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Alea's Children: The Avant-Garde on the Lower East Side, 1960-1970

A century ago the area known as New York's Lower East Side was among the most depressed neighborhoods in the city. As Milton Meltzer has noted, it had the distinction of being "the most crowded slum district in the city, and probably in the world," with an 1890 population density of 37 persons per dwelling (73-75)—half a million people in a tight corner of Manhattan.

Strangely enough, the Lower East Side is also a central location of a great deal of American popular culture. A steady flow of creative works have emanated from the tenements at the edge of the Big Apple.

The avant-garde movement of the Lower East Side in the early 1960s—when it turned, for some people at least, into the "East Village"—was a remarkable period. Grim though the walk-ups might have been, the atmosphere of creative and artistic energy was exhilarating. There was a ludic buoyancy—perhaps from hunger, or too much herbal tea. Maybe it was because there was so much jazz in the air, maybe because the poets knew the musicians who knew the painters who knew the dancers.

Historians like to fix and x-ray avant-garde movements and analyze them in terms of process or product. Those who find themselves attracted to such vortices, however, know that the avant-garde is less about change in the arts than it is about genuine experimentation in social relations. "America in the fifties," writes Ron Sukenick in *Down and In: Life in the Underground*, "had large numbers of people in what today would be called internal exile, a condition creating a kind of subversive sensibility maybe best described by the title Herb Gold refused to relinquish, *The Man Who Was Not With It*. In this mode, even screwing up became a form of resistance" (96).

The artistic circles attracted people who were well-educated, curious about other cultures, and widely read. The work of African American writers and artists on the Lower East Side scene was directly influenced by the low-rent cosmopolitanism of their environs. As Michel Oren notes in his excellent study of the Umbra group,

the general freedom of the neighborhood made itself felt in the Umbra poets' life styles and in their poems. From 1960 to 1965 the "LES" was also the locus of a "ferment" in American letters that revolved around a series of coffeehouse poetry readings, just as in the '50s and early '60s the single 10th Street block between Third and Fourth Avenues had been home to seven co-op art galleries . . . and hangout of the Abstract Expressionists. (185)

The relative freedom that Oren speaks of in this passage is more specifically characterized in his quotation from Brenda Walcott to

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the effect that the neighborhood atmosphere was one of " 'a shaky truce' " between its diverse ethnic and socio-economic factions.

Bohemian artists are, by definition, people determined not to do what is expected of them. They are usually bright enough to aspire to leadership yet educated enough to feel dissatisfied and skeptical. Often, if they are from minority groups that feel oppressed, they are also the carefully prepared but unwitting vicars of their elders' desire.

Some of the younger artists came to the Lower East Side from the South or Midwest. Others, like poet David Henderson, were "uptown boys downtown." In my own case, I was a kid from Long Island who thought he had only one river to cross. To all comers, the Lower East Side offered what La Boheme has always offered—a range of possibilities from the creatively electrifying to the irremediably lethal.

What had once been the "heartland of Yiddish culture" soon was distinguished, according to Judd L. Teller, by "the imprint of three distinctive and separate segments—the Puerto Ricans, the Ukrainians who entered the United States from Germany after World War II, and the New Bohemians" (251-52). It is clear, though, that something of the intellectual vivacity that had marked the Café Royal in the 1920s and '30s was still alive in coffeehouses such as the Deux Megots and the Metro, where a new generation of poets held forth, debated the same isms, and quarreled about matters having nothing to do with Parnassus.

Mainstream media attention lavished on the antics of the so-called

"Beat generation" had very little to do with what quickly became known as the East Village. People who found their way there were already—for various reasons—headed into the newly emerging networks of alternative media, a diverse politics of liberation, and the arts.

The most remarkable thing about the Lower East Side scene was that, while race remained a powerful engine of social upheaval, the artists seemed able to work together almost in spite of it.

These people, some more aware of it than others, were "the Sixties." Alea, the original Little Miss Can't Be Wrong, granted them gifts withheld from other generations. They were to have a double dose of power: the precocity to seize the time and shape that decade, and the opportunity, now, to define the terms of the approaching fin-de-siècle. This last, of course, comes at the expense of millions of young people that American society consigned to a dizzy and vicious illiteracy during the 1980s. It took a dozen years to do it, but there are neighborhoods in what was once "the richest na-

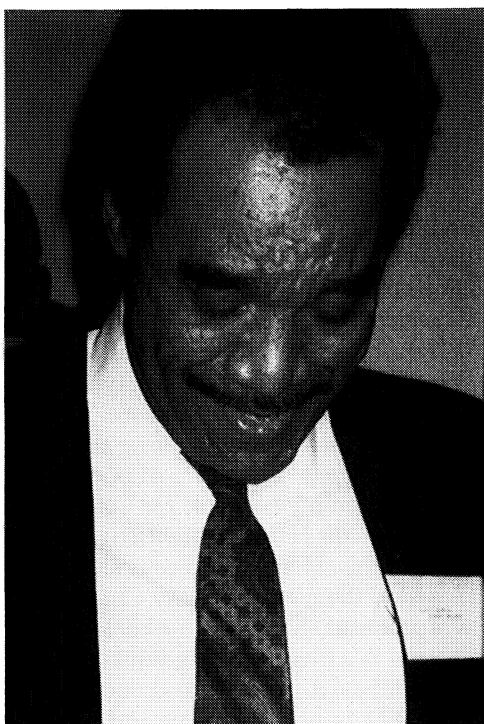
tion on Earth" that bear an all-too-alarming resemblance to Mogadishu.

The newcomers settled in with a flourish. As poet Tom Dent, founder of the Umbra Workshop has written, "Stanley Tolkin's bar on 13th and Avenue B [was] a place we transformed overnight. It was an empty Polish café that soon became a busy communications center for artists, writers, actors, and the people who hung out with them. If you wanted to see somebody, or find out what was happening, you checked at Stanley's" (106).

However, not every local establishment was as accommodating as Stanley's. The little tavern directly across from Tom Dent's East 2nd Street apartment had only a bar and

three or four tables, but it was somebody's idea of heaven. One afternoon Tom and I dropped in, and the handful of red-nosed old Ukrainian sots in attendance made it clear to the barmaid—in two languages—that our visit should not be encouraged to become a custom. These old fools felt a proprietary interest in the joint and were probably also aware that the black and white collegians and dropouts appearing on their streets would not be doomed to stay there. "Every ten years," Mike Gold wrote in 1930, "there has been a new population on the East Side. As fast as a generation makes some money, it moves to a better section of the city" (154). The difference in 1961 was that the young people moving into the East Side began with options that the earlier successive waves of immigrants often never achieved in long lifetimes of hard work. (Of course, making art can also be very hard work—especially if one is convinced that the art one makes is destined to revolutionize a corrupt and dying society.)

If one wanted to be a poet in the early 60s, the Lower East Side was the place to be. An energized series of readings was organized by Diane Wakowski with help from Carol Bergé and Jackson Mac Low, at the Tenth Street Coffeehouse in early 1962, and poet Paul Blackburn organized popular reading nights at the Deux Megots and later at the Metro on Second Avenue (Sukenick 137-38, 146-53). Ree Dragonette and Barbara Holland, who claimed to be metaphysical poets, sponsored a set at a bar on the West Side called rather ominously The Ninth Circle. Eventually, around 1966, all of the poets could be found at readings held in the parish hall of St. Mark's Church on Second Avenue at 10th Street. The church later became the headquarters of The Poetry Project.



Calvin Hernton at the 1991 forum. Photograph © Tom Dent.

The most remarkable thing about the Lower East Side scene was that, while race remained a powerful engine of social upheaval, the artists seemed able to work together almost in spite of it. Wilmer F. Lucas, for example, produced a record album of poets' reading their work that featured two black and two white writers: Umbra's Calvin Hernton and Norman H. Pritchard with Jerome Badanes and Paul Blackburn. Hernton's amazing long poem "The Passengers," brilliantly dramatized by his voice on the recording, was dedicated to Allen Ginsberg. *Umbra* magazine, while intended by its editors to focus on African American literature, also included in its pages the work of East Side coffeehouse regulars such as John Harriman, Ree Dragonette, and the mystical Will Inman. The national little magazine circuit was represented by the prolific St. Louis poet and translator Charles Guenther, with a fine version of Aimé

Césaire. Hettie Jones edited an anthology titled *Poems Now* for Lita Hornick's Kulchur Press that included David Henderson's jazz-like portrait of the East Side "Yin Years."

Because they were all outsiders in an immigrant community, the avant-garde artists became a community. Because those who were African Americans came there to become artists, not to avoid being black, there was a kind of integrated society that did not seem to exist elsewhere. True, the black artists brought along some heavy baggage. The cover of poet Calvin Hernton's 1963 book *The Coming of Chronos to the House of Nightsong* testifies to this. Hernton's face is shown, closed to the viewer by Ray Charles wraparound shades. In the background is a huge, smiling white girl on a billboard—unreal, and equally CLOSED. In his aggressive and beautiful poetry, and in the 1964 book *Sex and Racism in America*, Hernton was the first to really express the meaning of race to this new generation. It was not your father's double-consciousness—not even James Baldwin's. Believe that!

The Umbra Workshop—including writers such as Steve Cannon, Askia Muhammad Touré, Joe Johnson, Ishmael Reed, Calvin Hernton, David Henderson, Art Berger, Norman H. Pritchard, and others—was a group that was involved in the literary hub-bub of the East Side on many levels. It remains a significant element in the postwar development of African American literature.

The publication of Dr. Rosey Pool's 1962 anthology *Beyond the Blues in Europe*, and the generally energetic organizational efforts of Raymond Patterson all over New York City, provided the initial impetus that caused Tom Dent to assemble the group of young writers who became, as they styled themselves, "The Society of Umbra." The members of the workshop presented a unique com-

ination of Civil Rights activism, artistic ambition, and interest in both local and international politics. The group, which met every week for about a year, also provided a sense of early direction in the careers of a number of writers who are today variously known as scholars, full-time working artists, and arts administrators. The Umbra group was also the core of what became known nationwide as the Black Arts Movement (Riley 19).

The Umbra poets and other African American artists on the Lower East Side, particularly musicians such as Archie Shepp and Marion Brown, were militantly race conscious and outspoken. The poets caused controversy for two reasons. One was the obvious discomfort created by their focus on racial themes. Charles Patterson, for example, was able to freeze houses with recitations of his angry poem "115th Street," which addresses the suburban commuters who daily ride in elevated harassment over the streets of Harlem:

The whites pass by seeing all the smiling faces
Return home to laugh at misery
Up on the tracks commuters commute
Looking down on hell, on your dirty streets
And still the whites laugh, saying those niggers
Are having a ball

Larry Neal's hipster love lyric "Poppa Stoppa Speaks From His Grave" exemplifies the other pole of controversy. The poem begins, "Remember me baby in my best light, / lovely hip style and all." The concluding lines, however, include some very ancient and well-known Anglo-Saxon words which liberated black poets felt entitled by heritage to use—words that either delighted or enraged poetry crowds whenever one of us got up to read. It was a delicious conundrum of being avant-garde: African American poets censured for speaking Anglo-Saxon words!

Between 1960 and 1970 there was an outpouring of poems that focused on jazz and Rhythm & Blues musicians in the role of griots. As Stephen Henderson notes in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, "This is probably the largest category of musical referents in Black poetry" (60). Black music was also a common focus of poems and paintings by other artists on the scene, from the former Beats to the "metaphysical" Ree Dragonette. In 1962 she collaborated with reed man Eric Dolphy in a concert held at Town Hall. Dolphy composed original pieces for his quintet based on four of Dragonette's poems. His approach to the project, Dragonette would recall, was "original, perhaps radical, but it is so structured, and it goes back into so much jazz that went before. I feel that we are much alike and his response to my work has been greater and better than I would normally find from some other poet" (Cross 42).

Dolphy, in fact, spent several months reading and analyzing Dragonette's poems, and he composed not traditional "settings" but rather musical commentaries on the poems. He later recorded one of these compositions (without the poetic text) as "Mandrake" on his 1963 album *Iron Man*. The Dolphy/Dragonette collaboration was special in terms of the level of artistic achievement, but it was also typical of the kind of interdisciplinary and interracial artistic exchange available on the Lower East Side in the early 1960s.

In the late 1950s, highlighted by the favorable school integration decision of the Supreme Court in 1954, the struggle of African people in the United States toward equality was carried on with the good will, assistance, and/or indifference of many whites. The relationship was at once encouraging and enlightening for black people. "White liberals," as they were known then, were sometimes masked radi-

cals, but the majority of those who earned the label were advocates of what may now seem the rather innocuous doctrine of "fair play." Many of them—mostly well-educated, middle-class people—felt a need, more personal than political, to disassociate themselves from the crimes and excesses of white racism upon which their country had been founded and materially enriched itself.

The vast majority of African Americans in those years seemed to respect the sincerity of liberal whites and excluded them from the justifiable rage they might have harbored toward others. Side by side, almost a century after the abolition of slavery, idealistic young blacks and whites went into the hard land of racist America seeking justice and equality for the black people suffering segregation and oppression. Some of these young folks got broken bones and bashed-in skulls for their efforts; some were killed; others were brutalized beyond belief. Raymond Patterson's *Twenty-Six Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1969) includes an eloquently disturbing poem on the murders of three such young men who were enthusiastically trying to register black voters in rural Mississippi. The first stanza of Patterson's "Schwerner, Chaney, Goodman" is a haunting and accurate report of the times, a painful eulogistic apostrophe to the young martyrs:

Behind you, now,
Your final pain,
Your dreams,
The search in darks
Toward friendless hands,
The violent men you could have saved,
Your loved and fumbling nation.

Two white boys and one black boy . . . murdered for trying to register black citizens to vote. The students didn't know it, but for all their enthusiasm and the purity of their belief in American democracy, they were being dealt a game of "Georgia Skin" in Mississippi. They never had a chance.

Years later we all learned that the FBI stood by and watched as young Civil Rights workers were bludgeoned by Ku Klux Klansmen in 1961; that local agents had been alerted in advance of the racist terrorists' plans and were on the scene taking snapshots rather than action because—unbeknownst to many Americans, and the revisionism of the movie *Mississippi Burning* notwithstanding—the FBI men were not paid to enforce laws pertaining to justice for black folks.

The relative lack of racial animosity—at least among the artists—was a notable feature of life on the Lower East Side. The fact that this atmosphere changed in the middle of the decade has, perhaps, more to do with the realities of the nation at the time than with any failure of heart among the practitioners of the avant-

garde. The goddess Alea, in all her unpredictability, for all that the artists themselves shamelessly worshiped her, ordained a change of course.

The moment of the African American avant-garde writer on the Lower East Side was superseded in the second half of the 1960s by the Black Arts Movement, and interracial collaborations were replaced with a different mood as the rhetoric of "revolution" turned bloodily into the massacre of the Panthers and the frustrated madness of the Weathermen—among other things. The moment, however, was significant. As Harlem had been the locus of the Renaissance in the 1920s, it was—in part—to the Lower East Side that *Time* magazine turned in 1970 to assess the new directions in the arts pioneered by African American artists.

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