

## Preface

*Dwight A. McBride*

As Head of the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I'm delighted to sponsor the Virtual Harlem Project. The mission of the Department of African American Studies is, in part, to promote "a comprehensive study of the African American peoples' experience combining the approaches of the humanities and the social sciences." The Virtual Harlem Project expands on this combination by adding the resources of electronic visualization technology.

Although the impetus for the Harlem Renaissance came from the "Talented Tenth"—the African American social, professional and intellectual elite of the 1920s and 30s—the Renaissance ultimately became a peoples' movement. Designed by the originators as a movement in arts and letters that would prove African Americans worthy partners in post WWI America, the first artists were chosen for their high-culture and acceptability to mainstream (white) America. Blues, jazz, spirituals and anything that could be labeled "of the folk" were excluded. As the Renaissance matured, the work became more representative of the true experience of African Americans in the United States. Eventually, the art and writing of the Renaissance traveled in the form of magazines such as the NAACP's *Crisis* and the National Urban League's *Opportunity*. It spread from the exclusive parlors of elite Harlem to the sharecroppers' cabins of the rural south and to the tenant farmhouses of the plains and prairies. In return, these folk, as part of the Great Black Migration, brought their talents, labor, and lives to America's northern cities—including Chicago, Detroit and, of course, New York's Harlem.

History, political or intellectual, has often been told in terms of the elite and their accomplishments. We read about kings and presidents, their dates of reign, their victories, losses and compromises. We read about award-winning artists and writers, see their works in museums and libraries, study the dramatic moments of their lives. What we do not get as often is a sense of the everyday experiences, social events, and cultures that shaped the leaders or the art. Even the best studies of the Harlem Renaissance concentrate on the work and the fame of the artists. A change in direction

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toward portraying the cultural environment that nurtured the art of the Renaissance is where the Virtual Harlem Project has the potential to offer so much.

The Virtual Harlem Project is at a critical stage. There is much to be done in the way of improving historical accuracy and cultural veracity. My colleagues in the African American Studies Department and I plan to develop an “editorial board” of leading Harlem Renaissance scholars to oversee the historical and cultural aspects of the project. With the capacity for interaction it represents between visitors from the beginning years of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century and their ancestors—the virtual citizens (including the artists of Harlem during the beginning years of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century—Virtual Harlem represents a vast potential for learning not only about the arts and letters of the Renaissance, but about the everyday lives of the people who lived the culture that produced those arts and letters. Our contributions will make this learning experience rich, more detailed, and more accurate, which will in turn impact future scholars in their study of the Harlem Renaissance.

This volume of *Works & Days* announces the Virtual Harlem Project to the larger community. It includes articles from disciplines that range from electronics to communications to literature and culture. Such diversity would be a worthy goal for any endeavor; that it is a by-product of Virtual Harlem speaks to the future and the promise of our academic community that, like the promise of our global community, lies not in territorial isolation but in generous collaboration. Here in these pages you will find the expression of creative energy from engineers, programmers, scholars, artists, and writers, all of which is aimed toward exploring and describing the Harlem Renaissance and the African American culture in which it evolved.

I am hopeful that this issue will acquaint the public with the work we are doing in African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. As a department in Chicago’s premier public research institution, we are poised to do groundbreaking work in the study of African American people’s experiences. I know of no other department in the country that can offer a virtual reality supplement to their courses. With virtual reality, our department does not stop at the borders of the UIC campus. Because Virtual Harlem can be accessed through delivery systems ranging from total immersion at the Electronic Visualization Laboratory on the UIC campus to videotapes, to pages on the world wide web, we can take Harlem and the Renaissance to the schools and neighborhoods of Chicago, to surrounding communities, and to the world.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my colleagues and friends who have developed and maintained the Virtual Harlem Project. Special thanks are due to Bryan Carter, who began the project, and to Jim Sosnoski, who brought it to UIC and has been instrumental in developing it here. It has been a particular pleasure to work with colleagues in other disciplines, and I am grateful to them for making this project possible. For their work from UIC’s Electronic Visualization Laboratory, I thank Tom Defanti and Dan

Sandin, directors; Steve Jones, professor and head of the Department of Communication; Andy Johnson, assistant professor of Computer Science; and Jason Leigh, senior research scientist in Computer Science; and for his work from the University of Missouri, I thank Bill Plummer. I am especially appreciative of Jim Hall and Jennifer Brody, faculty colleagues in the Departments of African American Studies and English at UIC, who linked their courses on the Harlem Renaissance to Virtual Harlem through video conferencing with Bryan Carter. And finally, thanks and resounding applause go to that precious reserve of every research university, the UIC graduate students: programmer and artist Tim Portlock, programmer Kyoung Park, and creative writers Janice Lively, Duriel Harris, and Georgia Tappan.

The Virtual Harlem Project is a collaborative learning network that reaches from the departments of UIC to people in Chicago's schools, cultural centers, and neighborhoods and all the way to people in Europe and Asia. Its expansion of the study of the Harlem Renaissance from the classrooms of the academy to the people of the world mirrors the expansion of the Renaissance itself from its inception in the Talented Tenth to its fruition in the people. Because of the unique interactivity of Virtual Harlem, the students of the project will create the project, in much the same way that the readers of the Harlem Renaissance became contributors to the Renaissance. As Head of the Department of African American Studies, I am pleased to have the opportunity to be involved with such a cutting edge educational project. And this is only the beginning.

