DUNBAR: A DOCUMENTARY

The Central Region Humanities Center at Ohio University seeks $20,000 from the Ohio Humanities Council for the first, treatment-development, phase of a video documentary on the life and legacy of Ohio-born poet Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Background
As the centennial of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) approaches, a coalition of cultural institutions and scholars aims to reevaluate his literary, social, and political messages as national legacies. The institutions include the Central Region Humanities Center at Ohio University, the Wright and Dunbar National Historical Park, the Dunbar House (Ohio Historical Society), Berea College’s Black Cultural Center, and the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center. The scholars (e. g., Henry Louis Gates and Shelley Fisher Fishkin--see list) are among the most distinguished experts on African-American cultural history. Between 2004 and 2006, these partners will mount a series of public and academic programs under the general title of “The Dunbar Project” to stimulate new questions about African-American life and letters in this region. At the center of The Dunbar Project will be Dunbar, the working title of a documentary on Dunbar’s life and career to be produced by the Central Region Humanities Center.

One of nine regional humanities centers created by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Central Region Humanities Center at Ohio University promotes understanding of the cultures of Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia among students, teachers, scholars, and the general public. In exploring human experiences in our region, we seek to understand literature and history, popular and material culture in local and regional communities, institutions, and organizations. The CRHC acts as a clearinghouse, linking resources with audiences who seek to
enjoy, study, interpret, and preserve them. As a clearinghouse, the Center respects and advances work already begun by existing organizations, while fostering new collaborations within and across the five states.

One such collaboration is The Dunbar Project. Most of The Project’s events (museum exhibits, library programs, K-12 sessions, poetry readings, and performances) will be developed by local organizations and targeted at audiences in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, and West Virginia (the states of the Central Region); they will be fed in part by a major academic conference on Dunbar at Ohio University. Project events will provide both material and audiences for the documentary *Dunbar*. The CRHC will distribute *Dunbar* in three forms. Shot in broadcast standard, *Dunbar* will be eligible, first, for national showings on PBS and/or cable channels. *Dunbar* segments will be shown, and the contemporary relevance of themes discussed, at the public events of The Dunbar Project. These public viewing-discussions will encourage audience members to identify their experiences of racial discrimination and interracial friendship with Dunbar’s. The themes will follow protocols developed by OU entertainment education activist Arvind Singhal, who will consult on the development of the themes in discussion leaders’ guides and a companion website. Dunbar’s work as a poet, novelist, dramatist, and journalist provides opportunities to arrange discussions in conjunction with local viewings at libraries, museums, schools (especially schools named after Dunbar), and Dunbar Project events at colleges, concerts, poetry slams, and dramatic performances. Third, a low-cost DVD version with study guides, including material from regional Dunbar Project events, will be available to schools in our region and across the nation. The DVD version will also be permanently deposited at those institutions affiliated with the Project. Those institutions, and others to be enlisted, will publicize *Dunbar* as part of The Dunbar Project. *Dunbar*’s audience, in short, will be composed of teachers, students, scholars, and community members--the public at large.

*Dunbar* will revise understanding of Paul Laurence Dunbar and reinterpret his literary and historical roles. If African-American writing had its renaissance in Harlem, then its nascence was here, in Ohio, where Charles W. Chesnutt and W.E.B. DuBois also wrote, where Langston Hughes was educated (at one point taught by Chesnutt’s daughter), and which more recently nourished Rita Dove and Toni Morrison. Born to former slaves in 1872 in Dayton, Ohio, Dunbar became the first African-American national poet, “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 would put it in his introduction to Dunbar’s *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). He was one of the first “cross-over” artists; his poetry readings in the United States and England enthralled readers of all races. Fascinated by the power of colloquial speech, Dunbar surpassed contemporary black and white masters of vernacular verse such as James D. Corrothers of Michigan, James Edwin Campbell, who founded West Virginia State College, and James Whitcomb Riley of Indiana. Today’s rap and poetry “slams” descend directly from Dunbar’s experiments in dialect. Dunbar’s influence on twentieth-century poets from Langston Hughes to Maya Angelou to Michael S. Harper to Nikki Giovanni is obvious. To cite only one example, the first 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).

Although few of his poems attract wide recognition today, Dunbar left a large body of published and unpublished work in many genres: poems, essays, editorials, novels, songs, plays, and short
stories. Indeed, Dunbar modeled ways for subsequent writers to represent racial difference in fictional and poetic forms. Some of those strategies were subversive, although whether Dunbar belonged to “the plantation tradition” or was “signifying” through the mask of dialect remains one of several controversial questions. In either case, his work explored the frustrations and ambitions of black Americans of his day. More important, his life exemplified blacks’ potential for contributions to American culture and barriers to their achievement. Considering that his formal education ended with high school and that his professional career spanned barely fourteen years (he died of tuberculosis at 33), Dunbar’s range is astonishing. Further research will broaden our understanding of his experimentation.

Capturing Dunbar’s significance and making him come alive require historical contextualization as well as biographical and literary research. Dunbar was very much a figure of his time and his place. One of the few African-Americans of his period to graduate from high school, Dunbar nonetheless found that racism closed most Dayton jobs to him. For years he operated an elevator in a downtown office building, selling his poems to the passengers he ferried between floors. Later, the Library of Congress rewarded the author of half-a-dozen books with the most menial of jobs; as a page, he fetched volumes for white patrons. Fortunately, though impoverished all his days, Dunbar’s life was rich in friendships. His story includes interracial relationships in an environment hostile to them. His friendship with the Wright brothers, who were his Dayton High School classmates, contrasted with the persistent humiliations of prejudice. Printers before they became bicycle manufacturers and pioneers of flight, Orville and Wilbur Wright published Dunbar’s short-lived Dayton newspaper; he in turn wrote for one of theirs. Dunbar’s work on the Indianapolis World exemplifies African-American journalism in the region. By contrast, musical adaptations of his verses embody more serene parlor traditions of the period, while his plays fill out the history of American regional theater, when collaborators came forward to recognize his merits. White patrons from Cleveland and Toledo subsidized his second volume of poetry. William Dean Howells, editor of Harper’s, praised his primacy as a writer of African-American experience. Such praise, of course, could marginalize, as in the caption of the photo displayed here.

Dunbar will resurrect Dunbar’s courageous attacks on northern racism in newspaper articles, as acerbic, compelling, and relevant today as in the 1880s, and examine his marriage to the civil rights activist and suffragette Alice Moore Dunbar. Empowering as a narrative of obstacles overcome and challenging as a dramatization of injustice, exclusion, and oppression, Dunbar’s life also illustrates many of the themes and topics taken up by scholars of the present: the performance of race and gender, of course, but also black intellectual history, vernacular traditions, integration and education, the history of American music, the influence of slavery on American realism, regional black journalism, multi-racial friendships, the politics of memory, resistance to Jim Crow laws—and many others.

OHC funding will support sustained discussion among the producer, director, treatment writer, and scholars on the Dunbar Project Advisory Board on these and other themes for development in the documentary.

Dunbar’s complexity as a person derives as much from his victimization by racism as from his talent. Warmly supported by his family as a child, he never quite freed himself from dependence on his mother. Although he was briefly a protégé of Frederick Douglass, Dunbar was not a fiery
orator in drives for justice for African-Americans. Nor was he merely a thread in the tapestry of his period: he inspired enormous pride in contemporary African-Americans, even among those who could not read, who flocked to black churches and lecture halls to hear him recite, to perform a blackness they admired. Some of his travel--to Chicago, for example, to the World’s Fair of 1893--was crucial and formative to his development as a thinker and artist, while his tour of England almost ten years later was sour and exploitative. His marriage to Alice was bewilderingly stormy, his final illness seemingly merely pathetic; uncertainty verging on despair eroded his sense of self. Yet he remained almost preternaturally sensitive to beauty, and bravely launched his imagination from the confines of his deathbed. His output was protean. Lack of perspective on these issues of artistry, activism, and personality, and the inability to assess the man’s versatility so worthy of emulation by individuals today--have thus far forestalled production of a documentary. Some years ago Andrew Garrison videotaped a few photos from Dunbar House in Dayton, but never finished or released the program. OHC funding for Dunbar will finally bring his story to a wide contemporary audience.

For that matter, Dunbar has resisted biography in general. The most recent, published in 1975, antedates the explosion of knowledge in the 1980s and 90s about African-American culture. Essays on Dunbar published during this period have addressed mainly 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; nearly every year some American theater group presents one of his plays or operettas. Nearly every professional African-American singer keeps at least one of Dunbar’s songs in repertoire. Last year, Herbert Martin and Ronald Primeau published three scripts and three libretti by Dunbar, along with two dozen other examples of his poetry and prose, in In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar (Ohio University Press), a collection of previously unpublished work that provides scholars and the public ready access to aspects of the unknown Dunbar. We hope that one by-product of research for the documentary video Dunbar will be a new full-length critical biography; the Ohio University Press is eager to publish it.

Production of the documentary hinges on acquisition of visual representations. Because a script must be based at least in part on the availability of visual materials, we have planned Phase One of Dunbar to produce a treatment from which a script can be written. To save time and money, and to maximize both our research efforts and the early enthusiasm of the scholars and institutions who have committed to the project, we will shoot some preliminary location footage, conduct some on-camera interviews at research sites, and transfer some still images to video as we do research for the treatment that will shape and animate the script. The treatment will evolve from collaboration among them all. Producer and director will talk with the treatment writer and the appropriate consultants through telephone conferences to plan each research and shooting trip, confer again after each trip, and repeat the process for the next. The reason is fairly obvious: documentaries are driven not simply by themes and interpretations, but by discovery of what can be illustrated: experience whose significance be made visible. Through previous queries and contacts, we know what is in some archives, but not in others. For example, we know that many of the photographs in the Countee Cullen Library in New York are duplicated in the Dunbar Collection of the Ohio Historical Society or at Dunbar House in Dayton, but we must consult with archivists about unique materials and images, then evaluate their narrative and visual utility. Since Dunbar House is one of
the partners in The Dunbar Project, we anticipate no difficulty in securing permission to reproduce materials there, to do extensive location shooting in Dunbar’s former residence, or to shoot preliminary interviews with local historians and curators. (At a later phase we will interview and tape scholars on our Advisory Board.) Moreover, we have already reached a preliminary agreement for modest fees to transfer some of the Ohio Historical Society’s Dunbar images to videotape, for instance, and will begin doing so as we simultaneously conduct more research in the OHS archives.

Known and as-yet-unknown facts of his life aside, we must decide how to treat that life. In *Dunbar*, the man should emerge from renewed scholarly investigation as the preeminent representative of African-American social and literary aspiration at the turn of the last century. Making that case, however, requires some hard choices, and for some of those we will draw on those consultants who have committed to the project. Because we expect that *Dunbar* will break new ground—if not offer a downright revisionist view—the producers will incorporate perspectives and arguments from different critics, some of whom will doubtless contradict each other. Their arguments will assist treatment writer David Bradley in weaving together dozens of Dunbar images and the elements that shaped the man: memories of slavery, discrimination in education and hiring, cracks in the wall of developing Jim Crow segregation, organizing for resistance, black intellectual networks, and building audiences for African-American voices. Director Frederick Lewis will advise on the use of such Dunbar artifacts as photos and manuscripts, assess the value of stock photos and footage and music from Dunbar’s period, research the availability of modern recitations and performances of Dunbar’s work, and decide whether dramatic recreations using actors can fill in gaps in phase two. The treatment will specify how the story is to be told. It will suggest comparisons and contrasts between Dunbar’s experience and that of his contemporaries—for example, C. J. Patterson of Greenfield, Ohio, a former slave whose buggy company became an automobile manufacturer, and Moses Fleetwood Walker, a baseball player who led the Toledo Bluestockings into the major leagues. The treatment will also advise on extruding some semblance of the man from the reminiscences of contemporaries such as DuBois, and from the correspondence and memoirs of Dunbar’s wife, who remarried after his death. The treatment will discipline the ideas coming from many quarters. Doing a treatment prior to a working script ensures that the documentary’s perspective will be a solid one, that opposing views be aired, that themes do not get lost, and that images help structure the narrative.

The treatment will continue to guide production after the script has been written. Please see David Bradley’s attached letter, affirming his commitment to the documentary and advancing his preliminary ideas.

Collaborative research supplemented by location and archive shooting will begin in November of 2003. Producer Joseph W. Slade, working with CRHC Dunbar Project manager Jennifer Scott, will schedule and log weekly activities. They will organize discussions among consultants, treatment writer David Bradley, and director Frederick Lewis. They will also make contact by telephone and email with archives and locations, assign research goals in advance, determine targets (including some consultants) for video-shoots, ship documents and footage to Bradley and consultants, revise tasks and ideas as new input makes necessary, and generally coordinate the collaboration. Throughout Phase One, they will talk with historians, social critics, writers, and performance artists, contact the Smithsonian and other archives for stock period footage (Douglass, Chicago
Exposition, DuBois, urban racism, African-American cultural artifacts), and sift through collections of Dunbar materials (the Ohio Historical Society, the Countee Cullen Library in New York, the University of Delaware, etc.).

November 2003: Slade, Lewis, and a videographer will visit the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus, Ohio, to select photographs and documents for transfer to videotape, including extant copies of Dunbar’s own newspaper, The Tattler. Because the OHS has the largest archive of Dunbar images, these will form a baseline for the treatment. Copies will be made by OHS staff with the participation of Lewis and the videographer.

December 2003: Lewis will review the OHS copies and videotape them in a lab at Ohio University to ensure professional quality. Copies of images and footage will be sent to Bradley, now actively writing the treatment. Slade, Lewis, and a videographer (probably from WOUB) will visit Dunbar House in Dayton, interview curator Lorraine Sci on-camera, and videograph the house and its artifacts, its surroundings, and any unique documents at the site. They will also visit the nearby Wright Brothers Memorial, having arranged for interviews in advance and asked about pertinent materials.

January 2004: Slade, Lewis, and a videographer will visit Toledo, to do some location shooting, perhaps around the home of one of his white patrons, where Dunbar lived for a while. Consultants continue to advise on the use of images, audio sources, and other sources. Materials will be sent to Bradley.

February 2004: Slade, Lewis, and a videographer will visit the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis, and there interview on-camera Wilma Gibbs, an expert on the history of African-American newspapers. The videographer will also shoot some examples of period black journalism there and at Ohio University, which owns a smaller archive that the Indiana Historical Society; we have not yet located copies of The Indianapolis World. Copies of footage and documents will be sent to Bradley.

February or early March 2004: Slade, Lewis, and a videographer will visit the Library of Congress in Washington, where Dunbar worked as a page, having secured permission to shoot footage in the Reading Room (despite its having been renovated) and the stacks. We will try to locate the apartment house where he lived for additional footage.

By March 15, Bradley will deliver a finished treatment, from which a shooting script can be assembled for Phase Two of Dunbar. By the same date, Lewis will have reviewed and catalogued his usable footage, and with Slade will determine what additional footage needs to be shot and stock footage acquired. During Phase One, we will also be lining up additional people to interview. We know that in Phase Two we want to interview on-camera writers Maya Angelou and Rita Dove and R & B singer Alicia Keys to trace their indebtedness to Dunbar, and feature as well comment by such cultural critics as Henry Louis Gates and Joanne Braxton, and hip-hop expert Mark Anthony Neale. A full production and post-production schedule will then be created and additional funding sought.
During the fall of 2003 we will seek funding for Phase Two (Production and Post-Production) and Phase Three (Public Exhibition and Additional Distribution) from the Ford Foundation, from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and possibly from PBS. Education funders will also be asked to support the development of supplementary teaching materials to accompany the DVD version of *Dunbar*, which will include as add-ons primary documents and footage left out of the edited version.