

KEEPING THE COMMUNAL TRADITION OF THE UMBRA POETS:

CREATING SPACE FOR WRITING

By Angela Joy Fortune

In a small room where the pen had the power to make every voice sing, young Black men and women gathered to share their writing, engage in provocative discussions of the world, and collaborate to pen their souls. Uniquely situated in time between the naturalistic protest poetry and the Black Arts Movement, the Umbra Poets were a community of readers and writers who gathered around to share their writing and offer and receive critical affirmation and valuable criticism. Their ultimate goal was to cultivate life-long writers who wrote with purpose and passion. Established in Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1961, The Umbra Poets' Workshop was a collection of young Black writers who served as predecessors to the Black Arts Movement. Umbra Poets wrote with a heightened sense of urgency. Some of poets became influential writers for Black artistic nationalism. These writers strived to inspire change through a landscape of politics and aesthetics. A few writers among these many notable artists were Thomas Dent, Calvin Hernton, and Lorenzo Thomas.

Thomas Dent, one of the leading founders of the Umbra Workshop, came to New York after serving a two-year stint in the United States Army. He was working as a public information director for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund when he helped form the Umbra Poets. Dent's early educational background is worth mentioning because it quite possibly mirrors the experiences of many young African American male adolescents in today's schools. He was taught in a public education system in which the voices of Black writers were invisible. The literary cannon he was exposed to in high school through college exuded writers such as Shakespeare, Hemingway, and Faulkner while excluding even a trace of the Black literary tradition that included the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, or James Weldon Johnson. With no recollection of ever hearing a consciously Black line of thought, comment, or reality in any of his courses, Dent expressed the belief that Black students like himself were being "prepared to 'belong'...to become whites in brown skins by mastering white standards."¹ Instead of adhering to the standards of others, Dent felt that platforms needed to be established for Black writers to speak their truths and tell their stories. With this realization, Dent and other former members of

a 1960s Black nationalist literary organization, *On Guard for Freedom*, established a writing collaborative that would be named the Umbra Poets. The group was named Umbra, meaning "shade" in Latin, after the term, "penumbra" which was written in a poem titled, *The Poet Talks to a Face and the Face Talks Back*, penned by Umbra member, Lloyd Addison.

The Umbra Poets' Workshop became a space created in the lives of Black writers to gather weekly and share and critique their poetry. These workshops would convene on Friday evenings at eight o'clock and last many times until one or two o'clock in the morning. Tom Dent hosted the first writing workshop in his apartment. Looking back on this experience, he wrote:

We felt it imperative that we have a device that could deal with race, that could serve to bring us together, that could be a vehicle for the expression of the bitterness and the beauties of being Afro-American (as we called ourselves at the time) in this plastic land... We called an organizing meeting and sent out a call to all the black writers in the area we knew. Our first workshops, on Friday nights at my apartment, were a way of becoming familiar with each other's work, of airing obsessions, fears, and plodding, jerking toward some concept of what we were by measuring our concepts against the beliefs/experiences of brother writers.²

The Umbra Poets recognized the white hegemony that persisted in publishing and therefore set out with a determination of publishing themselves. Dent further explained, "The surfacing of one black writer at a time in the white literary world, like a long chain of single black voices, was not an acceptable situation."³ Not long after the origination of the workshop sessions, the decision was made to publish a magazine titled *Umbra*. This was a productive step in their larger purpose of fostering a realization among Black writers and encouraging them to advocate and protect their distinctiveness in the literary world. Dent captured the essence of this purpose when he voiced this claim:

We also developed a growing sense of alienation from the white literary world. This was not a negative development born of rejection by the white literary establishment, but a healthy development in the sense that the only way we could say certain things as black artists-the things that needed saying-was to recognize that we constituted a separate world and that this world, propelling itself on the cultural integrity of black people in America, was as distinct with its own value system from the main body of

*American literature as black culture is distinct from whatever mishmash of advertisement majority American culture represents. We discovered that to survive we had to protect, in fact advocate and encourage, our distinctiveness. How else could we possibly know who we were? Thus it became important to emphasize our African heritage, our music, our church, our talk, our walk -all those things that make us us.*⁴

Umbra magazine was regarded as the very publication that had the potential to bring the reader and writer together on a wider scale as the words of these young Black poets directly tackled social and racial realities. The first issue of the new literary magazine introduced the *Umbra* as having two preoccupations: (1) “the experience of being Negro, especially in America; and (2) that quality of human awareness often termed ‘social consciousness.’”⁵

The *Umbra* poets also wrote with self-recognition and consciousness that conveyed strong distinctiveness in identity in America. Among these devoted writers was Calvin Hernton, whom Dent considered to be the “strongest and most mature” voice in the workshop. Hernton’s affection for this writing collective rings with testimony of the power of writing and community in one’s life. As he begins his personal recounting of *Umbra*, he exclaimed,

Physically, as a cohesive, functioning group, *Umbra* existed for only a couple of years. But in terms of its impact on my work and my life, the two years of *Umbra*’s physical existence constituted a lifetime; its influence on my writing and its meaning for my life through the years are immeasurable and timeless.⁶

The writers, many of whom were new and experimenting with ideas, read their works aloud and listened to critiques from everyone in the room. The discussions and workshops were described as exacting, exhausting, and challenging as Hernton recounted, “If your skin were thin, you were sure to bleed at some point or other.”⁷ Captivated and invigorated, writers would return to the next session with improved writing and receive praise and encouragement from fellow writers. Some of the brilliant writers and poets of the twentieth century were birthed through these writing workshops.

Public readings became a routine aspect of the *Umbra* Poets’ Workshop. From people’s homes, to coffee shops, to national radio and television broadcasts, the *Umbra* writers would share their poetry with anticipating audiences. Without any rehearsal and practiced routine, the

diverse group of writers would create a line in front of an audience and begin to share their heartfelt messages through their written poetry. Their readings were honest and real and expressed Black identity and experience in a unique way. Tom Dent shares the following statement in his recapturing of the *Umbra Days*, “. . .just the idea of black poets reading, and using the language black people speak, was unique. . .in a sense it was a beginning of the Black Poetry Movement as we know it today.”⁸

In *The Shadow World: New York’s Umbra Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement*,⁹ Lorenzo Thomas conveyed the *Umbra* Poets’ urgency to understand and embrace the African culture. They recognized the “communal tradition” of the Black community to be a key aspect of the African culture and essential in the Black Arts Movement. He viewed the *Umbra* magazine and *Umbra* workshop as a creative source of energy in New York in the 1960s that served as the “thump on the rump that forced the new black poetry into breath.” Thomas described this essential aspect in the following declaration, “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.”¹⁰



Although the Umbra Poets were not the first group of Blacks to establish a writing collaborative, their need and advocacy to put their voice on record publically shows a strong link across history. Mirrored in the founding Umbra poet's experience, historically, the Black voice, line of thought, comment, and reality have been absent, not only in the educational system, but in the national narrative. Throughout history, African Americans have used their pens to write their lives and tell their stories in pursuit of voice and visibility. They have embraced writing as a powerful tool to protest against social and political injustices, preserve cultural heritage and tradition, define and express identity—both collective and individual, and create unity by providing a sense of hope for a more promising future. There are many lessons to be learned from the model of this writing collaborative, but if there is but one foundational message of the Umbra Poets' Workshop for young Black writers today, it is in the example of Black artists coming together and uniting to produce something that is meaningful and lasting.



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Notes

1. Tom Dent. "Umbra Days," *Black American Literature Forum* 14 (1980): 105-108
2. IBID., p. 106.
3. IBID., p. 106
4. IBID., p. 107
5. Phylon, Edward Clark Phylon, "A New Literary magazine," *Umbra* 1 (1963): 417
6. Calvin Hernton, "Umbra: A Personal Recounting," *African American Review* 27 (1993): 579-584
7. Hernton. "Umbra: A Personal Recounting" 581
8. Tom Dent. "Umbra Days," *Black American Literature Forum* 14 (1980): 105-108
9. Lorenzo Thomas, "The Shadow World: New York's Umbra Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement," *Callaloo* 4 (1978): 53-72
10. IBID., p. 70

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Lesson Plan

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Connections to Middle and High School:

Motivating students to be lifelong readers and writers is key to their success. At the heart of motivating adolescents to read and write is social engagement around meaningful experiences. During the adolescent years, children are developing their identities, finding their voices, and learning to make sense of the world around them and their place in it. Writing is a powerful tool that can be used to help students find their individual voices while feeling a collective purpose as they become a part of something greater than themselves.

Goals of this Lesson Plan:

Students will gain knowledge about a historical writing collaborative, the Umbra Workshop, and participate in a modern-day form of a writing collaborative. Students will collaborate with peers to read, write, discuss, and perform poetry.

Objectives of this Lesson Plan:

- Participate in small and whole-group discussions
- Develop awareness and understanding of selected themes
- Engage in peer critiquing of peers' writings
- Compose poetry representing selected themes
- Perform written poetry aloud for peers

National Council for Social studies (NCSS) Standards:

Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Help learners understand the concepts of role, status, and social class and use them in describing the connections and interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions in society
- Assist learners as they explain and apply ideas and modes of inquiry drawn from behavioral science and social theory in the examination of persistent social issues and problems

Culture and Cultural Diversity

- Enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards:

- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes (Standard 5)
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (Standard 11)

Activities:

1. Begin this activity by leading an in-depth discussion with your students about the role of the Umbra Poets Workshop as a historical writing collaborative. Be sure to include in your discussion the purposes and functions as well as activities of the Umbra Workshop.
2. Display the following emerging themes from the story of the Umbra Workshop on the board:
 - Empowerment
 - Identity
 - Self-determination
 - Hegemony
 - Social Consciousness
3. Activate students' prior knowledge by engaging them in a quick brainstorm activity by posting the following: Choose one of these words to write about for the next few minutes. How do you connect to the word you have chosen? What does it mean to you? How (if) have you experienced this in your life?
4. Join students in the brainstorm activity to share your thoughts.
5. Bring the class back together after a few minutes and share your writing aloud with your students.
6. Ask your students to turn and talk to their neighbor about their brainstorms.
7. Invite your students to share out in the whole group to get the conversation started and take this opportunity to introduce any themes that seem unfamiliar to your students.
8. Divide your class into small groups, keeping a mixture of themes chosen in each group if possible.
9. Model a pre-chosen poem as a mentor text. This could be a poem you wrote or a poem that you selected that represents one or more of the themes to you in a personal way. Welcome students into a discussion and critique of the poem shared.
10. Ask your students to write a poem that they will publically perform in your classroom that represents one of the discussed themes that most resonates with them. Give them time to pen their poems silently.
11. Give students the opportunity to engage in conversations in their small groups to discuss their writing, to provide critiques and feedback to each other, and to support each other in a community of writers in revising and taking their writing to a higher level.
12. Help students prepare for a public reading of their poetry in your classroom. Ask each group to work together to decide what order they will line up in to share their new poetry with their peers. (If possible, invite another class, parents, or administrators to share in the performance.)
13. Encourage and support your students in publishing their poems in a venue outside of the classroom, whether individually or collectively, such as an online poetry site or school magazine.

Assessment opportunities include the following:

- Contribution and participation in small-group collaborative
- Providing and receiving peer critiques with partner in small-group
- Piece of polished poetry reflecting chosen theme from lesson
- Performance of poetry in classroom

Teacher Resources:

- <http://aalbc.com/authors/blackartsmovement.htm#.TxfnhWCRhXU>
- <http://www.poetryfoundation.org>

Writing Publication Links for Students:

- <http://www.teenink.com/>
- <http://KIDSBOOKSHELF.COM>
- <http://allpoetry.com>
- <http://poetrypoem.com/>
- <http://poetry.com/>