

Paul Laurence Dunbar Project NEH Consultation Grant Proposal

A. Nature of the Request

The Central Region Humanities Center at Ohio University requests a \$10,000 consultation grant in support of planning the Dunbar Project. The consultation phase of the Project will establish a schedule of at least 15 academic events and public programs, performances, and exhibits between 2003-2006, exploring the significance and legacy of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), America's first professional African-American writer. Most events (museum exhibits, library programs, poetry readings) will be targeted at public audiences in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, and West Virginia (the states of the Central Region).

The consultation grant will furnish seed money to engage consultants who will (1) develop and schedule individual programs, (2) advise on regional outreach enabling others to develop materials and plan programs under the aegis of the Project, and (3) assist the CRHC and its regional partner institutions in developing proposals to fund individual components of the Project from other public and private sources.

B. Introduction of the Subject

The Dunbar Project will feature a series of public and academic programs between 2003 and 2006 to stimulate interest in African-American life and letters in our region and to raise new questions about their roles in regional and national life. The project is led by the Central Region Humanities Center in collaboration with the Ohio Historical Society's Dunbar House, the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, and a national group of scholars of African-American literature and culture.

The Dunbar Project reexamines the legacy of Paul Laurence Dunbar, a writer whose career makes clear that if African-American writing had its renaissance in Harlem, then its nascence was here, in Ohio, where Charles W. Chesnutt and W.E.B. Du Bois also wrote, where Langston Hughes was educated (and at one point taught by Chesnutt's daughter), and which more recently nourished Rita Dove and Toni Morrison. Dunbar's history draws on regional dynamics in all five states of the NEH-defined Central Region and illuminates the network of black intellectuals and creative activities in this region. Born in 1872 in Dayton, Ohio, of former Kentucky slaves (his father escaped to Michigan), Dunbar joined black and white contemporaries experimenting with vernacular verse: James D. Corrothers (Michigan), James Edwin Campbell (founding president of West Virginia State College), James Whitcomb Riley (Indiana). Musical adaptations of Dunbar's verses embody parlor and minstrel traditions of the period, while his work on the Indianapolis World and other newspapers exemplifies the efforts of the African-American press to challenge and resist Northern racism. His friendship with Dayton High School classmates Wilbur and Orville Wright (he wrote for the newspaper they created for the white community, while they printed the newspaper Dunbar created for the black community) provides insight into the ways in which some extraordinary adolescents, each of whom would leave a mark on American culture, bonded across racial lines.

Dead of tuberculosis at the age of 33, Dunbar left a large body of dialect poems, neo-classical verses, essays, editorials, novels, plays, and short stories – the outpouring of “the only

man of pure African blood and of African civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically,” as William Dean Howells put it in his introduction to Dunbar’s Lyrics of Lowly Life (1896). Although racism and poverty kept him from higher education, Dunbar managed to become the first African-American literary celebrity, earning a living, though just barely, from patronage, public performances, short-term jobs at the Library of Congress and elsewhere, and, most important, writing.

Indeed, Dunbar modeled ways for subsequent writers to represent racial difference in poetry and fiction. His experimentation with colloquial speech inspired later writers and black vernacular performers, and helped ready the country to appreciate their work. Dunbar’s influence on twentieth-century poets from Langston Hughes to Michael S. Harper and Nikki Giovanni is obvious. To cite only one example, the last line of Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy” inspired the title for Maya Angelou’s autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970) and R&B singer Alicia Keys’s song “Caged Bird” (2001). Considering that his professional career spanned only thirteen years, Dunbar’s range is astonishing – as is his impact on those who know his work. The centennial of Dunbar’s death is 2006, but no full-length critical study and only a few essays have appeared since 1975; most new publications have addressed juvenile audiences. Nonetheless, contemporary composers such as Adolphus Hailstork (Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground, An Operatic Theaterpiece [1994]) have set his life and poetry to music. Nearly every year brings at least one more thesis or dissertation on his published poetry and fiction. Last year, Herbert Martin and Ronald Primeau published three scripts and three libretti by Dunbar, along with two dozen other examples of his previously uncollected poetry and prose, in In His Own Voice. This collection, published by Ohio University Press with the Dunbar Project in mind, provides scholars and the public ready access to an unknown Dunbar. He should emerge from renewed investigation as the preeminent representative of African-American social and literary aspiration at the turn of the last century. More generally, his life and career compel reexamination of the regional and national African-American experience during his period.

C. Description of the Project

Through programs aimed at a wide variety of audiences (teachers, students, scholars, the public), the Dunbar Project will stimulate interest in and deepen understanding of the heritage of African-American creativity in the five states of the Central Region: Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Kentucky, and West Virginia. Partners such as the Ohio Historical Society’s Dunbar House, the National and Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, and other groups we hope to attract will help develop, sponsor, and publicize locally-arranged musical performances, poetry slams, and contests, mount their own exhibits and host others that travel, and identify themes and materials that can be of use for K-12 teachers.

Consultants will provide guidance in developing and scheduling components of the Project, which we currently envision as:

- (1) a series of public lectures and performances during the period leading up to the centennial of Dunbar’s death;
- (2) museum and library exhibits on local/regional racism, African-American life before and after the turn of the last century, and related topics;
- (3) reading-lecture-discussion series hosted in libraries and other community venues; and
- (4) web content development and a comprehensive bibliography of Dunbar source materials to support public programming.

Consultants will identify and develop the Project's major themes, provide rationales for scholarly and public treatments of Dunbar's life and work, help contact additional participants, and advise on proposals by partners. The National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center, for example, plans to develop a traveling exhibition. Dunbar House and the Wright and Dunbar National Historical Park plan to host public programs. Faculty at the University of Kentucky, West Virginia University, Ohio University, and the University of Michigan intend to develop events for students, area teachers, and community members. Other regional scholars and humanities professionals will use local knowledge to construct events at places chosen to maximize exposure of Dunbar's work and its historical, social, political, and literary contexts to the widest audiences. The Ohio and West Virginia Humanities Councils, in particular, have indicated interest in partnering on components of the Dunbar Project, and we are seeking participation from other humanities organizations in our region. Consultants will help us identify theatrical and musical groups who might add Dunbar productions to their schedules and find sites for poetry slams, poetry and journalism contests, with special outreach to students in Dunbar High Schools and other historically black high schools. Publicity will invite many kinds of regional organizations to base their programs and plans for 2004-06 around topics, themes, and materials from the Dunbar Project.

Some of these consultants will later serve on an advisory board composed of national and regional scholars and humanities professionals who will oversee events. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Professor of American Studies, U of Texas), Richard Yarborough (Assoc, Professor of English, UCLA), and other notable scholars of African-American literature and culture have already agreed to serve on the advisory board, as have leading regional scholars of the African-American experience. Noted Dunbar scholar and performer Herbert Martin has expressed interest in participating.

D. Description of the Consultation Process

The consultation grant will underwrite costs associated with bringing together consultants and regional project partners, primarily through telephone conferences, email, and website. The CRHC also deploys web-based conferencing software to engage larger numbers in online discussions. We plan a series of four 2-hour telephone conferences, each devoted to identifying themes, resources, program guidelines, participants, and venues for different audiences. In advance of each discussion, Project staff will research relevant scholarly and practical questions and circulate details to participants. Discussions will lead not only to decisions about each question, but also to tasks for regional consultants to pursue in collaboration with Project staff: to set up contests in high schools and colleges, to help develop local exhibits, to schedule concerts, recitations, or dramatic performances, always where possible with an eye to the subsequent creation of materials appropriate for K-12 teachers and students. The consultation process will thus result in a varied, multi-state schedule that can be used, in the next phases of the Project, as illustrations in a region-wide invitation to scholars, academic institutions, libraries, museums, schools, and community groups to develop their own events to explore and celebrate the heritage of African-American literary imagination, performance, and intellectual inquiry in this region.

The first conference call, in September 2003, will focus on themes. The consultants listed below have already suggested themes ranging from the influence of slavery on literature, the beginnings of African-American journalism, and the formation of networks of black intellectuals to vernacular traditions and early black musical theater (see attached list of themes).

The second conference call, in November 2003, will address programs for public audiences. Consultants will help identify performance groups who will add Dunbar productions

to their schedules for 2005-06. Prior research will list musical, dramatic, and literary works for suitable performances by student and professional groups, identify sources of texts, and specify performance rights and restrictions.

The third conference call, in January 2004, will address programs for K-12 teachers. High school teachers are the primary target, but programs might well attract teachers from the lower grades, as fourth and eight grade curricula include state and U.S. history and literature. Issues for this call include possibilities for designating special sessions for teachers in conjunction with events, and for developing program themes and resources for one-day workshops at Ohio University, the University of Kentucky, and other regional institutions.

The fourth call, in March 2004, will focus on contests and performance opportunities to acquaint high school and college students with Dunbar's poetry and inspire their own imaginative and journalistic writing through his example. The call will identify procedures for contests in oral interpretation and presentation of Dunbar's poetry, prose, and drama, and discuss appropriate recognition of student winners and faculty advisors. Prior research for this call includes lists of English, History, Journalism, and Theater teachers at historically black high schools in the region, in order to solicit their participation in particular, although contests will be open to all students in the region and to those nationwide enrolled in schools named for Paul Laurence Dunbar. Prior research will identify availability of Dunbar texts for use by students and works in the public domain that can be distributed via the Dunbar Project web site.

Plans and ideas generated by all conference calls will be posted on the Dunbar Project website (maintained by the CRHC) at regular intervals from September, 2003, through June, 2004. Project staff will continue to solicit participation, suggestions, and information on additional Dunbar resources.

The principal outcomes of consultation with specialists in literature, linguistics, history, theater, African-American culture, and museum/archival collections will be the specification of major themes and the creation of a pragmatic schedule of events. The consultation process will also enable Project staff, working with partner institutions, to determine costs and identify other sources of support. During and after the consultation grant period, Project staff will apply for public and private funding for implementing and publicizing Dunbar Project components. NEH support for this early, consultant stage of the Project is particularly valuable because it will certify to other funders the scholarly value of recovering Dunbar's significance for Americans today.

The consultants listed below have committed themselves to advise the Dunbar Project as outlined here. As a group they represent national and regional expertise in American and African-American literature, history, performance, and language; regional history and culture; K-12 education; university outreach; and public humanities.

Ancella Bickley, Ed.D., ret.; former Vice-President of West Virginia State University; co-author, Memphis Tennessee Garrison: The Remarkable Story of a Black Appalachian Woman (2001).

Joanne Braxton, Ph.D., Frances L. and Edwin L. Cummings Professor of American Studies and English and Director of The Middle Passage Project at the College of William and Mary; Resident Fellow at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University (1998); author of Sometimes, I Think of Maryland (1977) and Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition (1989); editor of The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1993) and Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook (1999).

Elizabeth Engelhardt, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Women's Studies, West Virginia University; expert in Appalachian literature and activism; author, The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature (2003); currently working on Appalachian black newspapers.

Frances Smith Foster, Ph.D., Charles Howard Candler Professor of English and Women's Studies and Director of the Emory Institute of Women's Studies at Emory University; editor, the Oxford Companion to African American Literature (1997), the Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1997), and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: A Norton Critical Edition (2001).

Kevin Gaines, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History and Afro-American Studies, University of Michigan; author, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century (1996).

Wilma Gibbs, M.L.S.; Archivist, African-American History Program of the Indiana Historical Society (Indianapolis); editor, Black History News & Notes (newsletter); author, Guide to African American Printed Sources at the Indiana Historical Society (1997).

Philip Greasley, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English and Dean of Extension Services, University of Kentucky; senior editor, The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature (2002).

Gordon McKinney, Ph.D.; Goode Professor of Appalachian Studies and Director of the Appalachian Center & Museum at Berea College; author, *Southern Mountain Republicans, 1865-1900: Politics and the Appalachian Community* (1978, 1998), and other works.

Dean McWilliams, Ph.D., Richard Hamilton/Baker and Hostetler Professor of Humanities and Professor of English, Ohio University; expert in African American literature; editor, Charles W. Chesnutt, The Quarry (1999) and Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Marchand F.M.C. (1999).

LaVerne Sci, Historic Site Manager, Paul Laurence Dunbar State Memorial (Dayton, Ohio), Ohio Historical Society.

Richard Yarborough, Ph.D. Associate Professor of English, and Faculty Research Associate, Center for African American Studies, UCLA; general editor of The Library of Black Literature reprint series; associate general editor, The Heath Anthology of American Literature; co-editor, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature; author, numerous articles on African American Literature, as well as book chapters and introductions in critical anthologies.

E. Project Staff

Staff at the Central Region Humanities Center will coordinate the work of partners, participating schools, and consultants. The principal staff members are:

Co-Director of the Dunbar Project: Joseph W. Slade, Ph.D., Professor of Telecommunications at Ohio University (1990--) and Co-Director of the Central Region Humanities Center (2000--); NEH Fellow at the National Humanities Institute in Humanities and Technology at the University of Chicago (1976-77); Fulbright Bicentennial Professor of American Studies at the University of Helsinki (1986-87); editor of The Markham Review (1969-1990), a quarterly journal of American culture noted for essays on regional literature and history; author of four books and 50 articles on American literature, film, and communication.

Co-Director of the Dunbar Project: Judith Yaross Lee, Ph.D., Professor of Interpersonal Communication (1992--) and Co-Director of the Central Region Humanities Center (2000--); specialist in popular culture (especially regional literary humor); author of Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America (1991) and Defining New Yorker Humor (2000), and numerous articles and essays on American cultural history; founder and former executive director for the Society for Literature and Science. She is currently at work on a book on regional political humor.

Co-Director of the Dunbar Project: Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Ph.D., Professor of American Studies at University of Texas at Austin; author of From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America (1985); Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices (1993); Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture (1997); editor, The Encyclopedia of Civil Rights in America (1997) and the twenty-nine volume Oxford Mark Twain (1996). Fishkin has lectured on Dunbar at a number of universities, and has an article and a book chapter on Dunbar currently in press. In addition, she has for many years worked to advance the study of African-American culture and letters through the American Studies Association, which she currently serves as President-Elect. As of Sept. 1, 2003, she will be Professor of English and Director of American Studies at Stanford University.

Project Manager Jennifer Scott, an Ohio University graduate student in interdisciplinary rhetorical studies, is currently researching historical, literary, bibliographic, and educational resources regarding Dunbar.

A profile of the Central Region Humanities Center at Ohio University is included in the supplementary materials.

F. Plan of Work and Project Timeline

Date	Goals	Objectives	Responsibility				LOCAL PLANNERS
			Project Manager	Regional Consultants	National Consultants	CRHC Directors	
Sept. 2003	Announce start of Dunbar Project via website with preliminary materials about Project themes & Dunbar's life, writings, and significance		X			X	
Sept. 2003	Teleconference #1 (themes): develop list of themes for use in programs by regional museums, libraries, community organizations, schools, teachers		X	X	X	X	
Oct. 2003	Follow up individually with consultatns to build list of key potential planners of local events in each state		X			X	
Oct. 2003	Research: Develop bibliography of performance texts (musical, dramatic, literary) and identify copyright/permission requirements; share with consultatns & post on website		X		X		
Oct.-Nov. 2003	Circulate invitation to participate via personal networks, CRHC newsletter (sent to 1500+ regional organizations), H-Net & other listservs, etc., in order to identify public venues, professional & scholarly resources. Develop list of museums and other sites for exhibits.		X				
Nov. 2003	Teleconference #2 (public audiences): Identify theater, musical, and other performance groups to schedule performances, including poetry slams		X	X	X	X	
Dec.2003 -June 2004	Work with student, community, and professional performance groups to schedule productions in 2005 and 2006; locate venues (chain bookstores?) for poetry slams		X			X	X
Jan. 2004	Research: identify possible presenters, thematically significant regional sites, resources for K-12 teachers/workshops		X	X		X	
Jan. 2004	Teleconference #3 (K-12 teachers): identify themes & presenters for 1-day workshops at conference & regional sites		X	X	X	X	X
Feb.- June '04	Secure partners and possible dates for K-12 workshops; funding and planning to be developed separately		X			X	X
Mar. 2004	Teleconference #4: draft call for announcement for and details of student competitions at high schools and colleges – primarily in the region but also including Paul Laurence Dunbar high schools around the country		X	X	X	X	X
Apr. 2004	Research and develop mailing list of regional high schools & national Dunbar High Schools to receive information on contests		X			X	X

Apr. 2004	Develop funding proposals for poetry contests & publicity for overall project		x	x	x	x	x
May. 2004	Teleconference #5: follow-up to unfinished business, review bibliography for additional Dunbar manuscripts and other resources		x	x	x	x	
June, 2004	Launch Dunbar Project at Dunbar House event in Dayton		x	x		x	x

THE DUNBAR PROJECT

Themes Suggested by Consultants for Discussion During the First Telephone Conference

- Themes (to be reduced, clustered, and refined prior to discussion)
- - The Vernacular Tradition/Vernacular Poetry Performance
 - Recovering a Regional Heritage of Writers
 - Resistance to Jim Crow and the North
 - Literary Patronage (for Dunbar and others) During Dunbar's Period
 - African-American Lyric Poetry
 - Lynching in the North
 - Integration and Education
 - Sites of African-American Heritage
 - Race Relationships on the Ohio River
 - Slavery and the African-American Memory
 - Early Black Musical Theatre and Performance
 - Race and the Politics of Memory
 - History of American Music
 - Slavery's Influence on Literature
 - Literature of the Underground Railroad
 - Slavery and Poetry/Fiction
 - Influence of Slavery on American Life
 - The Emergence of Black Intellectual Networks Before and After the Turn of the 20th Century
 - Locating Obscure African-American Resources
 - Recovering Period Audiences for Black Letters and Journalism
 - Countering Racism
 - Black Journalism (in the nation and the region): *Columbus Ohio Dispatch, Philadelphia Times, Denver Post, Chicago Tribune, New York Times*
 - Multi-racial Friendships (Dunbar/Wright brothers, Dayton Central High)
 - Birth of Twentieth-Century American Letters