



*Cyberculture: Targeting the African diaspora*

THE NET

## Africana Goes Dot-Com

A scholar puts W.E.B. Du Bois, and more, online

BY N'GAI CROAL

THE INTERNET THRIVES ON CREATIVE self-promotion, so Prof. Henry Louis Gates Jr. is right at home. Reclining in a mesh ergonomic chair, Gates (Skip to his friends) points to several photos hanging on his office walls, casually rattling off the names of the notables standing next to him: Nelson Mandela, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Vernon Jordan, Bill and Hillary Clinton. Then he turns to his computer to show off the latest version of Encarta Africana, the CD-ROM encyclopedia of African and African-American history that he coauthored. "One of the things I do with my students is talk about how blackness sounds," he says, playing scratchy audio clips of Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington. "Now listen to *this*. This is W.E.B. Du Bois himself." After the fiery ora-

tion concludes, Gates indulges in a brief moment of reverent silence. Then he returns to salesman mode, giddily clicking on video clips of Miles Davis, John Coltrane and George Clinton descending from the P-Funk mothership. The Zelig-like celebrity photos may captivate visitors, but as befits his status as a Harvard professor and chair of its prestigious Afro-American Studies department, it's teaching black history that really turns Gates on.

Having channeled his passion into magazine articles, books, television shows and CD-ROMs, Gates is now trying to conquer the Net with Africana.com, an educational portal aimed at providing authoritative information about and for the African diaspora. Launched in January 1999 to promote Encarta Africana and host corrections and revisions to the encyclopedia, the site be-

came so popular that Gates brought in an editor in chief to beef it up with original and occasionally provocative content: feature stories on black gays and lesbians, columnists like Nobel Prize-winning author Wole Soyinka on his visit with Mumia Abu-Jamal, multimedia galleries of long-hidden African-American art works, radio streamed by stations from Martinique to Morocco. The timing for Africana couldn't be better: according to a recent Forrester Research report, black people are the fastest-growing segment of Internet users. And even though Gates's venture is a bit late to the party—companies like NetNoir and BlackVoices launched in the mid-'90s with mostly lifestyle content—the combination of his high-minded focus and an unparalleled Rolodex makes Africana a formidable competitor.

For Gates and his academic partner, Ghanaian-born professor Kwame Anthony Appiah, Africana represents an opportunity to do good and do well simultaneously. "My motivation is that there's an incredible amount of information on black cultures and people hardly know any of it," says Appiah, who with Gates has won grants from foundations so that their start-up can give the CD-ROM away to schools in cities like Boston and Washington, D.C. "That doesn't make investors happy, because it doesn't say anything about profits. But if we do this right, it will make money." Drawing largely on their reputation, the founders have brought in blue-chip sponsors like Ford and AT&T while raising \$3.2 million in angel financing. Africana president Darrol Roberts plans to bring the total financing up to \$15 million to \$20 million by the year-end. "Part of that funding will go toward advertising," he says, "but not those Super Bowl-type ads. Skip won't be doing a sock-puppet rap." But Gates is so jazzed about Africana's potential—he recently contributed a three-part interview with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan—that sock puppets aren't out of the question. "It's a miracle, because every generation before us had to reinvent [black scholarship]," he says. "Twenty years after African-American studies was founded, we have dictionaries, encyclopedias, concordances; now you can access them electronically in seconds. My hope is that in 2100 we look back and say this is primitive." And he's off again, clicking through the sounds and images of the CD-ROM, as enthusiastic about each one as if he were learning about it for the first time. ■