Afterwords

First Afterword

Bryan Carter

While recovering from a basketball injury (an attempt to recapture the glories of my youth as I officially entered my forties), I finally had time to slow down and think about all that has occurred during my graduate program. When I first arrived at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I wanted to do traditional literary study, exploring authors of the Harlem Renaissance. As I advanced through the program, taking classes with my peers, interacting with faculty and administrators, I experienced quite a bit of what a young, African American male might typically go through while trying to earn a position in higher education. I assume that I don't need to spell it out. If you've read this far in the issue, you probably know what I mean.

But I was one of the lucky ones—sort of. After working with several organizations on campus, diverse units like the Black Culture Center, the Black Studies Program, the Advanced Technology Center (currently the Emerging Technologies Group), and the College of Education, I began to realize that there is a "digital divide" in Higher Education to which we are paying too little attention. On one side, while teaching courses as a graduate student at MU, I learned of the Advanced Technology Center's work with Virtual Reality and proposed a project. Incorporating it into my African American literature course, I received quite encouraging responses from friends, a few faculty members on campus, a few from around the state and beyond. Jim, for example, drove down from Chicago just to see Virtual Harlem. On the other side of this divide, most of my students were hesitant to show too much interest. Most of my faculty advisors discouraged my developing a dissertation around Virtual Harlem since, for them, this sort of study was not in the tradition of the department. They couldn't believe that it was a "scholarly" endeavor. I was living between two worlds and falling through the crack.

Fortunately, I was presenting my research on Virtual Harlem regularly at national and international conferences during this time, and giving guest lectures to a variety of classes in both African American culture and technology, and responding to

requests for demonstrations of Virtual Harlem. This helped me keep my perspective. Then, I accepted a full-time position as Assistant Professor at Central Missouri State University. Being on faculty at Central has proved a mutually beneficial relationship. During my first year there, I introduced course management tools to the College of Arts and Science, which eventually lead to a university-wide adoption of a tool. Since the time of my tenure, I have traveled constantly because of the growing interest in Virtual Harlem. (When I go to Chicago, I stay with Jim, and he not only knows every restaurant in the city, but makes a great breakfast, complemented by his own special blend of coffee). I've also had a unique opportunity to travel through the International Program's office, which enabled me to travel to Sweden (where I met Marcelo), Amsterdam, Paris, Scotland, and Hungary. I have received quite a bit of support from CMSU and considerable encouragement for project development everywhere I have gone. This kept me going. Without this encouragement, I could not have persisted. I was one of the fortunate few.

James Baldwin, while living in France, once alluded to the inevitability for African Americans who are placed in very fortunate positions to question why they have been afforded such an opportunity. I must also agree with Baldwin and Richard Wright about the feelings an educated African American male sometimes has when traveling in various parts of the world, particularly if he has something unique to say. Visiting these areas, I see how my brothers and sisters are sometimes treated…sometimes similarly, sometimes very differently. Where does that leave me?

The divide to which I earlier referred between proponents and opponents of technology in the academy (with Humanities faculty in general among the opponents) frustrates me. My colleagues acknowledge that there are some great projects on the Web, on CD, or in some other digital or analog format; but that's just it— they are just formats. While the world progresses at a rate unimaginable to some, many in the humanities take comfort in the way things were. This may be fine for some but I wanted more. I want African Americans to progress rapidly socially and technologically. I don't think this will be very easy if new ideas are developed, tested, and evaluated using everything but African American content. When some of my colleagues consider the issues that concern the African American community, technology is not high on their lists. I don't agree. I see the possibility of showing the African American cultural achievements to students and educators around the world, through a collaborative network like Virtual Harlem. Their virtual experiences will be visual, tactile, and interactive, and they will be able to interact with one another exchanging ideas related to African American culture. As Jim likes to point out, collaborative learning networks can incorporate parallel studies of many cultures. Imagine the impact.

Virtual Harlem in its present form is only the beginning. Imagine working hand in hand with experts across many disciplines to develop a networked learning environment in which stu-

dents can have the CAVE experience in a classroom, on the street, at home, or almost anywhere they can wirelessly connect.

Imagine the impact.

Second Afterword

James J. Sosnoski

It's early afternoon and a light rain is falling. On days like these I tend to become reflective and like to stare out into the rain and let my mind wander over recent events. Fortunately for me, recent events have been quite exciting and very encouraging.

I just got off the phone with Bryan. We were talking about the ASCEND project, a direct outgrowth of the Virtual Harlem project. I was looking out at the rain, thinking about its implications and I had the impulse to write down my thoughts as if I were keeping a diary. Since David asked for an afterword to this issue, it feels good, while I am in this reflective mood, to let my thoughts meander across my computer screen.

The ASCEND project started accidentally. Marcelo had been at a conference on collaborative networks in Boulder, Colorado, and stopped in Chicago to visit me on his way back to Sweden. Bryan was supposed to come up to Chicago as well but he injured his Achilles tendon playing basketball and was pretty much confined to the places he could get to on crutches. Because of Bryan's Achilles' heel, I arranged a videoconference so that Marcelo, Bryan, and the Chicago group could have a chance to discuss linking Växjö Sweden to UIC and CMSU. It all started out as a simple videoconference between four persons (Jason and Steve were not able to participate). But Bryan is a kind of magnet and he draws persons to him everywhere he goes (sometimes this happens virtually).

I sent out an email about the videoconference just before Marcelo was to arrive in Chicago. Soon after, Bryan responded to say that Bruce Lincoln and David Menair would like to be in on the conference call. If we are going to bring in the New York group, I thought, I had better let Ken McAllister and the Arizona group know. So, I called Ken but he had a class at the time of the conference. In the meantime, I had been helping to organize meetings between Ronen Mir, who is the Executive Director of the SciTech museum in Aurora, IL, and the group at UIC's Electronic Visualization Lab. Knowing that Marcelo has contacts with science museums in Sweden, I asked Ronen if he'd like to have lunch with Marcelo when he came to Chicago. It turned out that Marcelo, Ronen, and Debby Mir had many friends in common. After a few emails, Ronen and Debby Mir joined the

conference call, which now had to be conducted over the phone because of the numerous sites. At some point, I received an email from Marsha Reeves Jews, a colleague of Bruce's and David's at Columbia Teachers College, saying that she'd like to be involved. (If you don't know Bryan, and this confluence of persons surprises you, I should mention that all of the persons in the group are involved in collaborative learning networks of one sort or another and most have been involved with the Virtual Harlem project.)

To prepare for the call, I sent an email to Bryan and Marcelo saying that we might ask if the people in this group would be interested in forming a network along the lines of the COLDEX/Virtual Harlem projects. They agreed that would be a good idea, so I sent a copy of Marcelo's essay from this volume to everyone in the conference call suggesting that it might make an interesting point of departure for our conversation.

When the time came for the conference call, I was a bit worried about how to moderate a phone conversation with so many people in it. So, I followed Ronen's suggestion that we start out by going around and introducing ourselves and mentioning our relation to the Virtual Harlem project. Then I raised the question of whether we wanted to form a network and, one by one, everyone indicated that they liked the idea.

Next I suggested that, if we formed a network, it should be one that had a learning theory at the center of the discussion and asked if the COLDEX/Virtual Harlem learning theory could be a candidate. After a more open discussion during which excitement rather than turn-taking began to rule, the group readily agreed.

At a lull in the discussion which had been going on for some time, I asked whether my sense that we had just formed a network was accurate. This elicited expressions of excitement at the possibilities that were then opening up to us. We ended with a plan to take three initial steps toward establishing the network: to formulate the objective of the network, to create a temporary discussion group on Yahoo, and to begin designing an online forum to continue our discussions.

It is more than a week later, and, as I mentioned, I just got off the phone with Bryan. We discussed a couple of ideas about the objective of the new network. In an earlier email, I suggested a name for the network, ASCEND, which stands for Arts and Sciences Collaborative Exchange Network Development. It's a bit awkward but the responses to the name ASCEND have been very positive. We will soon be discussing my second proposal—that the objective of the network be to establish and maintain an online experimental lab (modeled on EVL) for the development of leaning and teaching tools and content by fostering collaborative projects on the model of Virtual Harlem. Such projects would bring together persons from differing arts and sciences disciplines and from different types of educational institutions to develop instructional technologies that facilitate the study of various situa-

tions that have cross-cultural implications—pollution, violence, prejudice, ecology.

Judging from the last two long and rambling sentences, I think I have mused long enough now. I notice that the rain has stopped and the sky is clearer. This is a good omen.

PostScript:

Did you notice that I talked mostly about the past and that you talked mostly about the future in our afterwords?

I didn't notice that until you mentioned it. Is it important?

I just thought that the two worked well together.

Different perspectives fitting together.

That's what makes collaboration exciting.

Kenneth Burke has a nice way of describing the effect.

What does he say?

He speaks of "perspectives by incongruity."

That's powerful but I like the moment when you no longer know who's saying what and it becomes one voice.

So do I.

I knew you would.

Appendices