prerequisite." The atmosphere that results is perhaps what Ishmael Reed was talking about when he said of New York that "it always looks like the final days there." It looks like that because New York City began a grim decline just after World War II, a decline that paralleled the disintegration of the global economic and political hegemony the city represents. In everyday life, the glamor of New York is all shadow . . . and the danger does not cast a shadow. That's one of the tricks of the trade.

New York's decline was reflected in the sidestreets long before it reached the financial headlines. By 1960, the once bright neighborhood of Harlem had become a ghetto filled with trash-lined streets, callous muggers, and stumbling junkies. Formerly fashionable outlying suburbs like Forest Hills had grown narrow and insensitive . . . people were robbed and killed on the streets and in the subways while "good" white and black citizens drew their window shades or turned their heads, afraid to become "involved." On the other hand, younger people agitated for peace and civil rights and the city still had an atmosphere of urgency and creative energy. The mixture of these impulses created an interesting and unique environment.

The venomous ambiance of New York in the early 1960s was the thump on the rump that forced the new black poetry into breath. This is not to say that there were not significant movements in Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. The New York experience, however, possessed an energy and a direction that is still remarkable. A great source of this energy was the Harlem Writers Guild directed by John Oliver Killens; another was *Umbra* magazine and the Umbra Workshop, founded in 1961 by a younger group of writers. When I look back at that period, it is clear that, despite the normal diversity of personal tone and style, these writers all shared a common orientation. The young black writers in those years approached their work with a sense of outrage and with a missionary zeal borrowed from the Southern Civil Rights struggle and heightened by an urgency bred by their urban surroundings.

The various writers groups each had their own, often overlapping, concerns and orientation. The Harlem Writers Guild group was solidly in the black literary tradition. Another group of writers clustered around Daniel Watts' powerful *Liberator* magazine (including Woodie King, Lebert Bethune, Larry Neal, Clayton Riley, and others) interpreted the Afro-American literary heritage in more immediate and militant terms. Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) and A. B. Spellman, with tendencies toward the avant-garde, were powerful figures in both black and white literary circles—without compromising their blackness. The Umbra Workshop, for its part, included many writers who had a strong commitment to "non-literary" black culture: David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Tom Dent, Calvin C. Hernton, Joe Johnson, Charles Patterson, Al Haynes, Raymond Patterson, and Steve Cannon, among several others. Another member of the Umbra group, N.H. Pritchard, investigated the African underpinnings of "Black English" before most of us even under-

stood the significance of the term. Pritchard's early experiments, which were to lead to a "transrealism" that resembles concrete poetry, resulted in poems written in tampered English in which the combination of sounds approximated vocal styles and tones of African languages. Pritchard's poem "Aswelay" is a fine example of the experiment:

weary was when coming
 on a stream
 in hidden midst
 amber adornment
 of falls birth
 here near edge
 of rippling soundless
 leaves and eddy eyes
 with trickling
 forest thighs
 in widening
 useful nipping
 scenic creakless
 in this boundless vastly
 hours wait in gateless
 isn't
 fleshly smelling muchly
 as a golden
 on the crustish underbrush
 of where no one walked
 were unwindish rustlings mustings thoughts
 of ill-timed harvest

and as we lay
 and as welay
 and as welay
 aswelay
 and aswelay

above a bird watching we
 knew not what cause his course
 of course welay
 welay the rippling soundless
 boundless vastly of a firthing

duty leaving welay
 wanting noughtless
 and then it seemed
 as from the air
 heleft
 the bird who watched
 what would be called
 a dream²

A rhythmic recitation of the poem appeared on an excellent phonograph record featuring Pritchard, Hernton, Jerome Badanes, and the late Paul Blackburn.

The young black writers in New York shared a sense of revelation that was to become the basis of the Black Arts Movement. Their concern was, basically, for a re-turning of a purely African sensibility and a style that organically developed from that feeling and stance. They did not know exactly what to do. All were alienated from direct connection to African culture simply because they had grown up as black Americans with fundamentally American tastes and sensibilities. Most of them felt that an understanding of the most traditional black lifestyles and folkways available to them here would lead to a greater comprehension of the African way of life. This way of life interested them, but they did not idealize it as some militant blacks did in later years. They did share an intuitive knowledge that the ordinary private and communal life of black people was the key to a certain African integrity that most of their intellectual contemporaries lacked. If the force of this feeling can be understood now, it seems quite logical that, in later years, many of these young writers would reject the delusion of "literary New York" and turn toward "home" . . . Baraka to Newark, Tom Dent to New Orleans, and Spellman to lovely Atlanta . . . taking with them a brand-new sense of urgency, black culture, and nationalism. It is clear, though, that the new cultural and political activism was the fruit of their New York experience; in the early 60s, New York City and its unique scale of the typical informed the work of most of these pioneers of the Black Arts.

One might significantly begin to study the new Black Arts Movement by reading A. B. Spellman's profoundly interior landscapes of the far edge of Manhattan, so distant from safety and sanity in every sense but Spellman's hoard of feeling. Almost nothing else can be kept in a Manhattan apartment anyway. Spellman, best known for his book *Black Music: Four Lives in the Be-bop Business* (1966), managed in his poetry to record the tone of black life in a soft and poignant voice. In one of his best poems, "For My Unborn & Wretched Children" in his book *The Beautiful Days* (1965), Spellman writes:

if i bring back
 life to a home of want
 let it be me.

let me be, if i come
 back, new, hands in first,
 the mouth in.

if hands & mouth are in,
 the belly, filled, clothes
 the body. *then* want.

if want & hurt are clothed, bring
back life to home. if
want decides, let it be me.³

This is already Black Art in full maturity and strength—an African song in American English, drawing upon the syntax of traditional proverbs and the tersely sentimental tones of Rhythm & Blues.⁴ The self-sacrificing and yet proudly defiant willingness to accept the weight of suffering, as indicated in the final stanza, is derived from an Afro-American legacy that goes back to slavery days. In more recent times, the old folks would tell us, “Things gon’ get better . . . I may not see it, but you children will.” This sentiment may perhaps be one of the results of certain African and West Indian attitudes which permit children vast latitudes of behavior (and misbehavior) because “they don’t know any better, they just children” and because they, as the incarnation of the community’s future, must be nourished and *allowed* to grow. In the United States, this particular value imputed to children is often shared by the stable black middle-class family and by the victims of the rough street life as well. Elliot Liebow recorded a moving and characteristic incident in *Talley’s Corner* (1967):

On a Saturday morning, after a visit from his wife, Stoopie stands on the corner with three other men, watching his wife disappear down the street with their two school-age children on either side of her. “There goes my heart,” says Stoopie, “those two kids, they’re my heart.” The other men nod understandingly. They would have felt and said the same thing had they been in his place.⁵

There is something more here than the standard American desire to have one’s children enjoy all of the advantages of life the parents themselves were deprived of. A deeper tone is sounded here, one that recalls the real sufferings of slavery, genuinely abject want, and the forced disintegration of family units. The tone of Spellman’s poem adds a note of mysticism to the issue and suggests a spiritual and biological urgency that extends far beyond concepts of purely social well-being.

Spellman’s feelings have no kinship to the Western appliances of psycho-temerity that we find in even the best (and supposedly “revolutionary”) white American poets . . . and many black ones. These are, in some deep sense that remains unclear, African feelings. There is a totally physical aspect to these words. *Touch* and/or *reach*. If he were to write a welfare program, one suspects Spellman would probably include reincarnation there, too. “For My Unborn & Wretched Children” displays a decidedly non-Western conceptualization, even though the song was composed amid the continuous decomposition of New York.

Among the Umbra writers there was a similar affinity for non-Western approaches and ideas. David Henderson's catalogs of the awesome depression of the white man's 20th century urban America are grimly illumined by flashes of an Abyssinian metempsychosis. His figures, situated as they are in a completely recognizable urban present, turn angrily or sadly toward myth. Henderson's major concern in his poems is the concept of "atavism"; his constant wonder is whether present behavior finds its basis in a reaction to the hideousness of the black man's lot in white America or if it is determined by atavistic traits . . . vaguely remembered habits from the pre-slavery African past. He examines all action in this light, attempting to identify the sources of each individual presentation and response.

Unlike many of Spellman's poems which seem to take place in a timeless and unspecified contemplative space, all of Henderson's work is set in the real world in all its shabby complexity. There is no one else attempting "street poetry" able to do what Henderson at his best can do in three eloquently colloquial lines and five place-names. He achieves his effects almost effortlessly, as naturally as he dances, walks, and talks. And sings. In "They Look This Way And Talk That Way As Tribal As They Can Be Under The Law" Henderson wrote:

sherman the barbecue man
 famous former mayor of Harlem
 sittin in his brand-new caddy
 aunt jemama's hat on his head

 in his barbecue parlor huge photos framed
 shakin hands with rockefeller
 standin next to truman

 and in his chain of barbecues
 surround Harlem no
 porkchops / on the menu
 remain⁶

which is another reality of our starvings. Our strivings. It is not, perhaps, the reality of the Nation of Islam—despite the deletion of porkchops from the menu. Sherman's badges of legitimacy in business (framed photographs of the proprietor in the presence of various "great white fathers" including the butcher of Attica and the hell-giver of Hiroshima) strike Henderson's eye as glaringly reactionary. The verses outline a portrait of a sad man, shipwrecked by time, because the unspoken nuances of the poem relate to an entirely different view of the world. The Harlem community's abortive struggle to prevent construction of the Rockefeller administration's State Office Building on 125th Street, the

police attack on Mahammad's Mosque No. 7 on 116th Street, the rising tide of crime, black unemployment, the daily dropping dime . . . many of the horrors of those years can be read here between the lines, made sensible to us through Henderson's ironic detail and the clear vision he offers of the junk-collage world we all live in. Henderson arranges his details in words and phrases much as a painter handles shape and hue. James Rosenquist's montage visions of American materialism are suggested, as is Paul Waters' magical new hieroglyphics, and Joe Overstreet's hard-edge insistence upon the spirituality of an atavistic African style . . . African in form and spiritual intention even if executed in acrylics.

Without doubt, Henderson is the most literate of "street poets." He does not hesitate to use \$26 words next to cuss words. He can allude to T. S. Eliot and Langston Hughes in the same breath and his sources are extensive enough to include the oral tradition of radio and TV.

Uh oh! I believe I can hear several moldy voices say, Hold it. Just hold on, now. Oral tradition?

Well, one hopes that we've chosen the right end of the body electric.

In any case, the "unwritten" mass media have begun to function as a tradition and we cannot dare say that this tradition is not real to most people in the United States. Journalism in this country, despite our approximation of universal literacy, still functions within an oral tradition not much elevated from its origin as gossip. Our demonstrated preference for television and radio news (documented by the research departments of every advertising agency) is a case in point. The old system of the readers in a community reciting the newspaper for their illiterate neighbors has simply been streamlined by electronic broadcasting. Further, most people are only aware of those news items in the printed media that are actually *discussed* by their peers. David Henderson acquired an appreciation of the significance of this new tradition naturally and he admitted it into his work.

Unlike slightly older writers like Amiri Baraka, Henderson did not feel any nostalgic attraction to the early radio dramas, movies, and pulp fictions that are currently being analyzed into limbo by humorless academicians of "Popular Culture." His own radio environment was a world of Alan Freed rock 'n' roll muzak with "News On The Hour" interruptions. No Lone Ranger, no Green Hornet & Cato, no Maj. Bowes with his bell.

Henderson's poem "They Are Killing All The Young Men" is an important piece that cannot be understood fully outside of this

context. While the title reproduces the agonized utterance of some elderly black man or woman, the poem itself is an accurate rendering of Henderson's response to the new aural environment. The shape and function of radio had changed with the advent of television broadcasting, and the suddenly outdated radio programming was suitably eulogized by Baraka in his poem "In Memory Of Radio" where he sarcastically announced that the Lone Ranger was dead. By the 1950s, radio programming had almost completely replaced drama and live music with recorded music and live announcers who recited commercials and read wire service news bulletins. Radio had begun to function in a real-life Orson Welles' "War Of The Worlds" manner that was alarming even to people who grew up listening to it. David Henderson's poem recorded exactly what he heard and presented it in a direct ideogrammatic style reminiscent of Pound's *Cantos*:⁷

(THIS IS A BULLETIN!!!!)

Malcom X shot several times in Audubon Ballroom
(Don't Negroes meet in the strangest places!)

Later, in his narrative voice, he added significant details of the tragedy that had interrupted the music:

The thin Times today tells
of three black scrubwomen
put to work
on the blood
 (just as the handymen of Harlem were put to work
 after the riots—patching up)
3 scrubwomen
scrubbing up blood—their blood—in time
for a Brooklyn Social Club's dance
that night
 the Audubon must go on

just as:

the New York Times marches on . . .

Henderson's understanding is sound. The Audubon Ballroom & the New York *Times*. The medium is the message. Ultimately, both institutions represent the same thing. Obviously in terms of "white ownership," but there is a deeper relationship between them that Henderson is concerned with. The word is, of course, "commerce"—what poet Tom Weatherly called "the dark continent of the European mind." Malcom X, spokesman for a certain idea of black independence, died in a rented hall owned by white businessmen who had many other rental dates to concern them. In juxtaposing these images, the poet allows no one to forget that

American slavery was nothing other than a commercial enterprise in the first place. Echoing the spiritual “Many Thousands Gone,” Henderson establishes the connection which is pinpointed by his allusion to the Audubon’s unbreachable rental schedule. Commercial enterprise. The pigmeat emporiums of the negro elite, pictures of white politicians on the greasy walls, are no different. Henderson said, *Chains of barbecue*. You understand?

Simply, the message is that the debased spirit of acquisitiveness encouraged by a capitalist commercial society produces monstrous results wherever it interfaces with ordinary human concepts of feeling and care. Inhumanity & money money money remain America’s most important products . . . more important than life or even mourning one’s dead.

In much of Henderson’s work we see hideous details and grotesque situations. We need not demand a moral examination of Henderson himself, as one writer from Chicago has suggested, because even a superficial reading of the poet indicates that his own sensibility is quite clearly uncontaminated by the matter he finds so necessary to discuss. His poems about New York’s skid row, “Yin Years” and “Poem For Painters,” show the distance Henderson has established between his own personality and the deathly atmosphere of the American way. Without recourse to overt politics or exhortation, Henderson brings a vibrant black nationalist vision to bear on the American scenes he illumines for us in his poems.

What Henderson did with such sardonic coolness, Askia Muhammad Touré (known as Rolland Snellings when he was a member of the Umbra Workshop) accomplished with righteous passion. His *Malcom* was not a victim of the news media’s lopsided reality but “Malik, the Fire Prophet, God’s anger cast in glowing copper, burning the wicked of the earth with his flame.”⁸ Touré was, in those days, an uncompromising black nationalist. Others, like Tom Dent, were directly involved with the Civil Rights struggle and were willing to put their principles and asses on the line . . . Dent was later to be one of the founders of the Free Southern Theatre, travelling through the racist-ridden rural South presenting incendiary dramas teaching equality and common sense. Had we time and space, we might go into each of these writers’ works in depth and at length; but the significant issue is that New York in the early 60s was neither ivory nor ebony tower . . . the young black writers were both prepared and eager to back up ideological commitments with deeds *and* words.⁹

One of the sources of their strength was an unpublicized but genuine communal Afro-American tradition. In the 1950s, the

cultural expression of black nationalism was (with the exception of some prominent jazz musicians who embraced it) largely restricted to an underground of unknown artists—mainly sign-painters and streetcorner musicians—who sent their cosmic vibrations out from storefronts, basements, and summer-night brownstone stoops. There were poets of the cellblock and the corner “organ bar” lining out the grammar of our ancient language.

Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association mounted a militant mass movement in the 1920s, but the advance of the NAACP’s legalistic approach to the struggle for civil rights had tended to push the black nationalists away from center stage. Not merely coincidentally, the Garveyite approach to culture—which had had a definite effect on the artists of the Harlem Renaissance—was purposely denigrated and misrepresented in both black and white critical media. Too hot to handle, maybe. The emphasis that the Garveyites placed on the beauty (indeed **superiority**) of blackness did not suit the NAACP’s purposes, and in its journal *The Crisis*, under the editorship of W. E. B. DuBois, the NAACP led the campaign against Garvey and his ideas.¹⁰

The combined government and NAACP assault on Garvey finally landed him in prison for mail fraud and effectively destroyed his UNIA organization. At the same time, DuBois’ victory established the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as the arbiter of black political and cultural expression for almost thirty years. While the Garveyites had been black nationalists and Pan-Africanists, the NAACP at that time (DuBois’ presence notwithstanding) was geared toward the integration of black people into American society on all levels.¹¹

Artists of the nationalist persuasion were suppressed and, after white co-optation of bebop music had been achieved in the mid-50s, their tradition was unknown except in the black neighborhoods. The arts suffered, as did the artists. Still, the black nationalist approach to culture was—though ’buked and scorned—too good to quit. The artists were still around, though almost completely ignored. In the 50s, after twenty years of the NAACP’s integrationist ethic, the black community produced its own strange echo of white folks’ McCarthyism and the least connection to Garveyite groups or black nationalist ideas was enough to stamp you a *bona fide* nut. Nevertheless, artists who were black nationalists and Garveyites made valuable contributions which even now have not been either recognized or properly evaluated.

While many black people were striving to acquire the outward manner and accoutrements of white muddled-class America, the black nationalist artists continued doing their art and talking

about the ancient glories and present sufferings of Africa's peoples. Some of these elders seemed maniacal (like Coleridge's mariner) in their persistence. Some were nearly clownish in their embattled dignity; at least, we thought so. Some you may see even now (fewer every day) on Harlem's '25th Street or any copper-town street . . . with their sticks, sceptres, canes . . . seemingly crazy or drunk. Talking that talk.

Crazy or not, such people represented a vector of the black community's inner dynamic. Tradition. An interesting aspect of a seldom-discussed communal tradition can be traced in the outward manifestations of black nationalist ideas as they appear in fashion concepts and the visual arts. Certainly the wearing of dashikis and African-influenced jewelry, of *geles* (headwrappings formerly associated with the disgrace of slavery) and print dresses that become faddishly chic in the late 1960s and early 70s indicates a certain race-conscious pride and a grass roots appreciation of the costumes of newly emergent African nations; but the bushy "afro" hair style suggests something quite different.

There is a story that the afro originated among SNCC civil rights workers in the South who, while registering voters in hostile rural areas, wore overhauls and T-shirts and were too poor to afford regular haircuts. Heh heh. Sounds good as the start of legend. But while those particulars may be true, none of this explains the true origins of the afro hair style and—in point of fact—the story distorts the actual process of our own cultural development within a segregated, racist society. The SNCC worker apochrypha is reminiscent of the distorted, propaganda-laced "folktales" that European missionaries brought out of south and central Africa.

Actually, Harlem's West Indian-dominated Graveyite organizations had been involved in promoting the afro hairdo throughout the 1950s. Each year on August 19th, the anniversary of Marcus Garvey's birth, artists Cecil Elombe Brath (known then as Cecil Brathwaite) and his brother, photographer-designer Ronald Brathwaite, staged fashion shows featuring the Grandassa Models in *au naturel* afro coiffures and African-styled gowns. These affairs were usually held at Harlem's Renaissance Ballroom on 135th Street and were primarily sponsored by Carlos Cooks' and Jim Lawson's surviving (and sometime rival) UNIA chapters. At the time of these extravaganzas, many people found it unthinkable that a black woman would appear in public with unstraightened hair—let alone participate in a fashion show! The eventual popularity of the afro hairdo (even among white women

in the late 70s) was the result of conscious and persistent promotion by the Brathwaites, San Diego's Wille L. Morrow (author of *400 Years Without A Comb*), and other black nationalist-oriented designers and cosmeticians.¹²

Similarly, innumerable sign-painters in black neighborhoods across the country produced works in oils, tempera, and pastels depicting black Christs, madonnas, and other popular subjects. Such works (purely *naif* to any art critic) were often executed in an excellent, if corny, representational style . . . but the subject matter spoke of Garveyite cultural concepts. It was Garvey's African Orthodox Church that popularized the concept of a black Jesus back in the 1920s, assisted by historian J. A. Rogers' documentation of the black Christs and madonnas among the treasured art masterpieces of Europe.¹³ These painters also developed an interesting and distinctively *naif* angular style of lettering and graphic design that appeared on the album covers of records by James Brown, Sun Ra, and other musicians. Some of these graphic forms are reminiscent of the Haitian *veves* drawn on the floor in chalk before voodoo ceremonies.

These instances, among many others, suggest that there was a self-generating group of artists and craftsman within the black community that remained dedicated to black nationalist cultural concepts from the late 20s to the early 1960s.

These men were quietly teachers and curators of our cultural alternatives, and their personal frustrations must have been enormously painful when one considers the bitter shares our "recognized" artists received in those years. The sign-painters were serious, if untrained, artists . . . and some of them were, indeed, well trained at universities and art schools. The sign-painting shops were art schools in their own way. Abstractionist Joseph Mack, now teaching at Prairie View A & M University, provided an interesting clue to the value of these shops. Mack sometimes uses gold leaf in his paintings and the special technique of applying it was taught him by an older man during Mack's stint as a sign-painter following his graduation from art school. The technique, says Mack, "is almost a forgotten art. You have to learn it from someone, you can't pick it up by yourself." And it is not taught in art schools or universities.

Talk in the sign shops was not limited to the humble barbecue and barber shop commissions the painters executed but ranged over the public WPA art of the 1930s, the Mexican muralists Rivera and Tamayo, and the design innovations of the Bauhaus. The older painters were strong men, talented and frustrated. For black men trained in the visual arts, the sign-painting shop

served the same function that the Post Office and the pullman coach served for those who had majored in the liberal arts. Somehow, these men should be remembered. They were proud, enlightened and enlightening, and unassuming. Shunned by fame, they shone with the sincerity of their dedication . . . anonymous professors of magical arts and trustees of suppressed schools of wisdom. They were North American *griots*.

The most nearly visible of this black artistic underground were explicitly political: scholars of Marxism, left-over Graveyites and Pan-Africanists. A less visible few were more “spiritually” oriented, adherents to various “Eastern” or “Oriental” disciplines or mysteriously Christian in some form quite inexplicable to most of us. But whatever they were or were not, we owe them more than can be said here. They maintained a complete cultural alternative within the black community, an alternative that was investigated by the young artists of the Black Arts Movement in the 60s. We will someday reach a security within ourselves that will enable us to study the lives of the forerunners and their works which remain safeguarded still in our communities.

Recognition of the function of these unknowns, all of them quite literate and fluent in their arts, will demonstrate that the cultural black nationalism of our moment did not spring forth from inspiration of the *New York Times* or the *Late News*; it is the result of a continuing tradition transmitted as naturally as possible under the circumstance of a specifically malicious and aggressive white American culture which expediently implemented its hostility with the integrationist ideologies of the NAACP and the Urban League. The powers that be in the United States are practiced in the art of turning people’s aspirations into weapons to be used against the people.

One might think that the admittedly “literary” orientation of the Umbra circle and its location on New York’s lower east side would have precluded much contact with the older underground Black Arts tradition, but that is not the case. All of the Umbra poets had questioned and conferred with these sages as part of an ordinary downhome or ghetto upbringing. Contrary to some popular and supposedly scholarly opinions, pimps and gamblers are not the only glamorous models for youngsters in the black community. I fondly remember the man who sold me art supplies and chatted with me in his shop on Sutphin Boulevard about the Korean War and the black Jesuses he painted for my neighbors. I remember as a child being entranced by a chance meeting with boxer Ralph “Tiger” Jones or seeing Shepherd Lewis of the Heartbeats (and later Shep and the Limelights) on the street.

Lewis and other musicians frequented Tolliver's Crystal Casino on the corner of the street where I lived and the tavern had been a favorite relaxing spot for pianist Thomas "Fats" Waller in earlier times. In these days of media-concocted "superstars," many people are unaware of how close most black musicians and artists have been to the black community. In my own growing up days in Jamaica, New York, it was not unusual to see James Brown on Linden Boulevard talking to friends, or John Coltrane puttering around his Mexico Street home. And the corner of Phroane Avenue by Tolliver's bar was a friendly spot. Whether celebrity doo-wop singers or plain working men, the people on the corner related to the kids on the block in the same way—talking jive and slapping five.

The Umbra writers were also in connection with Harlem poets, such as Hart LeRoi Bibbs, himself a *griot* and (sometimes unfortunately) a true scholar of the street's tradition of strolling and rapping. Bibbs, though his orientation is not "literary," is an inventive and original poet well versed in the history and lore of Africans from here. Bibbs' book *Polyrhythms to Freedom* (1962) is a rare document filled with idiomatic and idiosyncratically mind-jarring verse.

The frighteningly intellectual poet Lloyd Addison was another influence on the Umbra writers. Addison's poems, though indebted to T. S. Eliot and Melvin B. Tolson, seemed to emerge from the black community without any foreign influences; his language and themes were those expected from a people who grew up reading the Bible. Other contacts with the hidden pulse of black culture came from meetings with the fabled "characters" of post-Beat Generation Greenwich Village. Joe Johnson, author of *Hot* (1978) and one of the editors of *Umbra* magazine in the mid-60s, can still tell you all about Jorge Brendon, the Puerto Rican bard of Union Square, famous on the streets for his "talking coconut" and ventriloquist poetry. Jorge, Johnson remembers, always wore a yacht cap and was a sign-painter with his own shop on East 10th Street. "El coco que habla" was fond of foretelling the future, and Johnson thinks that Brendon's act might have vague connections to Yoruba divination and mythology.¹⁴

Some of the Umbra group (Hernton, Dent, and Steve Cannon, among others) also had a deep knowledge of black Southern folk traditions, which also contributed to the group's awareness. Other members had been exposed to alternative (i.e., reliable) versions of recent political history by poets such as Art Berger and Henri Percikow, an experienced trade unionist. But, more

than anything else, it was the oral tradition of the Harlem *griots*—and that tradition as reflected in black popular culture—that had a major impact on the embryonic Black Arts Movements in New York. The tattered but tenacious traditions of black nationalism in the streets had as much of an impact on these writers as did the literary heritage of the Harlem Renaissance and the innovations of the international avant-garde.

The black nationalist approach of older men, so persistent in the face of the Civil Rights Movement's continuing disappointments, seemed to exert a particularly powerful influence on the young writers who, through the Umbra Workshop, actively sought a better understanding of the shadow world that is black life in the United States. In Harlem literary circles, Harold Cruse was beginning to acquire his well-deserved reputation as a scholar and interpreter of black history. Cruse made a special effort to include and decipher the black nationalist aspect of recent events. In the even dimmer Manhattan of Greenwich Village and the lower east side, the upstarts of the Umbra Workshop sponsored a series of audacious and uppity poetry readings at St. Mark's Church which thrust poetry back into its original oral grandeur and reaffirmed the poet's primary role of social commentator. The poets themselves, as David Henderson put it, were always "going to Harlem" for a closer connection to the spirit of the people.

In the summer of 1964 Amiri Baraka formed an all-black group for the purpose of publishing an investigative community newspaper in the Village. At the same time, there was a noticeable estrangement between black and white artists on the Village scene, partly due to issues raised by the Harlem riots of the "long hot summer." The newspaper project never got off the ground but Baraka's group, then called In/Formation (and including artists such as Charles Patterson of the Umbra Workshop, painter Joe Overstreet, organizer Steve Kent, and pianist Andrew Hill), produced a well-received poetry and jazz showcase at the St. Mark's Playhouse that winter. Poetry by many of the young black writers discussed here was presented in dramatic readings with complementing music by Marion Brown, Pharaoh Sanders, Dewey Johnson, and Rashied Ali.¹⁵

Too hot to handle, too good to quit. One of the downtown fundraisers for the organization had been an evening of drama. Baraka's *Experimental Death Unit #1* and *The Toilet* were staged with Nat White's *The Black Tramp* and Charles Patterson's *Black Ice*. Some of the most promising young black

actors performed. Several of these young people have since achieved prominent names in the theatre. Barbara Ann Teer became director of the excellent National Black Theatre troupe in New York, while D'urville Martin and Antonio Fargas are well-known now in motion pictures and television. Walter Jones, a young actor then, is now a playwright in New York. Director Robert Hooks, who first received glowing notices as the lead in Baraka's *Dutchman* (1963), also became a popular television star and—more importantly—an untiring worker with the Negro Ensemble Company and his own drama school for young performers.

At the beginning of 1965 In/Formation began moving uptown to Harlem to establish the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in a house near a “jumping” corner of Lenox Avenue. The new organization openly affirmed black nationalist political and aesthetic ideas. Umbra was honored with an invitation to present the inaugural poetry reading for the May, 1965, opening of the theatre. The reading attracted a large community audience including several unknown young poets. One of these was Pedro Pietri, the “people’s poet” of East Harlem’s *barrio* and of 14th Street, New York’s outdoor Third World bazaar.

In addition to poetry and drama, the Blacks Arts presented concerts by Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, and other musicians. One of Sun Ra’s sets was memorable and spooky. Sitting in a totally darkened room, we and the Arkestra called down rain from Harlem’s heavens. John Gilmore played the drums and traded fours with thunder. As the concert ended, so did the storm and Sun Ra delivered a quiet lecture about what he called “black classical music.”

The brand new theatre space, located in a refurbished brownstone house on 130th Street, had been planned to provide a showcase for both young and established artists “as well as formal instruction in all the fields of the arts, and practical job training.” Under Baraka’s direction, somehow informed by Ezra Pound’s aesthetics, the Harlem organization was determined to MAKE IT NEW:

When we see something new, we are necessarily *moved* to where that thing is. The black artist, with all his different eyes, with all his different ways of seeing, can take us to new places . . . maybe places where we’ve never been, but places that we’ve always known somehow existed. The black artist will move black people most deeply if he is talking to them. *The Black Arts* will focus the soulpower of the black artist on black people . . . to help them in their hour of need. And is there any black man walking the streets of this hell today who can truthfully say, he does not need?

The black artist can give his people Truth, Beauty and a sense of themselves as masters of the planet. The Black Arts will try to give all black men the sense of themselves that the artist has. And an artist is a man that must be free, so the Black Arts is a place where freedom will be shown as actual, and the force of its being must make all black men want this freedom so badly they will do *anything* for it.¹⁶

Such as it was written, read now, this rhetoric veers off in all directions. It was, however, honestly bold and true for its time. It was also, perhaps, militant begging.

While the new movement represented a strong statement of pent-up black nationalism, yet was it also strangely and peculiarly tied to government grants variously designed to support “high culture” (which ain’t ours!) and/or provide bottom-line poverty relief. It is difficult to say whether the complex financial base of the organization contributed more to its establishment or demise. The pattern has become more familiar since then, but the complexities of that tightrope remain threatening.

The Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, though it may in some ways have undermined Umbra’s downtown viability, was the ignition spark of a new nationwide movement that has been much more energetic and extensive in its impact than the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s had been, simply because this movement has been completely controlled by black artists. The Black Arts Theatre represented a conscious decision to do art within the physical environs of the black community, utilizing the artistic and spiritual resources of that community. This limitation was immediately attacked, and it was suggested that the theatre’s orientation would preclude the presentation of white characters. Harold Cruse, in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), recorded the Black Arts directors’ response: “We’ve got actors that can play those roles in whiteface, you dig?”¹⁷ The concept of limiting the theatre to talent resources available in the black community was primarily Baraka’s idea and it was an idea so timely, at that time, that it quickly spread throughout the major cities of the United States. Soon there appeared the Black Arts West in San Fransisco (the theatre that produced playwright Ed Bullins), the Afro-Arts Theatre in Chicago (headed by Philip Cohran, formerly a member of Sun Ra’s Arkestra), the Free Southern Theatre based in New Orleans, and the Sudan Arts/Southwest and Black Arts Center groups in Houston.

The Black Arts movement represented a new freedom of access to the arts for ordinary black people, particularly youngsters. It

also represented the artists' political awareness of black nationalist ideas and their determination to **get back to the roots, to vindicate black and unknown bards of our own time who lectured by lamp-posts and held the trust of a knowledge oppressive black bourgeois and white racist interests had relegated to the oblivion of the slums, "across the tracks," and blushing silence.**

According to Albert B. Lord, "A superior written style is the development of generations."¹⁸ Much black writing today deserves the epithet "superior" and I've been trying here to recount some of the generations of our development. What generations! *Griots* of the Harlem streets, bedraggled saints from Southern homes, "outdated" island prophets of black nationalism . . . all of these characters, somehow (by a process still incompletely documented) managed to transmit to the young writers of the 1960s an entirely alternative approach to doing art that has made contemporary black literature of the United States one of the most vibrant and beautiful human flowerings on the planet. It is almost—now—in its direct **communicative ability, the equal of black music. Jazz. The turning point, what Baraka might view as the switch from "the myth of a black literature" to its reality, was the assertion of a communal tradition over and above the literary (read "white marketplace") concerns of the writers. The communal tradition in the arts has been invisible, in the sense that Ralph Ellison understood long ago, but its strength has been nurtured and its effects are real.**

The Black Arts Movement required its artists to return to the black community and produce their art from within that context. It encouraged a new sense of community and a new awareness of the black heritage at the same time that it embraced a militantly engaged political stance. It is much too soon to say what ultimate results this movement might produce, just as it is not yet time to evaluate all the works of its principal participants. Indeed, the works still keep on coming. Baraka changes ideologies, but not his direction; Henderson has shifted his incisive attention from poetry to cultural history in his new book about singer Jimi Hendrix, *Voodoo Chile of the Aquarian Age* (1978). Calvin Hernton, Tom Dent, and Askia Muhammad Touré continue to teach magic to the young brothers and sisters. The Black Arts Movement is, in short, still very much a work-in-progress. But we can say that the most important effect of the movement up to now has been the identification of artists as the spokesmen of the people. And the recognition that artists are "of the people" themselves, not a rare breed.

I've been trying in these pages to backtrack just enough to let you in on a secret history which is part of the foundation of our future as a self-determining people. Black Art is, if we but comprehend, the blossoming of the most ancient communal traditions of African creation.

Notes

¹ A detailed description of the development of the Umbra group and a selection of poems by members are found in Art Berger's "Negroes with Pens," *Mainstream*, 16 (July, 1963), 3-6, and in "The Umbra Poets," 6-14.

² Norman Pritchard, "Aswelay," *Umbra Anthology 1967-1968*, p. 55. The poem also appears, read by the author, on *Destinations: Four Contemporary American Poets*, Essence records ELP 3501 (1964). See also W. Francis Lucas, "Norman H. Pritchard, Poet," *Liberator*, 7 (June, 1967), 12-13; includes five of Pritchard's poems.

³ A. B. Spellman, "For My Unborn & Wretched Children," *The Beautiful Days* (New York: Poets Press, 1965).

⁴ For those of you who have been away, the musical reference is Betty Everett and Jerry Butler, "Let It Be Me," *Delicious Together*, Vee-Jay Records VJLP-1009 (1964). The song was written by Curtis Mayfield, and background vocals on the recording are by the Dells.

⁵ Elliot Liebow, *Talley's Corner: A Study of Negro Street-corner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967), pp. 81-82.

⁶ David Henderson, "They Look This Way and Walk as Tribal as They Can Be Under the Law," *De Mayor of Harlem* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), p. 42.

⁷ David Henderson, "They Are Killing All the Young Men," *Felix of the Silent Forest* (New York: Poets Press, 1967). The Felix of the title is the motion picture cartoon character Felix the Cat; this might be Henderson's only nostalgic reference to the media . . . all of his other attention to such things seems for the purpose of irony.

⁸ Rolland Snellings, "Malcolm X as International Spokesman," *Liberator*, 6 (February, 1966), 6.

⁹ See Berger, "Negroes with Pens," *Mainstream*, pp. 5-6, for information on the Civil Rights activism of Tom Dent, Julian

Bond, and Robert Brookins Gore in 1962 and 1963.

¹⁰ Elliot M. Rudwick, *W. E. B. DuBois: A Study in Minority Group Leadership* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), pp. 216-220.

¹¹ See Rudwick, pp. 152-153 and 228-230.

¹² See Willie L. Morrow, *400 Years Without a Comb* (San Diego: Black Publishers, 1973) and Helen Hayes King, "Should Negro Women Straighten Their Hair?" *Negro Digest*, 12 (August, 1963), 65, 68-71. On page 70, King describes an "au naturelle" fashion show featuring singer Abby Lincoln and the Grandassa Models.

¹³ See J. A. Rogers, *Sex and Race*, I (New York: Rogers Publications, 1941-1944), 273-283. A three volume study.

¹⁴ Jorge Brandon, "el teatro ambulante," still performs and paints signs in New York. A fine film by Jose Pareño, *Un Momento, Un Momento... Jorge Brandon* (Poets In Motion Films, 1978) provides a beautiful portrait of the man poet Miguel Algarine, described as "the father." The film is available from Raul Sebazo c/o Nuyorican Poets, 505 East 6th Street, New York, NY 10003.

¹⁵ Details of the concert can be found in LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1967), p. 123.

¹⁶ *Black Painters: Directions*, a pamphlet from the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, 1965. The Collection of Lorenzo Thomas.

¹⁷ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1967), p. 536. See p. 538 also.

¹⁸ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 134.

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