BLACK TO THE FUTURE:
THE POLITICS AND PRODUCTION OF GATES AND APPIAH’S
ENCYCLOPEDIA AFRICANA

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ABSTRACT

Early in the twentieth century the great W.E.B. Du Bois became convinced that ignorance was at the root of racism and that knowledge was the essential tool needed to effectively fight it. This led to the realization that the academic world and indeed Africans themselves were in dire need of an African Encyclopedia that accurately accounted for the prehistory, cultural contributions, colonial history and sociology of Africa and the African Diaspora. The Encyclopedia Africana would be an academically engineered project, designed to socially amend the twentieth century racial landscape by altering long held negative and even imperialist perceptions of the culturally insignificant black world.

Du Bois made three significant efforts in his lifetime to make his vision a reality but due to political and financial challenges he went to his death in 1963 in Ghana still striving to make his vision a reality. Fortunately, the mantle was picked up and carried to completion in 1999 by two Harvard Professors, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah with the publication of Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience and in the creation of the Encarta Africana.
Their great accomplishment challenges *Britannica’s* formally narrow conception of history as the history of European elites by achieving respect for denigrated blackness in the same manner that respect for French culture had been cemented by Diderot’s encyclopedia, or respect for English culture by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Gates and Appiah’s work has created a paradigm shift in the colonial curricula of a Eurocentric academy by establishing the African continent and the African diaspora as having produced civilizations, religion, and culture by establishing that Africa, cradle of mankind retains the oldest history of the human race.

*Africana: The Encyclopedia of The African and The African American Experience* and *Encarta Africana*’s historical evolution, postcolonial politics and success in expanding beyond the “ivory tower” of Harvard Square to the common curriculum across all levels of education provides evidence of its monumental success. Despite the challenges due to evolving technology and competing sources, the work of Gates and Appiah will prove to be a more trusted, balanced and politically significant body of knowledge.
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INTRODUCTION

It is not simple ignorance of Africa, but deliberate disparagement of the continent and its people that Africanists and the *Encyclopaedia Africana* must contend with. The foulest intellectual rubbish ever invented by man is that of racial superiority and inferiority.

-- President Kwame Nkrumah, First Annual Meeting: EAP Editorial Board, 1964

Early in the twentieth century the great W.E.B. Du Bois came to the realization that the academic world and indeed Africans themselves were in dire need of an African Encyclopedia that accurately accounted for the prehistory, cultural contributions, colonial history and sociology of Africa and the African Diaspora. Du Bois made three significant efforts in his lifetime to make his project a reality. In 1909 his efforts were set aside due to his involvement with the NAACP, his commitment in editing *The Crisis* magazine, a lack of funding, and the Great War. In 1932 he encountered competition from the Stokes Foundation and a rival Africanist, Dr. Carter G. Woodson. But once again it was a lack of funding that cut the project short. In his later years Du Bois was arrested by the McCarthy Tribunal and tried for being a Communist sympathizer. Though acquitted, such treatment made it easy for him to accept an invitation in 1961 by Kwame Nkrumah, the President of Ghana, to come live in Africa to edit the “Encyclopedia Africana.” However, Du Bois died less than 2 years later. He was, after all, 95.

In this thesis I will establish the history of the subsequent attempts by Du Bois to publish an encyclopedia Africana in the United States and Ghana. I will then provide a history of Henry Louis Gates and Anthony Kwame Appiah’s attempt, which succeeded in 1999 in the actual publication of *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* and in the creation of the *Encarta Africana*. My thesis will argue
that the *Encyclopedia Africana* was an academically engineered project, designed to socially amend the twentieth century racial and academic landscape by altering long held negative and even imperialist perceptions of the culturally insignificant black world.

After Du Bois’ death the Encyclopedia Africana Project (EAP) within Ghana continued work on the *Encyclopedia Africana*. Unfortunately to date only 3 of 20 volumes have been completed. However, in 1973 Henry Louis Gates Jr., a graduate student and Kwame Anthony Appiah an undergrad at Cambridge University, dreamed of completing the vision of Du Bois. Gates and Appiah were ideal for the task due to their respective relationships with Du Bois and President Kwame Nkrumah. In Kwame Anthony Appiah’s infancy, his father Joseph Emmanuel Appiah served as President Kwame Nkrumah’s personal representative in London, however the relationship between his father and the president fell apart when Joseph became a prominent force in the political opposition against President Kwame Nkrumah.¹ As for Gates and Du Bois, while the two never met, Gates has found a way to embody much of what Du Bois represented. As Director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University,² Gates has made it his professional mission work on the social and political changes that Du Bois had envisioned for the United States. Du Bois and Gates political agenda is solidified in the accomplishments and


mission of the institution, according to their official website:

The W. E. B. Du Bois Institute is the nation’s oldest research center dedicated to the study of the history, culture, and social institutions of Africans and African Americans. Named after the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1895), the Institute was established in May 1975 to create fellowships that would “facilitate the writing of doctoral dissertations in areas related to Afro-American Studies.” Today, the Institute awards up to twenty fellowships annually to scholars at various stages of their careers in the fields of African and African American Studies, broadly defined to cover the expanse of the African Diaspora.3

Despite their impressive academic qualifications, both Gates and Appiah faced significant political opposition from African scholars in bringing Du Bois’ envisioned encyclopedia project to fruition. Primary opposition came from African-based scholars who objected to African Americans of the African Diaspora seizing their project. Afrocentric to the core, they regarded Gates and Appiah as little more than “Brits” and “Americans” whose work would automatically be inauthentic. Regardless of this and other political opposition, in 1999 Gates and Appiah finally completed the vision. The publication of *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and American Experience* appeared as a huge single volume edition, while in order to keep up with ever evolving technological advancement, a CD-ROM was additionally created entitled *Microsoft Encarta Africana*.

In this thesis I will proceed by examine the evolution and relevance of Gates and Appiah’s work. Born of the politics of the great Enlightenment encyclopedists, Pan Africanism, Afrocentrism, and the colorful post-60s American academic and cultural politics, the encyclopedia is a notable landmark in the twentieth century production of

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knowledge. Though we are only in the second decade of the twenty-first century, its use and impact has been a significant agent within education, as well as furthering political and social discussion with an eye to the historical contributions and significance of the black world in the context of human history. However, there are those that stand in opposition to the project on the basis that Gates and Appiah did not have a right to produce such a work due to their American pedigree. Additionally, there are those today who argue that in an age of fast, free digital media, a traditional encyclopedia has lost its place as an essential source for academic knowledge. Though Du Bois dream of completing the Encyclopedia Africana was never personally bestowed upon Professors Gates and Appiah, they can rightfully claim the honor of seeing the project through to completion in a fitting manner for the twenty-first century.

I argue in this thesis that all great Western encyclopedias have been political projects as well as scholarly ones, and that Anthony Kwame Appiah and Henry Louis Gates’ *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* emerges as both a political project and a scholarly one. Deeply marked by the politics of the 1950’s, Pan Africanism, the emergence of African Diaspora studies, postcolonial studies, the multicultural movement and postmodern notions of high and low culture as

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4 Pan Africanism is a wide range of ideologies that are committed to common political or cultural projects for Africans and people of African descent. In its more straightforward version Pan Africanism is the political project calling for the unification of all Africans into a single African state to which those in the African American diaspora can return. W.E.B. Du Bois was one of Pan Africanism’s most important figures early in the twentieth century.

5 Postmodernism is based on the position that reality is not mirrored in human understanding of it, but is rather constructed as the mind tries to understand its own personal reality. Postmodernism is therefore skeptical of explanations that claim to be
legitimate history and knowledge, more liberal notions of Africana could only have been produced in the aftermath of these culture and historical events.

Gates and Appiah worked out of a moment in the academy that had begun with the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, the women’s movement, and multicultural educational reform. All of this had been undergirded by Pan Africanism of the previous decade, post colonialism of the post 60’s movement, and spurred on by expanded conceptions of culture and knowledge through the merging of high and low cultures, consequent to the postmodern moment. Politically speaking, the Africana encyclopedia aspired to the following: 1) redress the conception of Africa and African culture as the “dark continent,” a savage space lacking culture and history; 2) challenge Britannica’s formally narrow conception of history as the history of European elites; 3) achieve respect for denigrated blackness in the same manner that respect for French culture had been cemented by Diderot’s encyclopedia, or respect for English culture by the Encyclopedia Britannica; 4) create a paradigm shift in the colonial curricula of the still Eurocentric academy by establishing the African continent as having produced civilizations, religion, and culture and 5) establish that Africa is the cradle of mankind, and therefore retains the oldest history of the human race. The Encyclopedia Africana was an academically engineered project designed to socially amend of the twentieth century racial and academic landscape by altering long held negative and even imperialist valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, arguing that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain or universal.
perceptions of the culturally insignificant black world. These imperialist perceptions persisted largely due to the western world’s expansive geographical and political control over foreign lands.

After the Age of Discovery, which started early in the 1400’s, and for the ensuing centuries a small population of white male Eurocentric aristocratic elites controlled a vast majority of the world by the dawn of the First World War, as made evident by the map below.

![Colonization Map 1914](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Colonisation_1914.png)


In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, the author Edward explain, “By 1914… Europe held a grand total of roughly 85 percent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths. No other associated set of colonies in history was as large, none so totally dominated, none so unequal in power to the Western metropolis.”

By 1913 in Africa alone all but two nations, Liberia and Ethiopia, were

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under the control of European powers. European empowered colonizing powers typically established whiteness as fully empowered subjectivity and blackness as it’s disempowered objects. Colonized blacks in particular, were given the diminutive role as “objects,” viewed as uncivilized, lacking in reason, and possibly even lacking souls. Thus disempowered, many populations of so-called “natives” accepted their stance as colonial “objects,” to be exploited as free labor and written into colonial history as an inferior species. Gates and Appiah crafted their encyclopedia of African cultures to overthrow this colonialist hegemony and mindset in an effort to create a clear narrative of the history and culture of Africa and the black diaspora, whose voice had been omitted from colonial history. By providing indisputable evidence of African cultural and historical significance, and by locating its origins prior to those of classical and modern civilizations, this new encyclopedia offered the black world a politically reconfigured account of blackness and Africanity enabling them to map and remap their official history for the first time. This encyclopedia was designed primarily to empower Africans, and Africans of the diaspora in the same way the French and the British were empowered and elevated because of Diderot and the Britannica. Not incidental was Gates and Appiah’s awareness that to restructure the status of Africanity in the eyes of the academy one had to play one upmanship in the old culture game of who has the most ancient origins. This was a beginning in the process of deconstructing the lowly imperial designation of mysterious, corrupt “dark” Africanity by means of challenging the narrative of cultural origins produced by the Eurocentric West. In effect Gates and Appiah offered the world an encyclopedia that deconstructed the colonial “objects” to become decolonized “subjects” with their own ancient and vibrant culture.
Chapter I of this thesis will explore the political historical and genealogy of the great encyclopedia projects of Caius Plinius Secundus, Denis Diderot, Colin Macfarquhar and Andrew Bell as precursors to the work of Gates and Appiah. Chapter II will examine the life of W.E.B. Du Bois, and trace the political misfortunes of his efforts to bring an encyclopedia Africana to life. Chapter III will account for the labors, specific cultural politics, and eventual success of Gates and Appiah in publishing not only *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, but the CD-ROM version known as *Encarta Africana*. Chapter IV will describe the political implementation of this project and its and effect in schools and other educational programs within the United States. Chapter V will account for those who have spoken out in opposition to the Gates and Appiah project, many of whom feel that an encyclopedia about African and the Africana diaspora is overshadowed by the unauthentic Africanity of Harvard and Princeton professors. Chapter VI, the conclusion, will conclude with an explanation of technological challenge facing the future of the project and highlight new reference works that are currently being produced about the African diaspora.
CHAPTER I
A DEFINITIVE SOURCE

In this chapter I will explain how the politics of nationalism played a significant motivating factor in the development of Diderot’s *Encyclopedie* (1750) and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1768). As models for Du Bois’ *Encyclopedia Africana*, both works aspired to provide an accurate cultural history of the European and British worlds, and in so doing enhance their competitive nationalist and Eurocentric projects. These works were not the first encyclopedias the world had embraced. The work of Caius Plinius Secundus, a Roman philosopher and statesman dates back to the first century. Commonly referred to as Pliny the Elder, Pliny constantly absorbed knowledge, taking advantage of every moment to expand his mind. Time not devoted to study was considered time wasted, therefore even while bathing he had someone reading to him.\(^1\)

Pliny’s interest was not focused on one particular area of expertise but encompassed a range that touched on everything from art and astronomy, to zoology. Joseph Banvard, author of *Wisdom, Wit and Whims of Distinguished Ancient Philosophers*, accurately portrays the value of Pliny’s precious work:

> Out of all the rich fruits of Pliny’s industry, one work only has escaped the ravages of time, his ‘Natural History of the World:’ a valuable treasury of ancient knowledge; concerning which, notwithstanding all its errors and extravagances, we do not scruple, with some allowance for rhetorical decoration, to subscribe to the judgment of the Younger Pliny, who calls it ‘a comprehensive and learned work scarcely less various than Nature herself.’\(^2\)

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Pliny is credited with over 2,000 articles in 37 books of *Natural History*, a significant contribution of work that enhanced the political status of Pliny’s culture. Yet like all great encyclopedias it had a significant political effect. In the book *Pliny the Elder: Themes and Contexts* Valerie Naas writes of the political influence of Pliny’s work:

As an inquiry into nature, the *Naturalis Historia* is a work of knowledge and on knowledge. As a work written by a servant of the Roman emperor, it is also influenced by an imperialistic perspective…. Rome is shown to be the centre of a dominated world, where the centre absorbs and replaces the periphery. This encyclopaedic work proves to be an inventory, for the glory of Rome, of the resources available in the Roman world, which is assimilated to the *orbis terrarium*.

By 1469, just a few decades after the introduction of Gutenberg's printing press, Pliny’s work became the first scientific book available to the masses, laying an essential groundwork for centuries to come by allowing scholars to add to and edit much of Pliny’s work.

Additional works of encyclopedia survived from the Middle Ages, and their origins can be traced from Southeastern Europe all the way to China. However, it is the labor of European eighteenth century Enlightenment figures that provided the structure for what has become our modern day encyclopedia, as made evident by the monumental work of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopedie* (1751) and, Colin Macfarquhar, Andrew Bell and William Smellie’s *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1768).

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These two great modern encyclopedias are unique in their alphabetized and cross-referenced structure, a feature which greatly appealed to the general public.

Both projects were born in the Age of Reason, and intended to create a solid rational foundation for the comprehensive understanding of the cultures they represented. This was both the politics of rationalism and the politics of nationalism at work. Not incidentally, both projects would politically enhance the perception of their empire’s power, as they preserved and highlighted their respective national contributions, and offered their own nations as the preeminent European centers of culture. However, they quickly realized that the hands and minds of many contributors had built the respective great civilizations. In 1675, Isaac Newton, the great English professor of mathematics, penned in a letter, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.”

When Newton wrote these words to fellow English scientist, Robert Hooke, he was making a rather humble observation concerning cumulative human achievement. Newton recognized that his own brilliant contributions to the scientific world would be viewed as monumental, but readily admitted that those that came before him, such as Galileo and Copernicus, had established the foundation he had worked from. The French and Scottish minds that came together to edit encyclopedias also sought to embody the work of the great giants of human knowledge that had come before them. Nevertheless, they were at heart celebrations of European cultures as preeminent in the world.

The first of these modern encyclopedias was that of the Frenchman Denis Diderot’s. His father had held high hopes that he would one day become a lawyer, doctor,

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or possibly a Catholic priest, but it became evident early on that the young Diderot would head elsewhere. Denis Diderot was born on October 5, 1713 in Langres, France and was schooled by Jesuits in his youth. Subsequently he and traveled some 200 miles from the place of his birth to attend the University of Paris, where he became intrigued by language and philosophy, art, theater and writing.

In 1745, Andre Le Breton, a French publisher, hired Diderot, to publish a French translation of Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia* (1728). Diderot, and the mathematician, d’Alembert eventually commenced the undertaking. The vision and essence of the project began to take on a whole new life and ultimately it consumed roughly twenty-five years of Diderot’s life and contributed greatly to the cultural status of France. While Chamber’s *Cyclopaedia* served as a well respected universal dictionary for the art and sciences, Diderot sought to explore every branch of knowledge. The project took on the name *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, translated, *Encyclopedia, or a Rational Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Trades* (1750-72)

Diderot’s political hopes were tied to his belief that if readers would not just simply read the articles but truly examine and absorb the content they would begin to democratically question the common knowledge, assumptions and authority of their time. The political hope was that in the process of gaining sound knowledge, France and her people would rid themselves of religious superstitions and intolerance and put greater trust into their own rational thought. Rationalism was Diderot’s means of promoting a radical political change. Knowing he could not do the work alone, Diderot called upon the greatest thinkers of his time, men well versed in the arts and sciences. He even sought out the
minds of men who had made the Catholic Church their life’s calling. He believed that to achieve truth, every angle and method needed to be taken into consideration.\footnote{International World History Project, “Diderot, Denis (1713-84),” International World History Project, http://history-world.org/diderot.htm (accessed March 12, 2012).}

Five volumes into the project Diderot composed the article entitled “Encyclopedia”. This article allowed Diderot to reflect upon the democratizing project he was in the midst of preparing. He wrote, “I distinguish two means of cultivating the sciences: one is to contribute to the sum of knowledge through discovery . . . the other is to compare discoveries and reorganize them, so that more men are enlightened, and each may participate, according to his abilities, in the enlightenment of his times.”\footnote{Denis Diderot, Encyclopedia, The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=did;cc=did;idno=did2222.0000.004;rgn=main;view=text (accessed April 6, 2012).} Diderot envisioned the encyclopedia as a tool that would not only shed light on significant human achievements but invite participants to add to them for generations to come. It was this founding political view Gates and Appiah took for their own.

While the encyclopedia’s purpose was clear, Diderot expressed concern for how it would evolve with time, knowing full well that the knowledge of any given topic would incrementally increase. He was after all living during the age of the Enlightenment. In his article, The Eighteenth-Century Time Machine: The Encyclopedia of Denis Diderot, Daniel Rosenberg, keenly observes that, “one of the distinctive aspects of this historical moment in contrast to the centuries that preceded it, is a sense of vertiginous opening in the horizons of past and future . . . it seems that everything had changed in such a short period since the beginning of the century, in the short period ever since Isaac Newton
himself had engaged in serious attempt to reconcile astronomical chronology with the literal chronology of the Bible.”

One thing was certain. Change would be a consistent factor for the life of any encyclopedia. Imbued by the political vision of progressivism, Diderot recognized that his work would require continual revision and the addition of information to sustain and reflect the new knowledge of the times.

In his book *Portraits of the Eighteenth Century*, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve explains the relationship between the creation of such a unique work and its creator:

The Encyclopedie, then, was not a peace-bringing monument, a silent cloistered tower, with scholars and thinkers of every variety distributed among the different floors. It was not a pyramid of granite with an immovable base; it has no feature of those pure and harmonious structures of art which ascend slowly during centuries of fervent devotion toward an adorned and blessed God. It has been compared to the impious Babel . . . . There are ruinous portions, and unsymmetrical, much plaster, and firmly cemented and indestructible fragments. The foundation does not extend into the ground; the structure wavers, it is tottering, it will fall; but what does it matter? To apply here an eloquent observation of Diderot himself: “The statue of the architect will remain standing amid the ruins, and the stone that is detached from the mountain will not shatter it, because its feet are not of clay.”

Diderot recognized that all would not embrace many of his articles. His work found a way to offend both church and state, yet despite becoming the object of scrutiny, censorship, and outright ridicule, the work nevertheless continued. Once complete it became integral to an intellectual revolution that transformed European thought and culture, and enhanced the status and political power of France.

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The other influential project Gates and Appiah drew on was that of the Scottish Enlightenment encyclopedists, Colin Macfarquhar and Andrew Bell who compiled the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In many ways their efforts mirrored the accomplishments of Diderot. However, there were distinct differences. While the Diderot’s work often created political chaos because it questioned the authority of both church and state, *Britannica’s* objective differed. Author Bo Strath explained, “*The Encyclopedia Britannica* in particular reflected opposition and debates [and while] mirroring the contradictions and rapid changes of a period of particular cultural vigour . . . it performed the role of guiding and orienting the reader in the understanding, comparison and evaluation of a diverse theories.”10 Its politics were rooted in the Scots’ desire to provide a greater sense of clarity and direction to the reader, and to provide multiple answers as opposed to earlier political official and monocular accounts.

Initially the *Encyclopedia Britannica* was compiled into three volumes, but the intention was for continual growth. Within a relatively short span of thirty years the three volumes had increased to twenty. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* continues to provide a reliable source for the general public with its foundation of hard facts. In his book, *How the Scots invented the Modern World*, author Arthur Herman explains the efforts of these great minds that came together to propel the work: “The study of man is ultimately a scientific study. The Scots are the true inventors of what we call today the social sciences: anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology, history. . . . The Scottish Enlightenment embarked on nothing less than a massive reordering of human knowledge.

10 Bo Strath, *Europe and the Other and Europe As the Other* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2010), 201.
It sought to transform every branch of learning . . . into a series of organized disciplines that could be taught and passed on to posterity.”

Yet inevitably, it was ultimately a European and colonialist project centering mostly on Western Civilization. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, has for more than 240 years set the standard for extensive scholarly encyclopedia research. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* is the oldest English language encyclopedia and serves as a pedestal for the advertisement of British ingenuity and achievement, as well as an expression of national pride. Clearly, the policies, methods and style of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* provided another model of cultural and political purpose for Gates and Appiah’s project. However, with the introduction of digital media in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century updates to the online version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* are made every twenty minutes.12

Great works such as *Encyclopédie* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* were fostered in the spirit of powerful nationalisms. The editors that worked to bring these works to fruition benefited from a high standard of education and living in their respective nations. The power of their nations was often rooted in a sound economy, a strong military, and access to advanced technology. However their works only account for a tiny percentage of world’s population. Who can accurately account for the history, culture, and accomplishments of the vast percentage of people born outside their European empires? A continent lacking a modern encyclopedic record of its history and accomplishments


finds itself socially and politically overshadowed, marginalized or even rendered invisible by such Eurocentric accounts. They certainly do not truly account for the history and cultural understanding of Africa, a continent that boasts the earliest evidence of modern human life? If Africa is truly the cradle of civilization, then all human life can be traced to its rich soil and all human history proceeds from it. Africa has a rich history of thriving ancient civilizations whose narrative and foundational truths are often given little recognition in the West’s narrative of world history. Nowhere is this more evident than in the African American Diaspora cultures and American school system. While the Advanced Placement course on European history has been offered to students since 1956, the Advanced Placement exam encompassing World History was not introduced until 2002. In the texts students read they are taught that the little information we possess concerning African societies derived primarily from descriptions provided by foreign European visitors because most African societies did not have modern written languages. Back in the 1960’s President of the Republic of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, had expressed his concern with this view of Africa when he stated:

> Even the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* also declared: "Africa, with the exception of the lower Nile Valley and what is known as Roman Africa

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is, so far as its native inhabitants are concerned, a continent practically without history and possessing no records from which such history may be conducted... the Negro (referring to the black man) is essentially the child of the moment and his memory, both tribal and individual, is very short . . . if Ancient Egypt and Ethiopia be excluded, the story of Africa is largely a record of the doings of its Asiatic and European conquerors and colonizers.\textsuperscript{16}

Though the experiences and records of the conquerors, colonizers and many Christian missionaries held a degree of value, their accounts were incomplete and Eurocentrically skewed. Many of these foreigners were Europeans that had encountered the land and its people during the European Age of Discovery early in the fifteenth century. So very different were Elizabethan Europeans from Africans, from the color of their skin, to their religion, lifestyle, and language, that Europeans could not possibly have rendered a non-colonial account of Africans with all the complexities of [Africa’s] numerous cultures, and ancient history?\textsuperscript{17} In such projects it was not a long step from comparison to eroticizing and to denigration. In the course of time the imperializing, colonizing project subjugated and exploited Africa, producing in the meantime its most powerful trope, the designation of Africa as the Dark Continent.

Early explorers were limited in their knowledge about the African people yet Africa and its people have never been truly isolated. The Sinai Peninsula connects the northeast region of Africa to the Southwest edge of Asia, and the Straits of Gibraltar, a narrow nine-mile gap of water that separating northwest Africa and southwest Europe


provided a means for trade out of the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic Ocean. Many networks of trade in the region of the Sahara Desert are older than those of the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{18} While African scholars did rise out of these European imperial institutions, many assimilated a European interpretation of history, rarely valuing accounts of their African and African Diaspora ancestors. Modern postcolonial diaspora scholars realized they needed to counter the colonial history and culture of this vast continent with a postcolonial or non-European encyclopedia.

Gates and Appiah’s hoped that not only would Eurocentric colonial accounts be displaced, so would the political ramifications of an Africa branded as The Dark Continent and blackness as a mark of racial inferiority within the structure of Social Darwinism that proved to be the proverbial motes and beams in the collective colonial eye.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
CHAPTER II
DU BOIS AND HIS DREAM

Pertinent to my attempt in this thesis to provide the antecedent history and political design of Gates and Appiah’s *Encyclopedia Africana* it is necessary to trace W.E.B. Du Bois’ more recent contributions to their project. Accordingly, in this chapter I will examine the life of African American W.E.B. Du Bois, and trace the political misfortunes of his efforts to bring an *Encyclopedia Africana* to life.

Du Bois set out near the beginning of the nineteenth century with a modern rationalistic goal: to edit an “Encyclopedia Africana.” It would be an encyclopedia that would truly account for the history, culture and accomplishments of Africans on the African continent and those of African descent. Just as the *Encyclopédie* and *Encyclopedia Britannica* had propelled the legitimacy of European contributions to humanity, Du Bois hoped that this work would have a similar impact on African contributions to humanity, by providing a “scientific” account of the African continent. Du Bois political goal was to establish a historical foundation for enlightened African social policy, thought and discussion of Africa, her people and her diaspora. He was, after all, a great Pan Africanist, Du Bois initially believed that since the principal cause of racism was ignorance of African origins and culture, this “scientifically” assembled project would marshal evidence of African cultural achievement sufficient to undermine such colonialist racism. Du Bois was the principle American black scholar and intellectual of his generation. As the father of American sociology, a leader in the production of African American history, founder of NAACP, and editor of the African American *Crisis* Magazine, clearly Du Bois was the ideal pioneer for this great work. The
politics of his project are deeply rooted in his personal experience as a colonized black man in segregated America. The last shot of the American Civil War was fired less than three years before the birth of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, in Great Barrington, a small town in western Massachusetts. The population was predominantly white, however color was not a barrier for Du Bois’ education. He attended grammar schools alongside his white neighbors. At the young age of fifteen Du Bois became a local correspondent for the New York Globe and its successor, the Freeman. Within two years Du Bois contributed a two dozen articles. “They are remarkably revealing,” writes biographer David Levering Lewis, “First, because they make it possible to realign the tilted picture in the autobiographical writings of a somewhat uprooted, mock-patrician, teenage Du Bois. Second, because they catch for us the embryonic voice of a future prophet of African-American advancement and protest.”¹ Through his writing Du Bois expressed a growing need for the black population of his community to become involved in the political process, even if they only constituted a small percentage of the population of Great Barrington. He was first and foremost a political creature.

When it came time to enter college there was no doubt that Du Bois was intelligent enough to attend Harvard, but his financial situation made that near impossible. With the help of scholarships he was able to attend Fisk University in Nashville Tennessee. In the South for the very first time Du Bois became exposed to the ills of racism and everything that accompanies it: prejudice, ignorance, hatred, violence and inequality. Because his scholarship covered his school expenses Du Bois could

voluntarily spend two summers teaching at a summer school just 50 miles from campus. “Needless to say the experience was invaluable,” recounts Du Bois in his autobiography, *A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the last decade of Its First Century*, “I traveled not only in space but in time, I touched the very shadow of slavery.”

Du Bois recognized that to achieve a greater understanding of the strife of Southern blacks he could not simply read about them.

In time Du Bois was able to transfer to Harvard as a Junior. Upon graduation with his bachelor's degree in 1890, Du Bois quickly set out to acquire his doctorate. With grant money Du Bois was able to attend the University of Berlin in Germany where after two years his eyes were opened to the racial challenges that stretched from colonial America to the European Continent. With one remaining semester Du Bois returned to Harvard and completed his Ph. D., becoming the first black person in America to earn his doctorate. His dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in America, 1638-1870* (1896) became the first volume published in the *Harvard Historical Studies* series. “That William Edward Burghardt Du Bois,” writes Lewis, “great-grandson of African slaves should produce the first scholarly account of a federal ban on the importation of slaves into the United States after January 1808 was variously noticed with critical surprise and satisfaction.”

 Though more than a century has passed it is still considered the authoritative work on the subject.

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After two years of teaching at the small black college of Wilberforce in Ohio, Du Bois willingly accepted a fellowship from the University of Pennsylvania in order to conduct a sociological study on Blacks in the seventh ward slums in Philadelphia. Firmly believing that at the root of racism was ignorance, Du Bois came to the conclusion and that the only plausible cure would be to increase the knowledge of white societies. Du Bois extensive research resulted in the publishing of *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), a case study of black communities. While Du Bois research was not considered the very first of its kind in America, it can be considered a pioneering contribution. Biographer David Levering Lewis explains:

The six schedules in the Philadelphia Negro covering families, individuals, homes, street activity, community institutions, and a special category dealing with individuals, were patterned on Booth (*Life and Labour of the People in London, 1886-1903*). *Hull House Maps and Papers* (1895) displayed a similar reliance on the methodology in *Life and Labour*. The thoroughness with which Du Bois refined and applied what he borrowed, however, was characteristically remarkable.  

This work clearly set Du Bois apart as a political leader of the Social Sciences. By digging deep into the complex realities on an entire black community Du Bois was abandoning the old methodology used by Eurocentric elitists by giving a voice the so called colonial “objects”. Du Bois was meticulously shifting the political landscape. As Lewis explains, “The Philadelphia Negro was to enter the twentieth century frequently looking backward…. Behind the moralizing, and the stern admonition to black people to behave like lending library patrons, the book would speak calmly yet devastatingly of the

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4 Ibid., 135.
history and logic of poverty and racism."\(^5\) At Atlanta University Du Bois continued his research of the Negro race, addressing issues ranging from economics, religion, crime and education on down to history and politics.

However, life in Georgia proved to be very challenging. Because no white doctor would attend to their black child in the spring of 1899, Du Bois and his wife Nina, lost their two-year-old son to diphtheria. The grief that weighed so heavily on Du Bois was only magnified by the myriad of social ills surrounding him. In April of 1899 Du Bois became aware of a man named Sam Hose. Who had been accused of murdering Alfred Cranford and raping Cranford’s wife.\(^6\) In an effort to raise his voice concerning the evident facts, Du Bois walked himself down to the Atlanta Constitution, carrying with him a letter of introduction to the editor, Joel Chandler Harris. But Du Bois never made it to Harris, “On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking.”\(^7\) Du Bois goes on to express his concern and political reasoning behind the halt to his valued work: “Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort I was doing, as I had confidently

\(^5\) Ibid.


assumed would be easily forthcoming.”³⁸ Though Du Bois was aware of the necessity of his work the tragic events such as the brutal killing of Sam Hose forced him to question the politics of scientific study. “I regarded it as axiomatic that the world wanted to learn the truth and if the truth were sought with even approximate accuracy and painstaking devotion, the world would gladly support the effort. This was, of course, but a young man’s idealism, not by any means false, but also never universally true.”³⁹ If his work could not bring about the civility and equality lacking for the black population in America, was it worth it?

Seeking a greater activist role Du Bois decided to work alongside editor William Monroe Trotter to form the Niagara Movement, an organization that sought political and civil rights for Blacks. Though it was short lived, the Niagara Movement gave way to the formation of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Du Bois held the position of editor for close to a quarter of a century. The very same year as the formation of the NAACP, Du Bois envisioned another work of great magnitude. As though it had come to him in a dream, Du Bois unequivocally expressed that the best way to fight racism would be through the editing of an “Encyclopedia Africana.” It would be a work of great social and academic value, a work that could be placed of the same pedestal as the French Encyclopédie and Encyclopedia Britannica, a work that demanded respect, and accomplished the political evolution of Africanity itself.

³⁸ Ibid.
³⁹ Ibid.
Other black encyclopedias were already in publication. In Maryland, Bishop Alexander Walker Wayman’s *Cyclopedia of African Methodism* (1882) accounted for over 1,000 people and places of great significance within the faith. Charles O. Booth’s *The Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama* (1885) was a work of similar nature. On the title page of James T. Haley’s, *The Afro-American Encyclopedia* (1895) it states that the work encompasses everything from addresses and sermons to the names of colleges and universities, “In Fact, it Teaches Every Subject of Interest to the Colored People, as Discussed by More Than One Hundred of Their Wisest and Best Men and Women.”

Though these works had their value, Du Bois’s dream was different. He could not relinquish the idea that a comprehensive work of “scientific” knowledge would encapsulate both the historical and social structure of African Americans, Africans, and people of African decent around the globe. Du Bois, the activist believed this work would garnish greater respect for the Black race as had select encyclopedias had done for the status of Europeans.

Du Bois made his intentions clear in 1909 a letter to Edward Wilmot Blyden, a Pan Africanist intellectual in Sierra Leone, “I am writing venturing to address you on the subject of a Negro Encyclopedia. In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation of the American Negro, I am proposing to bring out an Encyclopedia Africana covering the chief points in the history and condition of the Negro Race.”

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Bois also knew that the core of the work would need to be done by Negroes. He expressed his desire to dozens of scholars, many of whom agreed to be part of his editorial board. He even had stationery printed up with a projected publication date of 1913, “the Jubilee of Emancipation in America and the Tercentenary of the Landing of the Negro.”\(^\text{12}\) Though many offered up their enthusiasm and support for the project, Du Bois was warned that it would require significant funding, which he did not have.

Activity within the NAACP consumed much of Du Bois time over the next two decades. However, the dream was brought back into focus when in November of 1931 Anson Phelps Stokes, head of the Phelps Stokes Association gathered roughly twenty scholars and public officials on the campus of Howard University to discuss the editing of an *Encyclopedia of the Negro*. Du Bois was not part of the twenty, and he took great offense over this. After raising his objection, Stokes made his apologies and by 1932 Du Bois was made editor-in-chief, a position he held for the next fourteen years.

The initial plan called for four volumes, each 500,000 words in length. A staff ranging from 25-100 individuals would divide the work of research, writing short entries as well as lengthy interpretive entries.\(^\text{13}\) Phelps had committed to fund half the project so long as donors matched the other half. Shamelessly Du Bois asked anyone and everyone to help finance the project, even the great Madame C.J. Walker, the famous African American entrepreneur. “I spent nearly ten years of intermittent effort on this project and secured cooperation from many scholars, white and black, in America, Europe, and

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid.
Africa.” noted Du Bois in his autobiography: “But the necessary funds could not be secured. Perhaps again it was too soon to expect large aide for so ambitious a project directed by Negroes and built mainly on Negro scholarship.”

So while support for the project was plentiful, financial backing proved once again to be the greatest challenge. It should be noted that the timing for the project came about in the midst of the Great Depression and $250,000 needed for publication was no small sum.

Du Bois left the Crisis in 1934 under pressure for having written an article concerning integration that went against the philosophy of the organization. To further complicate matters, in 1936 a spiteful newspaper article appeared in Baltimore’s Afro-America by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, a fellow Harvard graduate in history. Woodson made two claims: 1) that Du Bois had stolen the idea of the encyclopedia, which had occurred to him in 1921; 2) that the project was doomed to failure because those that sat upon the advisory board as well as those that were financing the project were white.

Despite these accusations and assumptions Du Bois carried on, and by 1937 he believed that he had fostered a relationship with the Carnegie Corporation to the extent that they would cover the remaining $125,000 for the cost of the project. Du Bois waited patiently but the money never came. Carter G. Woodson had depicted Du Bois as a radical, and soon the NAACP began to view him in a similar light. Despite Du Bois efforts the project was losing momentum. In his work Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Towards an

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"Autobiography of a Race Concept" (1940) Du Bois concedes to the racial hurdles, but does not take a defeatist attitude:

I fear that no money sufficient for the publication of such an encyclopedia under the leadership of colored scholars and the collaboration of white men can be soon found. I doubt if men would formulate their objection to such a procedure, but after all it would seem to them natural that any such work should be under the domination of white men. At any rate, we have gotten together a definite and completely worked-out plan, even to the subjects and many of the proposed writers, which can in the future be used for an Encyclopedia of the Negro, a publication sure to come in time.16

Though the project was officially halted in 1941, Du Bois never abandoned the project. In 1945 he published, *A Preparatory Volume with Reference Lists and Reports of the Encyclopedia of the Negro* which was presented to the Phelps-Stokes Fund in 1946.

Though the work was nothing more than what the title infers, the necessity to establish a foundation could not escape Du Bois. In the “Introduction” Du Bois once again made his plea for a compendium by writing the short essay, “The Need of an Encyclopedia of the Negro” (1945).

Du Bois was well aware of the challenges the project faced and was more than willing to share them with any and all who would listen. However, others were also trying. In 1948, the old New York based publishing company, Dodd Mead, joined forces with the John D. Rockefeller’s General Education Board (GEB) in hopes of compiling, *The Negro: An Encyclopedia*. The GEB was established in 1903 with the goal of improving education throughout the United States, but with a key focus on black

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education in the south.\footnote{Rockefeller Archive Center, “General Education Board Archives (1901-1964) 1967,” Rockefeller Related Organization, http://www.rockarch.org/collections/rockorgs/geb.php (accessed November 24, 2012).} Frederick Douglass Patterson, who had been serving as the president of the Tuskegee University for some twenty years at the time, would serve as their editor. Sadly, no such work was ever completed. In October of 1956, Charles H. Wesley, a well-respected historian, author and educator, penned a letter to Du Bois informing him of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History’s intentions of compiling Dr. Carter G. Woodson’s “Encyclopedia Africana,” Woodson having passed away in 1950. He additionally sought advice, writing, “I recall your project under the caption of the Encyclopedia of the Negro and that it was incorporated. Neither Dr. Woodson nor I was acquainted with the details of your plan…. I am writing to inquire concerning the status of this plan and what your reaction would be to the proposal of the Association concerning an “Encyclopedia Africana.” Funds are always an obstacle in these types of projects.”\footnote{W. E. B. Du Bois, The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Volume 3 Selections, 1944-1963 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 404.}

Within five days Du Bois responded. He clarified in his letter that the idea had been his as early as 1909, and that Dr. Woodson was well aware of his efforts. Du Bois additionally noted Dr. Woodson’s refusal to cooperate when an offer had been extended to welcome him aboard the project in 1932. Despite these factors, Du Bois did not want to impede the work from progressing, and was willing to offer access to correspondence
and materials that would push the project along. But Du Bois did close his letter with a warning:

Let me impress upon you: there is no such thing as a cheap encyclopedia. If you propose to publish a work of scholarship that will stand up beside the Catholic Encyclopedia, the Jewish Encyclopedia, and the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, it cannot be done for a cent less than $250,000. If, of course, you have in mind something like the Tuskegee Yearbook, then don’t for god’s sake call it an encyclopedia.\(^9\)

In the 1950’s Du Bois faced challenges far greater than Dr. Woodson’s claim to being the originator of the project. Due to Du Bois political views, he had become the target for the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. Though he was not officially a member of the communist party, his ideology unmistakably leaned in that party’s general direction. For a period of time Du Bois served as the chairman of the Peace Information Center, but his failure to register the organization with the federal government led to an indictment. Thankfully, a trial led to a dismissal, but his passport was nevertheless confiscated.

While Du Bois’ went to battle with his own government, the political leadership on the African continent was starting to drastically change. In March of 1957 Ghana became the first African nation to break free from colonial rule and establish itself as an independent nation. Though Du Bois had been invited to celebrate the establishment of the new republic, his act of refusing to sign a non-communist affidavit prevented his attendance.\(^{20}\) When his passport was finally returned to him after eight years Du Bois made it a goal to visit almost every communist country. He visited multiple universities

\(^9\) Ibid.

where he received honorary degrees and race leaders welcomed him with open arms. Du Bois had become disillusioned with the leadership of the Negro movement, perhaps based on the fact that many individuals that he had come to respect had turned their backs on him when he placed was on trial.21 In 1960, Du Bois made his trip to Ghana at the request of Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah. The two had met at an anti-colonization rally in 1944 and had remained in close contact. Lewis sheds light on the significance of this event, “Thirty four years after feeling the Liberian earth of Africa under his feet, Du Bois had returned to the continent not as the honored token of the almighty United States to a debt-burdened simulacrum of a nation, but as an honored and greatly moved guest of a virile black republic headed by a disciple.”22 Du Bois saw the leader of Ghana as his equal. While many Westerners before him may have come to Africa as representatives of an elite Western nation willing to “help” an uncivilized, uncultured population, Du Bois saw the playing field beginning to level. For Du Bois’ those six weeks in Ghana opened his eyes to the struggles and possibilities this new nation faced.

By 1960 Du Bois was no longer a young man, and although he had initially believed that the root cause of racism was ignorance, his own harsh life experiences altered that belief. He finally concluded that racism was built on a foundation of colonialism and economic inequality. With this realization the dream of editing an Encyclopedia seemed as though it would never eventuate. However, hope was restored once again when in February of 1961 Ghana’s Prime Minister, Nkrumah, extended


another invitation to Du Bois. This time the invitation was not simply for a visit, but a chance to start anew. To move to Ghana and make it his home. With financial backing from the newly formed republic the dream of editing the encyclopedia was once again set in motion.

On October 1, 1961 Du Bois made his last act of defiance on American soil by applying for membership with the Communist Party. Along with his wife Shirley Graham he immediately moved to Ghana. Though the United States would always be his place of birth, Du Bois had increasingly found himself at odds with the politics and greed for power. By the 1960’s the civil rights movement was beginning to take root in America, but for Du Bois time was no longer a luxury. Lewis remarks, “Du Bois’s vision - delusion, some would say - carried him past the desegregation of lunch counters and high schools and beyond the ‘cruel-dilemma’ of giving thanks for ‘partial equality’ to a better world trying to be born outside the folds of rapacious capitalism.”

In Du Bois’ last speech he stated, “it is logical that such a work had to wait for independent Africans to carry it out (because) the encyclopedia is concerned with Africa as a whole.”

Acting as editor-in-chief Du Bois once again set out to make his dream a reality in an African nation free from the confines of colonial rule. His dream also took on a new focus. The project would no longer cover the African diaspora, but instead would be about Africans. More importantly, Africans would write it on African soil. It was a work of authenticity, or perhaps one final blow Du Bois could deliver to the American leaders

23 Ibid., 156.

of the black movement in the United States. Nevertheless, the new focus would hopefully also alter the political face of the changing African continent. In December of 1962 Du Bois offered a postcolonial manifesto, “The Encyclopedia hopes to eliminate the artificial boundaries created on the continent by colonial masters. Designations such as "British Africa", "French Africa", "Black Africa", "Islamic Africa" too often serve to keep alive differences which in large part have been imposed on Africans by outsiders.”

In September of 1964 Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah delivered a speech at the First Annual Meeting: EAP Editorial Board. Though the creation of the Pan-African Editorial Board in Ghana was worthy of note, the real aim was to link all African nations together in an effort to bring forth the encyclopedia, a link that could possibly influence new postcolonial political possibilities. President Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah exhorted, “We must now think in terms of continental political unity in everything we do for Africa. Without such cohesion and unity none of us can survive the intrigues and divisive forces of the imperialists and neo-colonialists. The work of this Encyclopaedia Africana will take us one further step towards the great objective to which we are dedicated - a Continental Union Government of Africa.”

It is a statement which Gates and Appiah would take as one of their own less explicit political objectives.

After renouncing his American citizenship, Du Bois became a citizen of Ghana on his 95th birthday. To mark the event he was conferred with an honorary degree. At his


26 Ibid.
own birthday dinner Du Bois made it a point to express his deep gratitude and regret to
the Prime Minister, remarking, “I failed-you - my strength gave out before I could carry
out our plans for the encyclopedia. Forgive an old man.”\textsuperscript{27} The dream was so very
tangible for a brief moment, all the vital puzzle pieces were in place, but Du Bois health
was quickly fading due to complications with his prostate. On August 27, 1963, the eve
of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr. speech “I Have A Dream,” Du
Bois went to bed and died in his sleep.

Though Du Bois did not succeed in the completion of his \textit{Encyclopedia Africana},
his labors to establish a foundation for future scholars would prove essential to the work.
The timing was not right for Du Bois to complete his dream. The remainder of the second
half of the twentieth century would see greater and greater amounts of material produced
by African studies scholars concerning African cultures. While the political climate
during Du Bois time was against him, the balance of political power was beginning to
shift in the post-Civil Rights movement era.

CHAPTER III
COMPLETION BY GATES AND APPIAH

It's a dream that I inherited . . . I will go to my grave believing that one reason I was put on this Earth was to fulfill that dream.

-- Henry L. Gates Jr., Richmond Forum

In this chapter I will account for the labors, political climate and eventual success of Gates and Appiah in publishing not only Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience, but the CD-ROM version known as Encarta Africana. In addition I will also describe its postcolonial and postmodern political objectives. Just tens years after the death of Du Bois three educated and ambitious men sat down for dinner at a restaurant near the Cambridge University campus. Little did they know that their drunken pledge that night to complete Du Bois Encyclopedia Africana would be a turning point in the completion of the project. One of these men was a young African American college student by the name of Henry Louis Gates Jr. Today Gates can easily be identified as a modern day intellectual renaissance man. Aside from being the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University, and director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, Gates has authored over a dozen books, and has produced just as many documentaries. He stands in as editor in chief of the online publication, The Root, The Washington Post's online African-American publication.¹ His works have been well received by millions of readers and viewers.

Currently Gates finds his time consumed with a genealogy program called *Finding Your Roots*, produced for television by the Public Broadcasting Service. In this program Gates questions what is it that makes us who we are?\(^2\) Gates has interviewed influential Americans such as Barbara Walter, the broadcast journalist and author, Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State, and Samuel L. Jackson, film and television actor. Part of what makes us who was are is determined by our genetic makeup. As a member of the Personal Genome Project at Harvard Medical School, Gates and his late father became the first African-Americans to have their entire genomes sequenced.\(^3\) But genetics are only part of the story, everyone has a narrative that is shaped by the communities we live in, and the events of everyday life. However the greater purpose behind this project may be how it motivates the American public to examine its own history, a history that has been composed primarily by Anglo elite males. In a recent interview, Gates commented on his desire to expose and engage the rising generation of students with their own personal history:

> Everyone should be working on their genealogy, so I had this crazy idea that we could turn around the attitude of black kids towards learning again. When I was growing up in the 50’s the blackest thing you could be was an educated man or an educated woman. I have this belief that too many of our kids have lost that passion. And what we could do is reignite it by having each child do their family tree in social studies courses so they can learn how to interview, how to process between oral testimony and written testimony and learn how to use the archives. And then in science class we teach them about evolution, biology and DNA, through ancestry tracing. Every kid will have the DNA tested and then while we wait for the results we will teach them how the science works. Who wouldn’t be


\(^3\) Ibid.
turned on by that curriculum? What’s your favorite subject? Your favorite subject is yourself. And genealogy is all about yourself.4

This project is really about reshaping the postcolonial narrative of African American history for both black and white viewers with its extensive exposition of degradation, survival and achievement of the black history. The politics of his project are not hidden, though the classroom serves as the formal environment of education, Gates taps into every possible social and media setting to reach an audience beyond the campus of Harvard. "I want to get into the educational DNA of American culture," he says. "I want 10 percent of the common culture, more or less, to be black…. I'm a tech geek. Whenever I read about something new, I think to myself, How can I take this and make it black?"5 Gates embraces all dimensions of history including the components that make African Americans proud as well as those that bring all nations shame. Gates wants individuals to dive into history in ways that force them to reexamine their own reality. He writes, "The thing about black history is that the truth is so much more complex than anything you could make up . . . one principle I've been fighting for that doesn't endear me to a lot of people is that black people can be just as complicated and screwed up as white people. Our motives can be just as base and violent. Suffering does not necessarily ennable you."6 However, it is the complicated past of blacks that gives historical dimension to a people and place that for centuries has been described as “primitive.”


6 Ibid.
continuing revelations about this past continually deconstruct the power grid of the primitive imperialist imagination that has held sway for centuries.

Gates humble beginnings started in the rural state of West Virginia. Gates’ father worked two jobs to provide for his family, and from the start his parents’ stressed the importance of education. The 1956 World Encyclopedia was a staple in their home and Gates used it on a regular basis until it came time to go to college. At Yale Gates was expected to pursue his education in either law or medicine. At the conclusion of his year sophomore year Gates volunteered at a mission hospital in Africa, a continent he was enamored with since the age of four. Gates pre-med schooling hardly qualified him to diagnose a patient let alone administer anesthesia, but he was willing and the need was great. However, he soon discovered that medicine was not his passion. While attending Yale Gates read about Du Bois and his attempts to edit an Encyclopedia Africana, and became fascinated by the project. Though still a teenager, a seed had been planted. He would complete the work. Upon graduating from Yale with his B.A. in English Language and Literature Gates became the first African American to receive the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship. When Gates entered Cambridge University to pursue his M.A. and Ph.D., his desire was to major in African literature. He was very disappointed when the University made clear to him that African literature had never been nor ever would be a class taught on campus. He was told to focus on sociology or anthropology. Despite his

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disappointment Gates was pointed in the direction of a Nigerian poet and playwright, a Mr. Wole Soyinka, who soon became the inspiration and mentor he was seeking.\(^8\)

Soyinka had applied for a teaching position at Cambridge but was turned down. During the Nigerian Civil War Soyinka had been arrested for his involvement in political activities and spent two years in solitary confinement. Once he was released he published *The Man Died: Prison Notes (1971)*, a work of poems that account for the horrible atrocities he suffered while imprisoned during the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon. Impressed by his story, Gates made it a point to meet with Soyinka. Gates shared his adventures to multiple countries within the African continent with Soyinka, and in so doing something must have sparked between the two because Soyinka was willing to take Gates on as his only student.

While attending Cambridge University, Gates also became acquainted with a young philosophy student by the name of Kwame Anthony Appiah. Appiah, now a highly qualified philosophy professor having taught at some of the best universities throughout the United States, is an internationally renowned writer and scholar. When Gates crossed paths with Appiah there was no doubt that he must have been taken aback by Appiah’s family tree. His mother’s British aristocratic line includes his grandfather, Sir Stafford Cripps. Cripps served as the Minister of Finance for England and was involved in the negotiations that led to India’s independence in 1947, seen as one of the most significant political efforts to shift the power of colonial powers out of the hand of Eurocentric elites. Cripps’ met with leaders of the budding nation such as Mohandas K. Gandhi, whose promotion of civil disobedience though non-violence would alter the fate

\(^8\) Ibid.
of the nation, Jawaharlal Nehru, who would go on to become the first Prime Minister, and Muhammad A. Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League and future founder of Pakistan. Cripps’ task in India at the time was widely reported as, “the most delicate mission in the history of the British Commonwealth.”

Equally impressive is Appiah’s father’s line. Appiah is considered to be an African prince because his uncle, Otumfu Nana Poku Ware II, served as king of the Ashanti, the densely populated southern region of Ghana. While Appiah was born in London and visited family frequently, he was primarily raised in Ghana where his black father worked as a lawyer and politician.

It didn’t take much for Gates and Appiah to connect. In the fall of 1973 the two met with Soyinka to have dinner. Over a meal and a fair share of alcohol Gates shared the story of W.E.B. Du Bois and his dream of compiling the Encyclopedia Africana. Appiah and Soyinka, two Africans who would ultimately exercise great influence and intellect, found that they were just as fascinated by the project as Gates was. On that night over a drunken pledge the three young intellectuals committed to editing the Encyclopedia Africana. Some forty years later, Professor Appiah, readily admits that the idea was somewhat crazy. However, it needed to be completed.


After graduating with his Ph.D. from Cambridge Gates took a teaching position at Yale. He wrote to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1979 concerning the project. Though *Britannica* expressed a desire to publish the work Gates was told he would need to raise a sum of twenty million dollars first. The financial hurdle seemed impossible to clear. No one was willing to put up that sum, and while Gates was able to raise fifty thousand dollars, and fly Soyinka out to meet with a board of directors, the project just couldn’t seem to take flight.

By 1995 Gates and Appiah were both teaching at Harvard. Harvard proved to be an ideal setting for Gates and Appiah to not only fulfill Du Bois dream, but to expand the African and African American based curriculum. Gates notes in a recent interview with me,

> I got my foundation, my most important lessons from Yale, from two mentors, the chairman Charles Davis, the first chairman who hired me…and the first African American to be tenured in the English Department at Yale and then the great black historian John Blassingame, who was the first black historian to get tenured at Yale…when I came to Harvard, I had the plan in my head. I had the seeds; I just had to find the right soil to plant them in, to modify and to experiment. It’s like taking cuttings from a vineyard in France and growing them in the New World, like in California, Argentina or in Chile…. It has grown far beyond anything I could have imagined.¹²

Gates had the task of regenerating the African American Studies program, while Appiah was there to kick-start the African Studies program. With the aid of prominent individuals on campus, Gates and Appiah decided to make another attempt at the encyclopedia project. Gates approached Random House chief executive, Alberto Vitale. Vitale, like many before him expressed interest but required the project be done on

something called a CD-ROM, and not the traditional print format. Gates agreed despite the fact that he was unaware of what a CD-ROM truly was.\(^\text{13}\) Still fairly new to the general public, a compact disc read-only memory or CD-ROM was an incredible tool capable of storing a significant quantity of information, ranging from computer software to music to videos. It was new, it was innovative, and it also seemed to be the only way to proceed.

Gates and Appiah’s willingness to venture into the world of the CD-ROM demonstrated their willingness to take what would become their curated work to the masses by any means possible. To confine their work to the scholarly libraries of universities would only not serve to reshape the curricula of the American school system. In addition the CD-ROM business was altering the use of encyclopedias in ways that even Gates was unaware of, especially in the production of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Only been five years earlier in 1990 *Britannica* had enjoyed its largest profit in history. But within a few years all that was about to change. In 1985 Bill Gates of Microsoft asked his chief executive, Min Lee, to approach *Britannica* in hopes of creating a partnership that would produce the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on CD-ROMs for personal computers. However, *Britannica* was not interested, as made clear by a response from Larry Grinnell, *Britannica’s* director of public relations, “The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has no plans to be on a home computer. And since the market is so small, only 4 or 5 percent of households have computers, we would not want to hurt our traditional

way of selling."¹⁴ Britannica's reasons seemed sound; they were the current leaders in the industry and had been for some time. They had a large, and effective sales team. Shane Greenstein and Michelle Devereux of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University write that many gifted minds jumped at the opportunity to contribute to Britannica, not because they were paid well, when in fact they were paid very little, but because putting Encyclopedia Britannica on your resume was a great source of prestige.¹⁵

Realizing they could not compete with the depth of knowledge and reputation of Britannica, Microsoft decided to take an entirely different approach. Because they couldn’t join forces, Microsoft decided to create something sleeker, more user friendly, and cheaper in order to beat Britannica at their own game. In 1989, Microsoft purchased the reference works of Funk and Wagnalls. Though their reputation as a dictionary left much to be desired, the beauty behind their purchase was based on the idea that Microsoft would not have to create their own content from the foundation up, an expensive and time consuming task. Microsoft proceeded to drop the name, edit some of the content, and make it a multimedia tool by infusing the product with graphics, sound and video. They had created a product far more interactive than the one sitting on the shelves of thousands of American homes, and much easier to use for a new generation quickly becoming acquainted with the personal computer. In 1993, Microsoft was ready to release Encarta. However, according to Greenstein and Devereux, "By that time Microsoft was no longer


¹⁵ Shane Greenstein and Michelle Devereux, Teaching Notes: The Crisis at Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 2006), 2-3.
the small upstart it had been in 1985. Personal computers were in more than 20 percent of U.S. households and all forecasters predicted more use in more households over the next few years.” In addition “Microsoft’s market position had changed as IBM lost commercial leadership. Together with Intel, Microsoft reorganized the entire value chain for PC production and sales.”

Trying not to lose their stronghold in the market, Britannica went ahead and in 1991 created the first multimedia encyclopedia on CD-ROM. The product was free with the purchase of their hardbound editions, but as a standalone product the consumer would have to pay $895. Microsoft also offered their product for free with the purchase of a new computer, but the standalone price would only cost the consumers around $100. At a time when the average worker in the United States was bringing home just under $22,000 a year, the choice for most consumers was simple. Microsoft’s standalone product compared to Britannica’s was roughly a tenth of the cost. In addition, many families were now much more willing than ever to invest in a home computer. The market was changing at a pace Britannica could not keep pace with. By 1996 Britannica was forced to declare bankruptcy, and Alberto Vitale of Random House was not about to take “Encyclopedia Africana” down that road.

16 Ibid.
17 Stross, The Microsoft Way, 86.
18 Shane Greenstein and Michelle Devereux, Teaching Notes: The Crisis at Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 2006), 8.
Shortly after meeting with Random House in 1995, Henry Louis Gates met with the famous African American record and television producer, Quincy Jones. Jones took an interest in the project and was willing to put up half the development money to create the CD-ROM, some $125,000 so long as an encyclopedia company would put up the other half. With the financial support of Martin Payson, Sony Mehta and Alberto Vitale at Random House the project was finally set in motion. Gates and Appiah began work with Dynamic Diagrams, a Rhode Island-based design group to create a prototype of a CD-ROM.20 Wole Soyinka served as chair of the board of editors.21 Six months later Gates flew the executives of Random House to Harvard in an attempt to increase their investment to $2 million for the production of the product. While Random House was impressed by the prototype and felt as though their development money had been used wisely, a problem had arisen. Random House felt that the bottom had fallen out of the market for CD reference works. Gates knew it was time to bow out of the partnership when the head of Random House said they would continue with the project only if it could be turned into a game like product for the consumer.22


Unwilling to give up on the idea of a CD-ROM Gates set to work with Quincy Jones and Martin Payson to create Afropedia, modeled after Microsoft’s encyclopedia Encarta. After the arrangement with Random House fell to pieces, Gates hit the pavement. For the next two years he approached almost every publisher in New York: Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, McMillan, McGraw Hill. In the process he accumulated some 25 rejection letters. He was getting nowhere until Peggy Cooper Cafritz of Washington D.C. contacted Gates in 1997. Cafritz, a school administrator, activist and co-founder of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts had been a force in the nation's capital for over 30 years. Peggy referred Gates to Frank Pearl who was currently serving as chairman of the board at the Kennedy Center. More importantly, Pearl was starting a new publishing company called Perseus Books. Gates resisted the opportunity for another rejection on his meeting Pearl but Cafritz insisted. Once again with nothing left to lose Gates tracked down Pearl at his Hotel in NYC and once again pitched the idea for editing an encyclopedia of Africa and the African diaspora. After more than eight years of pitching this idea to intellectuals, activists, publishing companies, editors, boards and committees of every make-up, Frank Pearl said yes. Quickly Gates clarified that he was also in negotiations with Microsoft, but that before Microsoft would agree to the project they would need to conduct market studies to determine if there was a large enough population of black people with computers that would purchase the product. Although the digital divide could not be ignored, times were changing. Research by Forrester Research showed that the fastest growing segment of Internet users at the time was African

Americans. Pearl agreed that if Microsoft would put up one million dollars for the CD-ROM, he would match that sum to publish the hardbound book.

The very next day Microsoft contacted Gates. They were on board as well, on the condition that Gates and Appiah would additionally produce a two million word encyclopedia within eighteen months. Gates and Appiah quickly got to work. They hired more than two dozen people to work in an office on Harvard Square writing short articles and coordinating the daily logistics of the project. While Appiah focused on African content Gates oversaw the African American content. However, the task of managing a team had its challenges. Upon reflection Appiah admits, “Skip is a very good manager, he has been a director of the institute for a long time, and I’m not really a managerial type so for me the hard part was to be someone’s boss and you have to fire people if they are not doing the work.”

 Luckily Gates and Appiah already possessed what were considered to be the bread and butter articles. They had enlisted the help of four hundred scholars from all over the world to create the more substantial interpretive articles, and thus the body of the work began to take shape. Everyone from Secretary General Kofi Annan of the United Nations to Michael Jordan of the N.B.A. were invited to participate in the project. The Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka sat at the head of the

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advisory board. By November of 1998, after nearly ninety years from the time Du Bois had announced his dream, Gates and Appiah delivered their encyclopedia to Microsoft. Appiah admits, “for something that didn’t have anything written on day one it was amazing.”

On January 19, 1999, Encarta Africana was dedicated to Martin Luther King and published in honor of Nelson Mandela.

In the true postmodern multimedia fashion the encyclopedia was full of maps, charts and photographs that gave the reader a great sense for the diversity of Africa and its diaspora. Forty percent of the hardbound book is devoted to the African continent. Biographies of prominent men and women help to tell the story of the vastly diverse land. The history of each nation is told by encompassing both pre and post colonial periods. With its focus on religion, literature and culture, the reader is able to distinguish the unique qualities that set each nation apart. Roughly a third of the book concentrates on Latin America and the Caribbean, and as Appiah confessed, the process of editing this content proved to be very rewarding. “To me the most interesting thing was learning about the diaspora in America. I knew a certain amount about Africa and North America, everyone knows about Brazil as a place for the African diaspora but to know that Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, all these places have a black history.”

Another third of the content centers on North America, while the remaining portion is devoted to Europe and Asia.

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28 Ibid.
After completing roughly three thousand articles, and 2.25 million words Gates and Appiah had achieved the dream. They had edited an encyclopedia that suddenly brought the “black world into sharp focus.”

*Encarta Africana*, a two disc CD-ROM, was true to the content of the hardbound encyclopedia, but expanded its horizons by allowing for far greater consumer interaction. Officials at Microsoft touted it as a “groundbreaking marriage of content and technology.”

Words on the page convey great meaning and even evoke emotion, however an intimate gap is bridged when an individual can hear the notes composed by a famous musician, or watch video of significant civil rights moments, or hear the actual voice giving a speech that would alter the political and social structure of a country.

Appiah knew the political moment was perfect for *Encarta Africana* to come forth. He states, “We thought it was apt that the first encyclopedia of the black world should begin as a CD-ROM project and therefore be able to represent the expression of music, photographs, film and speeches. This could actually be an encyclopedia in which you could hear Du Bois and King.” As Appiah explained, *Encarta* did not have the same restrictions that a hardbound book did, “In a CD-ROM you insert the visual material into

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the text and the text automatically formats around it, but in a book you have to design every page, and if you are going to have a huge number of images, as we did, then every page has to be conceived and looked at by a designer and that just took a lot longer.”

Consistent with a more postmodern conception that the legitimate parameters of knowledge encompass high, popular and vernacular culture, Gates and Appiah believe *Africana* is the first scholarly encyclopedia to examine the culture, as well as the political and social history of the entire history of Africa and the African Diaspora, a genuine compendium of Africana. They designed it to be a unique testament of the African experience geared not only towards academia, but also to grade school and high school classrooms, and the home. The product was designed to cause universities to reexamine their courses and the mostly Western content being taught. It was an attempt to deconstruct the rigidly Western Civilization view of the world as the Anglo scholarly machine has constructed it. This product would seek to deconstruct the colonial view of Africa in students at every level of the U.S. educational system. Gates and Appiah hoped that politically it would create an historical narrative where all individuals discover their historical and cultural narratives, not just Anglo-European students.

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32 Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

AFRICANA IN SCHOOLS

Only with the coming years of its use in the multitude of educational forums and the research potential that it promises for teachers and scholars will its successes and failures be realized.

-- Dr. Robert L. Douglas, Professor of Pan African studies at the University of Louisville in Kentucky

Initial reception of Gates and Appiah’s project was very positive. While the hardbound book was noteworthy, news outlets focused on the CD-ROM, *Encarta Africana*. On January 8, 1999 Microsoft Corp. officially launched Microsoft *Encarta Africana*. Simultaneously Microsoft and Henry L. Gates announced plans to donate 8,000 copies of the product to schools K-12, historically black colleges, universities and public libraries throughout the southern United States. Retailed at a value of more than a half million dollars.¹ Microsoft, Gates and Appiah knew that if they could just place their product into the hands of America’s youth that the educational opportunities were virtually endless. Research had shown, as presented in a new release by Microsoft in January of 1999, that “students remember five times more information when it is presented in a multimedia context.”² To better serve its own community Microsoft Corp additionally donated over a thousand copies of *Encarta*, valued at $70,000, in February of 2000 to Thurston County and the Seattle School District, which encompasses a student

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² Ibid.
population of 81,000. Gates additionally met with Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, to donate one book to every single library on the African Continent. It made more sense to donate books as opposed to CD-ROMs because of a lack of computers in the region. This was no small task, but essential considering that such a large portion of the text is based on African history. For the first time African’s cultural narrative is told by postcolonial scholars.

While students are traditionally taught content through the method of reading a textbook, or listening to a teacher deliver a lecture in the confines of a classroom setting, Encarta software is designed to grant individual students outside the library access to articles, maps, videos and music. It was one thing to read from a textbook someone’s interpretation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech that was delivered on the March on Washington in August of 1963. However, it’s an entirely different experience to watch video footage of Dr. King, to view his body language and hear the words delivered from his lips. Students can create their own interpretation, which gives them great power in their own educational process.

Gates and Appiah’s generous donation of this product was their political ploy for reaching millions of students in the urban school setting, schools that often cannot afford the best materials. When teachers were interviewed about the product there was no

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disguising their excitement. Paulette Thompson, a world history and French teacher at Garfield High School in Seattle, said, "Encarta Africana's outstanding in-depth content, and interactive multimedia features make learning about the important topic of black history exciting and fun. As educators search for reference materials that capture our rich cultural diversity, Encarta Africana will set the standard for families and schools."³⁶

The question Encarta proposed was this: did students have the necessary tools they needed to succeed in school? While they knew the answer, for many students it was a resounding “no”. Encarta was not blind to their own drawbacks. The program was rendered obsolete without a functioning computer. In addition a computer without Internet access is very limited. Encarta may open the window of knowledge, but students are encouraged to dig deep and continue their research if all their questions are not answered by articles available on the program. For Encarta there was also the possibility of cultural drawbacks. In 2008, Kathryn Toure, Therese Mungah, Shalo Tchombe and Thierry Karsenti edited a paper entitled, Reflections on Cultural Imperialism and Pedagogical Possibilities Emerging from Youth Encounters with Internet in Africa. Concern was expressed over the dual nature of the internet. While it could be used as an incredible tool allowing for access to current information, academics and popular writers feared that the Internet could be used as another form of cultural imperialism, spreading Western ideals, standards and interpretations. With research gathered from 36 primary and secondary schools from five West and Central African countries, the authors of the

article argued that it was possible to use the Internet and computers to reinforce values
held within African culture, values such as community and interdependence as opposed
to individualism and consumerism. Students could embrace tools that could appropriately
lend themselves to creative use. This was precisely what Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah,
Whole Soyinka, Gates and Appiah had set as their principle political goal.

The study also gathered that *Encarta had* become a primary resource for students
to learn about everything from the debates over land in the Middle East to biographies on
key leaders in Africa.⁷ It was commonplace to encounter *Encarta* in West and Central
African schools, even on computers without Internet access. But there were additional
drawbacks to program, According to this study, “there is a fair amount of dependency in
the integration process. Teachers depend on multimedia center monitors (Tchombe,
2006) and in early stages schools depend on external ICT (information and
communications technology) specialists. There is still a steep learning curve during the
initial phases of access and little government support.”⁸ The study finds that it is rare to
encounter a product created by Africans for African schools, a sign that there are many
educational challenges in Africa in disentangling themselves from colonialism that has
even colonized the classroom.

In *Reflections on Cultural Imperialism*, it was also revealed that in 2006 the
estimated internet usage was only at 4.71 users per 1000 inhabitants in Africa, while the

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⁷ Kathryn Toure, Mamadou Lamine Diarra, Thierry Karsenti, “Changing
Mindsets in Education,” Réseau Ouest et Centre Africain de Recherche en Education

⁸ Ibid.
number for the Americas and Europe was around 37 to 38 per 1000 inhabitants. However, there was no doubt that those numbers were growing rapidly within the urban setting of the United States. Therefore, to get the encyclopedia into as many young hands as possible, the Educational Netcasting Foundation, a nonprofit organization, got donors to place books into public schools in the cities of Boston, Cambridge, Hartford, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, and every school in the District of Columbia, Atlanta, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago.

Gates realized getting people to actually use Encarta would present a unique challenge, admitting, “We were confident that we had a really good product…. But I was worried it would sit on a shelf.” Gates and Appiah were well aware that African American students, a primary consumer target for their new product, needed greater accessibility to computers and to the Internet. These students also needed to be shown how to use the software properly. Evidence showed just how much attention and instruction in this area of education were needed at the time. According to Henry Jay Becker, Ph.D., Professor of Education at the University of California, Irvine, the problem with youth and technology is an issue that manifested itself in the home as well as at school. In his article, *Who’s Wired and Who’s Not: Children’s Access to and Use of Computer Technology*, Becker reveals noteworthy data about the state of education. In 1998 the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey of U.S. Households (CPS) collected data about students and home computer use. Their findings show that while

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9 Ibid.

income and a parent’s level of education are considered the major factors in determining access to computer use in the home, ethnicity played a larger role than one may have thought. According to Becker, “African-American and Hispanic children were far less likely to have a computer or Internet access at home than other children. Earlier analyses of CPS data indicate that among households at the same income levels (whether or not children were present), African Americans are about three years behind, and Hispanics are about four years behind, white non-Hispanics in terms of their likelihood of owning home computers.”\textsuperscript{11} Those three years could make all the difference to a student asked to perform any task requiring computer skills.

To provide evidence that the gap was only widening, a nationwide survey of teachers conducted in 1998 revealed that while around 75% of students had access to computers at schools, how those computers were being utilized raised cause for concern. Becker writes, “those teaching lower-income students reported weekly use of computers more often than those teaching higher-income students. But the nature of children’s experiences using computers in school varied greatly by subject and teacher objectives, and the data suggest that lower-income students use computers more often for repetitive practice, whereas higher-income students use computers more often for more sophisticated, intellectually complex applications.”\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
In December of 1999 the University of California, Irvine and the University of Minnesota Studies conducted a nationwide survey of school and teachers that revel how much each subject area in schools made frequent use of computers.

Table 4.1 Frequent-Use in Middle and High School, by Subject, 1997-98

![Bar Chart: Frequent-Use Classes in Middle and High School, by Subject, 1997–98]


Although frequent computer usage in subject area of Social Studies at the high school level was second to last, behind math, what proved to be more disheartening was usage for middle school students. With less than one in ten students frequently using computers, the content area that covers of history, economics, geography, political
science, civics, religion and psychology was being left behind by the advances of the digital age.

*Encarta* was precisely the type of sophisticated tool that students could benefit from. Usage of the program was impossible without a computer, and the whole experience could not be enhanced without Internet access. Therefore on January 24, 2000 Henry L. Gates, the keynote speaker at the University of Michigan’s Martin Luther King Jr. Symposium, announced plans to establish an after school program called The Martin Luther King Jr. After-School Program. The program would give students the opportunity to learn about Black history through *Encarta Africana* and simultaneously acquire essential computer skills for the 21st. These schools were to be owned and operated by Blacks and much like Hebrew schools, the MLK After-School Program would be housed primarily in churches.¹³

Perhaps the MLK After-School Program was the ideal political response for the years of negative criticism Gates received from individuals in his own Boston Black community. One of Gate’s harshest critics had been the outspoken charismatic pastor, Reverend Eugene F. Rivers 3d. In April of 1998, Cheryl Bentsen for *Boston Magazine* reported on their somewhat hostile relationship. Rivers politics were attuned to the black underclass. While Rivers had elected to live with his family in the rough and tough area of Dorchester, a predominantly black neighborhood, Gates resides on one of the more elite streets of Cambridge. It was this “sense” of elitism and disconnect within the

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confines of the black community that caused Rivers to challenge Gates and other black intellectuals to step away from the walls of their university and immerse themselves in the real black community. He wanted them to actually go into the struggling schools and make the needed improvements. In a critique of the underclass and the “ivory tower black vision” River stated:

W.E.B. Du Bois would be horrified by an approach to Afro-American studies rooted in a let-them-eat-literature approach regarding a people who are suffering. How is it that the best we can do are parties with Tina Brown as opposed to looking at a menu of social policy? Professor Gates provides an important function entertaining the readership of The New Yorker—but beyond that, then there’s not much to talk about. Just enough sepia so that fairly uninteresting people can get a form of easy-listening, quasi-hip entertainment. It’s not hard funk. It’s 98.5, easy listening, Kenny G. lite. Professor Gates gives them Kenny G. blackness served up in a brilliant literary format—and that’s it.14

While Gates expressed respect for Rivers politics and all his efforts to better the black community, he adamantly defended his own politics and methods of service. Gates knew his strength was in academia and that was where he was most needed. "My whole life is a commitment to the black community. That’s the truth—and that’s what I respond to. My work is in African American studies. Who else is that for if not primarily the black community?"15 Gates goes on to say in the interview:

I like Eugene, he does very important work. In his politics, he’s such a generous person. Here’s a person who is obviously brilliant, who has committed his life to people on the street. And that is very noble and compassionate work. But I think that some of his public comments about other black intellectuals are unfortunate.


15 Ibid.
The part I object to was when he said they’re over there having parties and they’re not building some powerful fighting machine. Well, that’s bullshit.  

Gates goes on to comment that all members of the community need to do what they can with the skills they possess where they can. “Those people who think the only way you can make a viable contribution to the black community is to work in the ghetto 24 hours a day—they’re just shortsighted. The battle’s got many fronts, and we need people fighting on all these fronts or else we ain’t gonna make it.” While no single method of intervention will solve the problems that range from poverty, low-test scores in school, unemployment, or teenage pregnancy, Gates knew a holistic approach to the community would be tremendously beneficial.

Luckily the relationship between Rivers and Gates was strengthened as the two leaders banded together to open the first Martin Luther King Jr. After-School Program in Dorchester Massachusetts, in October of 2000. The opening was thanks to the collaborating efforts of Gate’s Du Bois Institute, part of the Afro-American studies department of Harvard University and River’s Ella J. Baker House, a newly restored three-story olive green Victorian community center that once served as a former crack den. At the ribbon cutting ceremony Gates expressed the political significance of the program by stating, "It's time to bring Harvard to the hood. It is also time to bring the hood to Harvard." The Baker House would simultaneously serve as an education center

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

to numerous youth within the neighborhood and as the primary quarters to the local Azusa Christian Community, which ran the program. Juliet J. Chung for *The Crimson* reported that forty students gathered together from neighboring middle and high schools. Seven classes a day offered five times week gave students an opportunity to work with computers and engage in their own African history. In addition many students under disciplinary action from their own schools were able to fulfill probation terms. As students and parents alike began to express their love for the program, a waiting list began to grow. Rivers could no longer criticize Gate’s methods, commenting, “with his idea of the Martin Luther King After-School Program, Gates has produced a signature prototype for addressing one the most urgent social policy questions…. He’s bridging the digital divide that’s emerging between the poorer black community and the world…. Looking back over the last 25 years, this is the most exciting program to be instituted in the poor black community at Harvard”\(^{19}\) The fact that *Encarta* could unite Gates in working with one of his harshest critics is evidence of the program’s and software’s power and political impetus. In addition, Gates and Rivers exemplified the act of placing a disagreement aside for the greater good of the black community, thus bridging Harvard and the black underclass.

The MLK After-School Program was not simply a safe place for students to pass time after school was released. Students were provided a structured environment that gave them the ability to gain essential computer skills and increase their knowledge of

their African American roots, an aspect of history barely or never covered in some of their own classrooms.\textsuperscript{20} At a news conference in Baltimore, Gates said, "With this program, we'll take our people not `back to the future' but `black to the future.'"\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Black Issues}, a forum which examines the challenges, needs and concerns of the black community, quotes Ken Johnson, executive director of the Ella J. Baker House, as saying, "We've had the students instructed on Black women activists, hip hop, the history of lynching and other subjects using \textit{Encarta Africana} and the Internet…. The bottom line for us is developing ways to get [information] technology into the hands of inner-city youth. We're using information technology as a hook to get them focused on their broader intellectual development."\textsuperscript{22} Students enrolled on a semester-basis spent around four hours with the program after school everyday. Students in return were held to a high standard. Swearing was prohibited, boys and girls were separated in class, and a strict dress code was observed. Young men were required to wear a shirt and tie, while the young ladies had to be dressed in a nice pants or a skirt. No jeans were allowed.

Word spread and within weeks churches in eight other cities approached Rivers, expressing interest in implementing a similar program. By late January of 2001, the first


set of students in Dorchester had graduated. In her paper, *Exploring Culture in the Design of New Technologies of Literacy*, Patricia A. Young of the University of Maryland reported on the findings of Goldsmith and Sherman of the Educational Development Center. Their findings from 2002 showed that a larger percentage of students in the program had Internet access. While some 80% of the 51 students had computers at home, and of that percentage, 60% had internet access, their skill levels nevertheless varied drastically, “in terms of navigating the Internet, operating the computer, and accessing and saving computer files.”23 What was determined was that after twelve weeks in the MLK After-School Program, *Encarta Africana* was a technological game changer for the students. Young writes how Goldsmith and Sherman found that, “The Martin Luther King, Jr. After-School Program format integrated the learning of computer technology in a structured academic program focused on African American history and culture. The program effectively provided a “context for learning about and through technology and created authentic examples to motivate student interest in technology.”24 Goldsmith and Sherman also called into questioned the strict guidelines established by the program. A dress code was one thing, but to require a parent to show up for monthly meetings was another challenge, “Will this type of structure meet the needs of poor and ethnically

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24 Ibid.
diverse communities?" Gates believed that it would meet their needs and began to envision a national program with one in every city. And initially it did spread.

Some four hundred miles away, The Baltimore City Mayor’s Office for Children, Youth, and Families (M.O.C.Y.F.) and the Du Bois Institute started to seek out AmeriCorps*VISTA members to volunteer in an effort to launch the MLK Program in their city. By February of 2002, The Martin Luther King Jr. After-School Academy at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church Outreach Center had opened in West Baltimore. Bethel would serve 60 students by teaching deprived African American youth the story of their origins. Support came from across the city, primarily Baltimore Rising, a faith-based youth mentoring initiative launched by Mayor Martin O'Malley in 2001. Financial support, essential to provide students with the needed computers and software, was generously given by the Family League of Baltimore and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, along with additional state and federal grants equaling more than a quarter of a million dollars. The success of the program continued to spread and by April of 2003, a third MLK program had opened, housed in Zion Baptist Church in East Baltimore.

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25 Ibid.


Gates and Appiah’s vision to take the program national was well on its way, with plans to expand the program to Philadelphia as well as within Boston and Baltimore.\footnote{Eric Addison, “Harvard U Program Opens Tech Center in Baltimore,” \textit{Black Engineer}, http://www.blackengineer.com/artman/publishprinter\_81.shtml (accessed March 20, 2012).}

Despite the success of the program in aiding numerous students in bridging the digital divide, as well as connecting them to their own personal history, despite the praise from numerous city officials, and despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars raised, the program as of 2012 is no longer in operation. Gates comments in a recent interview concerning the financial hurdles of running the program, “it was very successful, it was just a matter of getting funding and I didn’t have a lot of time to spend doing it. I wanted churches to take it over, in the same way that Jewish communities have Hebrew schools…we couldn’t do it for them.”\footnote{Henry Louis Gates Jr., interview by author, Boston, Massachusetts, March 19, 2013.}

When the grants and additional funding dried up, the program was forced to shut its doors. The initial cost to install computer and other equipment was around $200,000 according to Ken Johnson.\footnote{Black Issues, “Harvard Establishes a Digital Divide Program In Boston,” Diverse: Issues in Higher Education,” http://diverseeducation.com/article/1214/ (accessed April 8, 2012).} In addition instructors had to be hired, trained and then paid for their services. This was too much of an expense for local churches and community organizers to bear. In 2001, Karen Dalton, assistant director at the Du Bois Institute noted that it was clear that the program was having a positive effect on students, but to expand...
the program and replicate the same success with teachers, students in an intimate environment like that of the Ella J. Baker House would not be easy.

The beauty behind the academically engineered *Encarta Africana* was its political design to socially amend the racial landscape by altering long held negative Imperialist perceptions of the “culturally insignificant” black world. Perceptions can be difficult to alter. However, Gates and Appiah knew that if they could reach the youngest of black minds, then the cycle of historical, cultural and political inferiority would cease. *Encarta Africana* hooked for at risk inner city youth on technology in an educationally creative way. In addition Gates was able to connect his metaphorical ivory tower to the “hood” for the uplifting of the black community. Although Harvard holds the honor and of being the oldest university in the United States and one of the most prestigious in the world, it is essential to recognize the African American doors that a software program like *Encarta Africana* had opened, doors that had remained relatively shut since the civil rights era. *Black Issues* reports, “For years, the Du Bois Institute languished neglected and underutilized. After the 1991 appointment of Gates as chair of the Afro-American Studies department, the Du Bois Institute benefited considerably under Gates’ leadership, Gates having raised millions to endow the institute and the department.”

31 According to *Black Issues*, Ken Johnson, a graduate of Harvard, states, “The establishment of the MLK program represents a fulfillment of the original vision Black student activists sought in the late 1960s when they demanded that Harvard establish a Black studies research institute.”

31 Ibid.
goes on to say, “One of the goals of the Du Bois Institute was that it was supposed to share the intellectual resources of Harvard with the Black community.”

Editing the book version of the Encyclopedia Africana gave Appiah a great sense of accomplishment. The true measure of its political success in his eyes was Encarta’s impact on young students. Appiah commented in his interview, “The main reward was seeing the kids. In the book tour, adults would come up and say ‘I’ve been waiting for this all their life,’ which was moving but to see how we could use it [Encarta Africana] with these African American kids . . . that was something! Through the curriculum we were also teaching them to use work processes properly, and other general computer skills, and deal with the digital divide.”

Years after its release, Encarta Africana still held its credibility. Schools recognize February as African American month and as an opportunity to celebrate the cultural contributions of the African American community as well as recognize significant sacrifices made by numerous black pioneers. In an effort to promote greater focus-year round Allstate Insurance Co. launched a national campaign known as “Beyond February” In November of 2007 Allstate Insurance Co. made a three year subscription to Encarta Africana for all 140 Chicago Public High Schools. The announcement was made at Urban Prep Charter Academy, a charter school specifically designed to equip young

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32 Ibid.

men with the necessary tools needed to thrive in this world.\textsuperscript{34} Encarta was still recognized as one of those fundamental tools.

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CHAPTER V

OPPOSITION

It seems more necessary and imperative that the African should explain his own culture, and interpret his own thought and soul life, if the complete truth is to be given to the other races of the earth.

-- President Kwame Nkrumah, First Annual Meeting: EAP Editorial Board, 1964

It had pained Du Bois that a work he deemed essential could not be completed on American soil during his lifetime. Near the final years of his life he began to believe Africa and her people could make the encyclopedia a reality. In April of 1962 Du Bois issued a statement concerning the evolved nature of his dream to edit the Encyclopedia Africana, “My idea is to prepare and publish an Encyclopedia not on the vague subject of race, but on the peoples inhabiting the continent of Africa. I propose an encyclopedia edited mainly by African scholars . . . written mainly from the African point of view by people who know and understand the history and culture of Africans.”

Du Bois audience had changed. Its politics were emphatically Afrocentric. Now he addressed the leadership and people of Ghana. A key component to making his dream a reality in Ghana was the support offered to him from those in positions of great political power. In September of 1964, Osagyefo, the President of the Editorial Board of the Encyclopedia Africana remarked, “It is perhaps not without significance that Du Bois should have had to wait until the very sunset of his life to find and receive encouragement and support for this project, not in the abundance of the United States, but rather in an Africa liberated from

the cramping and oppressive conditions of colonial rule."^{2} It seemed only fair that in a land of opportunity such as the United States, a diligent intellectual such as Du Bois would have been able to realize his dream. Politics aside, the *Encyclopedia Africana* had all the signs of a noble and essential piece of work. However, once Du Bois had moved to Africa the vision for the project narrowed in scope and excluded the African diaspora. Perhaps this alteration to the dream was rooted in Du Bois willingness to politically sever himself once and for all from the intellectual Black American’s who had ostracized him once his sympathy for communism became apparent. Or perhaps, Du Bois felt it necessary to narrow the scope in order to create a work while he still had breath in his body. Either way, the dream was never completed in Du Bois lifetime.

Despite the death of Du Bois in 1963 the Encyclopedia Africana Project carried on the work of editing the Encyclopedia Africana. Under a banner of legitimacy, the EAP published three volumes. Volume I, published in June of 1977, covers the countries of Ethiopia and Ghana. Upon completion the publishers expressed great pride noting that their inaugural volume served as one of the first major steps in altering the world’s unfavorable and simplified view of Africa.\(^3\) With momentum on their side the EAP published Volume II just two and a half years later, covering the countries of Sierra Leone and Zaire. Then in September of 1995, some fifteen years after Volume II, Volume III was published, covering the countries of South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. But the additional seventeen volumes could not be published till

\(^{2}\) Ibid.

additional financial support was solidified. In May of 1997 the EAP was gaining international attention when a decision was made by The HOLDINGS Project and La-Van Hawkins pledged $450,000 to the EAP, an amount that could usher the project into the twenty-first century. The HOLDINGS Project (Holding Our Library Documents Insures Nobility, Greatness and Strength) was formed through the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University and La-Van Hawkins served as chairman of Urban City Foods-Burger King. This pledge occurred roughly around the same time Gates and Appiah had secured their relationship with Microsoft to complete their version of the project.

On August 7, 1997 Matthew Mirapaul wrote an article that appeared in the well circulated New York Times entitled, Dream of Encyclopedia Africana Nears Reality. The very title causing the EAP to sound the alarm. Four days after the article was published the Acting Director of the Secretariat for the EAP, Mrs. Grace Bansa, composed a letter to Mirapaul chastising him for not recognizing the EAP in the role as torchbearers of Du Bois dream. She wrote:

To begin with the title confused me a bit, because I wondered which, dream you were referring to. If it is a new dream of some encyclopedia Africana by someone else, then the only problem we have with that person is the name "Encyclopaedia Africana." But if it is the Encyclopaedia Africana®™ Dream of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, then I can assure you that that dream became reality as far back as 1961 when Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois became a naturalized Ghanaian and set up a Secretariat for the publication of the Encyclopaedia Africana and became its first Director.  

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For Bansa the EAP was not just simply being left out of the conversation, the *New York Times* wrote as though their struggles and accomplishment did not even exist. Mrs. Bansa goes on to make a plea from a financial standpoint, “Judging from the resources available to us and judging from our achievements so far, I believe we deserve patronage from well-meaning Black people - and by this I mean Black people who would want to see their fellow Africans as achievers and not as losers…. We only wish such people would have greater understanding for African problems and help us stand on our feet.”

Bansa recognized that the EAP would most likely never be able to find donors or investors to match the deep pockets of a company like Microsoft. Not all, but many African’s struggles to thrive are due to their unstable, weak, corrupt and or at times hostile governments. Completing Du Bois vision is not a high priority for governments that are more consumed by their efforts to stay afloat. Bansa continues, “many African Governments are finding it difficult keeping body and soul together - let alone find money for an academic undertaking.”

Ideally, or perhaps not, all twenty volumes of the *Encyclopedia Africana* would have been written, edited and published on the African continent, and if the funds had come from the African people how much greater their joy would have been. Bansa generously recognized that this was not a reality and gave thanks to the African Americans who donated generously to help create the EAP website. But a website is not sufficient and she charged those contributors to see the dream through, “Dr. Du Bois

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
must have had a reason for bringing the Encyclopedia Africana Project to Africa and not to the USA. It is left to our fellow African Americans who have the resources to help us see this dream through rather than compete with us. Help us keep the Dream alive! Don't destroy it!”

While Gates and Appiah worked to complete their vision of Du Bois early dream, another voice of discontent arose from Dr. David Graham Du Bois the late son of Du Bois second wife, Shirley. When Gates and Appiah expressed their desire to publish their work using the term *Encyclopedia Africana* they soon discovered the rights were licensed to the EAP. Dr. David G. Du Bois clarified this claim in a July 12, 1997 interview featured in *The Prince George’s Post*. He commented, “We don't want any distortion of the Du Bois tradition or the Du Bois legacy which motivated me to intervene and we were successful and the Harvard people have recognized that their project is decidedly different from the project of Du Bois and Nkrumah, and the last word I got was ‘we wish you well.’ So, it has been resolved and resolved amicably.”

Alongside the EAP, and with the aid of Fisk University, Dr. David Du Bois set out to complete his father’s evolved dream, a dream altered by financial, social and political experiences.

Though Dr. David G. Du Bois was under the impression that the issue over the term “*Encyclopedia Africana*” had been resolved, it became apparent to him that the general public was being misled. On October 7, 1997 Dr. David Graham Du Bois writing

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8 Ibid.

as a Guest Columnist for “The Final Call” expresses great concern over Mirapaul’s article in the *New York Times*, the same article Bansa objected to. Dr. David Du Bois wrote:

... his only reference to the Accra-based Secretariat that is actually engaged in realizing Du Bois’ dream, and of whose work he and others connected with the AFROPAEDIA project are well aware, was “another publishing venture” which owns the trademark Encyclopedia Africana.... It is not surprising that neither the *New York Times* nor its columnist, Matthew Mirapaul, appreciate the significance of this collaboration and of the international efforts to guarantee the success of the Encyclopedia Africana project as envisioned by W.E.B. Du Bois.¹⁰

While Dr. David G. Du Bois was born, raised, educated and even taught within the United States, he sympathized with the plight of his stepfather’s adopted African homeland, and their efforts to bring the project to completion. Following in the footsteps of his stepfather, David spent much of his later years in the late 1990’s fostering support for the project in Ghana. Gates and Appiah respected the efforts of the EAP, but did not allow their inability to use Du Bois’s title “Encyclopedia Africana” to deter them from carrying out Du Bois 1909 objective, a project that encompassed Africa and her vast diaspora. Their justification was based on the fact that much of Du Bois own contributions and those made by millions of African descendants would sadly have been excluded from the body of work. Despite his misgivings over the improper use of the term Encyclopedia Africana and the ability of the reporters to completely ignore the efforts of the EAP, Dr. David G. Du Bois graciously recognized the significance of *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* when it

neared publication; "Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr., inspired by Father's original idea, have made a magnificent, state-of-the-art contribution to African and African American studies and humanities with Encarta Africana. Dr. Du Bois would have been proud."11

While Fisk University was undoubtedly a reputable partner for the EAP, Hawkins would later prove otherwise. In 2009, La-Van Hawkins was sentenced to ten months in prison for tax evasion for deducting between 2001-2003 some $5.3 million dollars from payroll taxes that should have made its way into the hands of the government. His sentence ran concurrently with an earlier sentence of 33 months for a wire fraud and perjury case dating back to 2004. As of late 2011 Hawkins was being sued for roughly $21 million dollars for trying to use another restaurant’s secret recipe.12 While the conviction and alleged acts of Hawkins occurred years after his donation to the EAP, and therefore may have had no significant bearing on the project, one cannot help but question the damage caused association.

Gates and Appiah did contact the EAP to ask if they would be willing to collaborate, but their offer was rejected. Therefore, as Appiah put it in his 2012 interview, “there was enough difference in what they were doing and still aiming to do and what we


wanted to do that it didn’t seem unreasonable just to go ahead and do it.” 13

Sadly by 1999 leadership within the EAP was struggling to keep the project afloat. What money EAP had was provided to them through a small stipend from the government of Ghana. 14

As explained by Gates in a 2013 interview, there was little he or Appiah could do to unite their seemingly common efforts:

...we reached out to them to create a partnership and they said no. And they were only doing Africa. Du Bois had three projects, his first vision was the whole black world. His second, was also to do the whole black world, his third vision was, when he moved to Ghana, was just to do the African continent. That’s the project that ostensibly claims to be still in existence, but nobody knows anything about it. Appiah and I reached out to them because I knew we were going to be able to do this and they said no, and they wanted to go their own way so we said fine. 15

And as of 2012 not one additional volume has been produced, proving yet again that the greatest barrier to editing the Encyclopedia Africana has always been rooted in financial challenges. For Appiah, this outcome was not surprising. Commenting in a 2012 interview, Appiah explained how support of this magnitude doesn’t necessarily come from government or international organizations, “An encyclopedia comes from the putting together of scholarly advisory boards, which we had already done. I felt that at that point they [EAP] had been at it for forty years and it needed to be done!” 16


Despite the efforts to include contributions from great minds scattered around the world, scholars such as Dr. Asante and Raymond A. Windbush, believe *Encarta Africana* to be a politically Eurocentric approach to examining the black world. Dr. Asante, a former chairman of the African studies department at Temple University and a founding father of Afrocentricity, was quoted in *New York Times* as saying, "What we have here is a commercial product for the white buyers…. It is a project that is flawed, because the people who created it, even though they have strong credentials in the white academies, do not understand the African world."\(^{17}\)

Dr. Windbush, served as director of the Race Relations Institute at Fisk University in Nashville and as an advisor to the Ghana-based project. His reservations about the project were that he believed the project to be lacking a sufficient number of contributions from Afrocentric scholars. *The New York Times* quoted him as saying, "I'm just disappointed that some of our great scholars, like on slavery in America, were not invited."\(^{18}\)

Attempting to encompass not just a continent, but also the diaspora of its people leaves a lot of room for error and criticism. Appiah readily admits that mistakes were made, as is excusable for any encyclopedia. However, every effort has been made to

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.
correct those mistakes in future editions.\textsuperscript{19} Gates and Appiah had no allusions about the project. They knew it was would be impossible to please everyone. Furthermore, readers’ consume information differently based upon the format it is presented in. In his 2012 interview Appiah commenting on the nature of the reader said, “people will say, ‘you wrote an article on Du Bois, and it was only twice as long as your article on Grimké, and Du Bois is more than twice as important as Grimké…people always want you to say more… with the digital world it doesn’t show itself that way, you just read the article, you don’t go around comparing.’”\textsuperscript{20}

This may be the great brilliance behind Gates and Appiah’s project, with two distinctly different versions of their work a greater audience could be reached. While Dr. Windbush felt that the electronic encyclopedia was not the "definitive view of Africa." he did acknowledge that it was "a good first step, a baby step."\textsuperscript{21} Clearly the project in its many conceptions was always politically motivated, and remains politically fraught.

\textsuperscript{19} Kwame Anthony Appiah, interview by author, Princeton, New Jersey, October 9, 2012.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.  
CHAPTER VI
RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

With any encyclopedia project new editions are to be expected in an effort to correct errors and add content that may have been lacking in previous editions. In 2005 Gates and Appiah in conjunction with Oxford University published the five-volume Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience, and only five years later the second edition hit the shelves. In his 2012 interview Appiah expressed little concern over the printing of future editions of the book, stating, “it exists and it is not going to run out and if it does they will print more, if people want it…. I’m a book person, I have my kindle, but to abandon books is not in my plan…. I got my copy.” 1 What is essential to Appiah is that the information be made available to people in ways they will actually use it, and different generations hold tight to their own methods. Appiah explains, “There is a sort of symbolic function of the encyclopedia to middle class and upper middle class families to having this thing there, this thing that says these are the things that we have done. The physicality of the book is making a statement, but again that’s for a certain generation.” How the information is to be used is for future generations to determine. No one can predict the methods of research a hundred, let alone ten years in the future, but neither Gates nor Appiah are too concerned by this changing reality. While the formatting of book and CD-ROM had been fundamental to the project’s success at the turn of the century, it was the creation, compiling and editing of content that gave purpose Gates and Appiah’s labors. What they have created is truly a

1 Kwame Anthony Appiah, interview by author, Princeton, New Jersey, October 9, 2012.
curated body of work, set apart from what has formerly been made widely available to
the academics and masses a like.

In June of 2009 Microsoft stopped selling all Encarta software products, and
MSN Encarta, an online service, shutdown just four months later. While Encarta does not
directly point the finger at Wikipedia for their downfall, Wikipedia’s numbers are hard to
visits that Web surfers in the United States made to online encyclopedias, according to
the Internet ratings service Hitwise. Encarta was second, with 1.27 percent.” Cohen goes
on to explain, “unlike Wikipedia, where volunteer editors quickly update popular entries,
Encarta can be embarrassingly outdated.”² For example, as by March of 2009 John Biden
had been serving as Vice President for two whole months but, “The entry for Joseph R.
Biden… identifies him as vice president-elect and a U.S. senator.”³ While it is expected
for encyclopedia articles to eventually become out of date, the window of time for online
articles has significantly narrowed. If consumers can easily recognize outdated
information then they might quickly abandon a product. Microsoft explained its decision
on a FAQ page for Encarta, and while the page is no longer posted, Cohen reports that it
once read, “The category of traditional encyclopedias and reference material has
changed…. People today seek and consume information in considerably different ways

² Noam Cohen, “Microsoft Encarta Dies After Long Battle With Wikipedia,” *The

³ Ibid.
than in years past. As part of Microsoft’s goal to deliver the most effective and engaging resources for today’s consumer, it has made the decision to exit the Encarta business.”

Conversely in March of 2012 Encyclopedia Britannica announced that it would stop publishing print editions of their product. For many students of the twentieth century, this announcement is a sad conclusion to a reliable resource that aided in numerous school reports and research papers. This shift can be attributed to many factors. First and foremost cost. $1,395, no small sum for a family, even if it can buy 129 pounds worth of information. Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia is hard to beat. Going digital is paperless and friendly on the environment. Upon the announcement to stop printing in March of 2012, Britannica found themselves sitting on 4,000 copies of their 2010 edition.

Du Bois Gates and Appiah’s political hope and was that an Encyclopedia Africana would dispel myths and prejudices long held concerning Africa the African diaspora. Du Bois recognized the African diaspora as a fractured unit, broken apart long ago by the acts of the slave trade and imperialization, but he initially thought that a work of this significance could unite this splintered family even though their ties had been severed hundreds of years before. Like Diderot, Du Bois recognized that no single work could embody the entire history and cultural contributions of the African diaspora. He envisioned his Africana project as a jumping point for future scholars to carry on the work, providing a foundation for intellectuals of the future. Though Du Bois had

\[4\] Ibid.

envisioned this work for most of his adult life, the timing was not ideal until the late twentieth century. Our knowledge and clarity about the peoples of Africa and its diaspora has grown exponentially over the last 40 to 50 years, thanks to the academic work of many intellectuals in many disciplines.

In the introduction of *Africana: The Encyclopedia of The African and The African American Experience*, Gates and Appiah recognized that their moment to bring forth the project was perfect given the wealth of knowledge:

A more objective knowledge of Africa has gradually emerged, both in Africa and elsewhere. Anthropologists began to describe the rich religious, artistic, and social life of African peoples. African historians have learned to interpret oral histories passed down in Africa’s many traditions, cross checking them against archaeological and documentary evidence to produce a rich picture of the African past. . . . Work in African American Studies has led to new understandings of the cultures of slaves and of the role of people of African descent in shaping the New World’s language, religion, agriculture, architecture, music, and art. As a result, it is now possible to comb through a great library of material on African history and on the peoples of Africa and her diaspora, and to offer, in a single volume, a compendium of facts and interpretations."

In addition, the means of accessing knowledge through a program such as Encarta were unmatched, in one of the clips Gates expresses great pride in the unique work, "We have finally a technology that can explore and explain the expressive features -- music and dance, art and cinema, literature and story-telling -- that are the heart of cultural achievements of people of African descent." For students of the twenty-first century,

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African and African American focused courses have come to be a natural part of the curriculum of their education. Gates in a 2013 interview illustrates the great strides that have been made in incorporating not only African content, but various content outside the periphery of a Eurocentric male focus:

I started teaching when I was twenty-six years old and no one talked about the word multiculturalism. I have seen things in English departments move from the time we had the battle to get black texts recognized as part of the cannon back in the 70’s and 80’s till now where no self-respecting English department would call itself that if it didn’t have specialist is women’s literature, gay literature, third world literature and currently African American literature. The most dramatic way for me to put this is that when I started teaching, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was not even in print. I used it in a class in 1976 at Yale on the African American novel and I had to Xerox it and circulate it in that form and now it sells hundreds and thousands of copies a year. Now we have the *Encyclopedia Africana*, we have the *African American National Biography* and we have the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, none of those things were remotely thought of back in the day, so it’s a major sea change. African American literature is here to stay in the academy and no one can take it away.\(^8\)

The printed version of the encyclopedia and *Encarta Africana* are both politically significant academic works, which have laid a solid foundation of curated knowledge that will continually prove substantial to the academic world. *Africana: The Encyclopedia of The African and The African American Experience* or any version of it thereof will never be used as a source as was the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, prior to 2012. Today the most popular online English encyclopedia is Wikipedia, a free product of dubious and uneven quality that has hastened the end of many traditional encyclopedias. Even Britannica has had to evolve in order to survive and be viewed as an academic resource that millions

\(^8\) Henry Louis Gates Jr., interview by author, Boston, Massachusetts, March 19, 2013.
continually turn to. It used to be sufficient for an encyclopedia to be revised and reprinted every couple of years or so, but that standard has changed.

From grade schools to graduate schools students are wisely instructed not to cite Wikipedia as a source because just about anyone with access to a computer can provide edit the content. However, Wikipedia’s influence cannot be ignored, and as of 2009 around 1,300 articles were being added daily to the site. With close to four million articles as of July 2012, Wikipedia has become a “go to source” for everything from pop culture to quantum mechanics. While it is true that just about anyone can edit a Wikipedia page, evidently very few ever do. Despite a generally cavalier approach to academia, the public still want reliable information. In 2009, Bobby Johnson of The Guardian reported on the finding of Ed H Chi, a scientist who works at the Palo Alto Research Center (Parc). Along with his team, the Augmented Social Cognition group, Chi made some rather interesting discoveries that help to explain the evolution of Wikipedia:

The way the site operated had changed significantly from the early days, when it ran an open-door policy that allowed in anyone with the time and energy to dedicate to the project. Today, they discovered, a stable group of high-level editors has become increasingly responsible for controlling the encyclopedia, while casual contributors and editors are falling away. Wikipedia – often touted as the bastion of open knowledge online – has become, in Chi’s words, ‘a more exclusive place’ . . . change by a casual editor is more likely than ever to be overturned, while changes by the elite are rarely questioned.10


10 Ibid.
While it is good advice from an academic standpoint to never cite Wikipedia, grade school teachers and college professors cannot stop students from using it as a general source. Advice for students is to use Wikipedia as a starting point, a general reference that should allow one to understand the scope of a particular topic. Nevertheless, students and curious seekers of knowledge should be cautious of Wikipedia’s shortcomings. Professor Appiah warns that Wikipedia should be viewed as crowd sourced product. One can expect articles on mathematics and computers to be clear and correct, and that any incorrect information can and often will be quickly made correct, but that is because there is a right answer. However, there are a lot of questions where the answers are not so cut and dry. The reader must learn to make a balanced judgment based on the partisan views being expressed, which can be challenging when Wikipedia offers, in Appiah’s opinion, “a weird assembly of bizarre views.” 11

Because Africana: The Encyclopedia of The African and The African American Experience, like any other printed encyclopedic work is not free, it will be viewed by the masses as a completed reference work, confined to its years of publication. However, the information made available by Encarta Africana is as easily accessible as Wikipedia. It is free to download and it takes just a little more effort. Is it updated as frequently? No, but a core quantity of information does not need to be updated daily. Nevertheless, as Gates explains in a 2013 interview, the press has not stopped in the production of reference work. “We just last week (mid-March 2013) published the second edition of the African American National Biography…12 volumes of biographies of African Americans. And

then a year or two ago we published the *Dictionary of African Biography* in 6 volumes. The work keeps going…so we have fulfilled Du Bois dream, there is no question about that.”

And while there will always be room to make corrections and print future editions, the essential balanced, researched and curated body of the work is complete.

The *Encyclopedia Africana* was one of the greatest academically engineered projects of the twentieth century designed to politically and socially amend the racial and academic landscape by altering long held negative Imperialist perceptions of the supposed culturally insignificant black world. In this thesis I have outlines the political objectives of the Africana Encyclopedia from its original conception by W.E.B. Bu Bois through his thwarted attempts to bring it to fruition. I have made it evident that while Du Bois’ vision was never completed in his lifetime, his political struggles to lay the groundwork of the Encyclopedia Africana resulted in the lighting of a torch that was picked up carried across the finish line by Gates and Appiah. I have provided an account of *Africana: The Encyclopedia of The African and The African American Experience* and *Encarta Africana’s* historical evolution, postcolonial politics and attempts to span Harvard Square and the “hood.” I have provided evidence of the challenges due to evolving technology and competing sources, and that despite these factors, the work of Gates and Appiah will prove to be a more trusted, balanced and politically significant body of knowledge. Born of the Pan Africanist, Civil Rights, Multicultural and Postmodern movements it is also a powerful political tool in the deconstruction of the Eurocentric curricula of most Western universities and schools.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Interviewer: Natalie A. Bruford

Interviewee: Professor Henry L. Gates Jr.

Interview Setting: Interview conducted over the phone, March 19, 2013.

Interviewer: Since you have started your journey in education has seen a shift in the way students view multiculturalism?

Interviewee: I started teaching when I was twenty-six years old and no one talked about the word multiculturalism. I have seen things in English departments move from the time we had the battle to get black texts recognized as part of the cannon back in the 70’s and 80’s till now where no self-respecting English department would call itself that if it didn’t have specialist is women’s literature, gay literature, third world literature, and currently African American literature. The most dramatic way for me to put this is that when I started teaching, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God was not even in print. I used it in a class in 1976 at Yale on the African American novel and I had to Xerox it and circulate it in that form and now it sells hundreds and thousands of copies a year. Now we have the Encyclopedia Africana, we have the African American National Biography and we have the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, none of those things were remotely thought of back in the day, so it’s a major sea change. African American literature is here to stay in the academy and no one can take it away. Plus, with tools like Norton Anthology anyone can teach it anywhere, it’s affordable, you can teach a course in a textbook. A course through a book, that’s the great expression that Norton uses, that is what they aim to make possible.
Interviewer: Was your goal to create a paradigm shift? To make people take notice of a history that can no longer be discounted, the oldest history of the human race?

Interviewee: That was my goal, the goal of Anthony Appiah, Wole Soyinka and I shared was to fulfill Du Bois dream. Du Bois was the first person to realize that the equivalent of a Black Encyclopedia Britannic could effectively fight racism by collecting and codifying the achievements of people of African American descent from the earliest times, ancient Athens, classical Greece and Rome and all the way up to the twentieth century. Du Bois was convinced that it was ignorance that was responsible for racism. If only we could gather all the facts together like Diderot did with the Encyclopedie in France in the eighteenth century and Bell and others did with the Encyclopedia Britannica at the same time that it would show that our people, our ancestors created great civilizations. He articulated the idea and he spent much of his life from 1907 till his death in Ghana in 1963 trying to edit this encyclopedia. So we picked up the mantle and ran with it.

Secondly it was part of my larger dream of editing reference works on which your generation and every other generation could build. Once you do it someone else could come along twenty years later or fifty years later and do a new edition, so that it would never have to be done from scratch again. That is true of the Encyclopedia Africana as well as the African American National Biography and the Norton Anthology of African American Literature.
Interviewer: Can you describe the politics of creating of establishing the African American and African Studies programs in the country and your role in this at Harvard?

Interviewee: I was hired by the program in Afro America studies at Yale, that was my first job. I had joint appointment in Afro American Studies, as we called it then at Yale and in the English department, but my primary appointment was in Afro American Studies, that’s how my career began. I started as a lecturer and was then promoted to assistant professor, then associate professor, but I got tenure in the English Department at Cornell. I had a joint appointment in Africana Studies at Cornell. Then Duke didn’t have a program so I was in the English Department at Duke and then I was brought to Harvard. I got my foundation, my most important lessons from Yale, from two mentors, the chairman Charles Davis, the first chairman who hired me under whom I worked. He was a literary critic and the first African American to be tenured in the English Department at Yale and then the great black historian John Blassingame, who was the first black historian to get tenured at Yale. When Charles died Blassingame was the chair and I was trained by both of them. So when I came to Harvard, I had the plan in my head. I had the seeds; I just had to find the right soil to plant them in, to modify and to experiment. It’s like taking cuttings from a vineyard in France and growing them in the New World, like in California, Argentina or in Chile, and that is what I was able to do. I owe all my success to Charles Davis and John Blassingame. It has grown far beyond anything I could have imagined.

I was chair for over fifteen years, now Evelyn Higginbotham has been the chair for six years. We have over 30 professors, we teach 31 African languages, we have a
PhD program, that’s within the department and I am still head of the Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research. It’s got a 60 million dollar endowment, we’ve got fifteen fellows a year who come from all around the world, they spend their sabbaticals and write books here, we have an art gallery. We are starting the Copper Gallery for African and African American Art, named for Ethelbert Cooper, one of my friends from Yale, a Liberian. We have The Image of the Black and Western Art Project; we have 23,000 square feet just for the institute. It’s amazing! At Harvard there is nothing but open arms, I had as they say “the wind at my back,” I had president Rudenstine who thought that African American Studies should be an essential part of a liberal arts education. And that’s amazing, that’s a miracle, and not just a gecko for affirmative action appointments. With a president like that and then the dean who hired me, Henry Rosovsky, he felt the same way. He had been involved with the creation of the department back in the 60s, and always hoped that it would take off. With Rosovsky, who hired me, and Rudenstine as president I had ten years. I had the support and patronage of the president of Harvard Universities; I would have to be an idiot to not produce the program. Then my first appointment, Anthony Appiah, who is a genius, and we were able to do it together. I was the chair and he was the director of the undergraduate program and then the director of the graduate program, and he wrote the PhD program. It was amazing and we were the team! [African American centered classes in high school?] It’s become naturalized, a natural part of the curriculum. It wasn’t that way when I started and it’s that way now and I’m a happy dude about it.
Interviewer: What can you tell me about the Encyclopedia Africana Project based in Ghana?

Interviewee: They were of a biographical dictionary. They were independent, and we reached out to them to create a partnership and they said no. And they were only doing Africa. Du Bois had three projects; his first vision was the whole black world. His second, was also to do the whole black world, his third vision was, when he moved to Ghana, was just to do the African continent. That’s the project that ostensibly claims to be still in existence, but nobody knows anything about it. Appiah and I reached out to them because I knew we were going to be able to do this and they said no, and they wanted to go their own way so we said fine. That is why we were called Encarta Africana the CD Rom, which we did with Microsoft and then the book which came out the same time and it was called the Africana Encyclopedia, instead of the Encyclopedia Africana and that was it, so we didn’t have anything to do with them.

We just last week published the second edition of the African American National Biography in 12 volumes. This is separate from the encyclopedia. This is 12 volumes of biographies of African Americans. And then a year or two ago we published the Dictionary of African Biography in 6 volumes. The work keeps going, we published the encyclopedia, we published AANB and now its in two editions. The first was in 8 volumes and now it’s in 12. And then we published the first edition of the Dictionary of African Biography, so we have fulfilled Du Bois dream, there is no question about that. We are now doing the dictionary of Caribbean and Latin America Biography, which is the third part of the triangle. We did the African American National Biography, we did the Dictionary of African Biography and now we are doing Latin America. It’s exciting,
we will have wrapped up the African world, the Black/Pan-African World and I’m very happy about it.

Interviewer: By all accounts that I have read, it sounds as though the Martin Luther King After School Program was successful. What its closure due to funding?

Interviewee: It was very successful, it was just a matter of getting funding and I didn’t have a lot of time to spend doing it. I wanted churches to take it over, in the same way that Jewish communities have Hebrew schools. So we started with some churches in Baltimore and here (Boston) but that has to be something that the churches themselves take over. We couldn’t do it for them and I’m too busy creating new reference works. But now we are developing a curriculum on genealogy and genetics following my Finding Your Roots series. Everyone should be working on their genealogy, so I had this crazy idea that we could turn around the attitude of black kids towards learning again. When I was growing up in the 50’s the blackest thing you could be was an educated man or an educated woman. I have this belief that too many of our kids have lost that passion. And what we could do is reignite it by having each child do their family tree in social studies courses so they can learn how to interview, how to process between oral testimony and written testimony and they learn how to use the archives. And then in science class we teach them about evolution, biology and DNA, through ancestry tracing. Every kid will have the DNA tested and then while we wait for the results we will teach them how the science works. Who wouldn’t be turned on by that curriculum? What’s your favorite subject…your favorite subject is yourself. And genealogy is all about yourself.
Interviewer: If you had the chance to meet with Du Bois over a cup of coffee, what would that conversation go like?

Interviewee: If I could have a conversation with Du Bois, well I would probably just be so amazing I would be slobbering all over myself. I would want to talk to Du Bois about whether he thought capitalism could be reformed. He would be shocked at the level of black incarceration rate, and the huge child poverty rate still within the African community, in spite of the fact that the black middle class had quadrupled since Martin Luther King died. So ways in which capitalism could be reformed, since his vision of a communist revolution is dead, and he would be smart enough to understand that that was off the table. Secondly, about the relationship between economic freedom and political rights. Third, I would just want to interview his about how he paid his dues. I’d want him to tell me stories about all the stuff I’ve read about, I’d want his version. I would be in awe, he is my hero, there is no doubt about that. He would probably find me too conservative, not radical enough, he would probably find Cornell West more akin to his politics, but I would hope that he would be pleased with my institution building and with the encyclopedia and biographical dictionaries that Anthony Appiah and I have done.

Interviewer: What advice would you offer an inner city high school teacher seeking to help her students connect to the content?

Interviewee: Don’t allow yourself to be disillusioned, keep your energy and your vision and your dreams. You can’t save all the kids and there are factors that are larger than you, your abilities and your enthusiasm but keep the faith.
Interviewer: Natalie A. Bruford

Interviewee: Professor Kwame Anthony Appiah

Interview Setting: Interview conducted in Professor Appiah’s office October 9, 2012.

Interviewer: For you this project started some time ago, can you tell me about it?

Interviewee: Oh yes, we started thinking or talking about it in the 70’s, at least the possibility of doing it. There were many dinners with the three of us quite often. It came up and it seemed like a good idea, crazy really but the idea to really try and finish it. I was a graduate student, Skip was a graduate student and Wally was teaching as a visiting professor at Cambridge. It was before I had been to the United States, when I first came here which was in 1988 or 1989, academic year. We did some preparatory work, contacted the Encyclopedia Britannica and we talked to Charles Vandurren who was then the editor of the Encyclopedia Britannica and they said what they thought it would take to do it in terms of money. So we went to the foundations, and nobody was going to put up that much money.

Skip kept trying to find someone. But they felt no one would want to do it unless it was on CD-ROM. Then we started meeting with software people. We met with people at Disney, we saw people at Netscape, eventually Skip was talking to a publisher, he accepted the pitch to do the first print edition. Still couldn’t quite believe it. We figures out it would cost about 2 million dollars; if we could get the other half from Microsoft then we could get going. We flew out and had meetings with Microsoft and they said yes but then they said, “Okay, it’s 2 million dollars, you are going to need you to do it
quickly!” So we didn’t have very long to pull it together, it was essentially about a year. Which for something that didn’t have anything written on day one was amazing. The big thing that changed between when we first started thinking about it in the 1970’s and 2000’s was that there was about 25 more years of work in African American and African Studies. An encyclopedia, as they say on Wikipedia, should not contain original research; well I think that’s a funny idea. If you’ve got the piece written by someone who knows something that isn’t in the rest of the literature then you should put it in. The encyclopedia depends of the existence of a body of primary material, and there was just so much more [in 1999] than in the 1970’s and certainly infinite amounts more than when Du Bois had first suggested it in the first decade of the twentieth century.

We thought it was apt that the first encyclopedia of the Black World should begin as a CD-ROM project and therefore be able to represent the expression of music, photographs, film, and speeches. This could actually be an encyclopedia in which you could hear and see Du Bois and King. That was one reason why it took another year to do the book, in a CD-ROM you insert the visual material into the text and the text automatically formats around it, but in a book you have to design every page, and if you are going to have a huge number of images, as we did, then every page has to be conceived and looked at by a designer and that just took a lot longer.

Also with the CD-ROM version we knew that we could have a program of regular updates and just keep revising it. We have had basically three versions of the book, and the Oxford version is the biggest. To revise the text of the book is a big deal, but with the CD-ROM it was easier and now it has been absolved into the Encarta. I think it was nice
to have the main body of work as a separate thing but in a way you want the knowledge about the Black World to be part of the knowledge about the world.

One of the nice things is because we were working with Microsoft we could push at what the edge of technology could do. We put our prototype with the design team at Brisby and developed timelines for music and things like that. We could not have done that before.

We got the money and rented space in Harvard Square, actually from the divinity school, and hired a bunch of graduate students and senior editors. We had a manager to manage a team. If you know you need to produce a million words in a year then you can determine how many you need to produce in a day. The real thing that made it possible was the vast library of material that now exists in African American works. We didn’t have to start from the ground up. One thing we decided early on was that it was going to be genuinely diasporic. In the end a third of the material was about Latin America, the black presence in America, where I would say the research is less easily available. In those areas we did have to work with scholars that were on the edge of that expertise. We had the basic bread and butter articles, on the countries and on the main topics. We had interpretive essays that we asked particular people to do, which was spread around in the print edition and the CD-ROM. It was kind of amazing that it came together that fast.

Skip is a very good manager; he has been a director of the Institute for a long time. I’m not really the managerial type so for me the hard part was to be someone’s boss. You have to fire people if they are not doing the work and I don’t like that much, and either Skip likes it or he is just more use to that sort of thing.
Interviewer: How did you define your distinctive roles on the project?

Interviewee: First of all he was the person that got the funding, I trailed along and did some of the writing and worked with the team but he had the contacts and he knew how to persuade people to do it. There was a rough division of labor. He did more of the African American material while I did more of the African material. There was a senior editor for each region. It wasn’t far from our offices so we could wander over when we had the time, see what was going on, and we would have meetings with staff.

Interviewer: Did anything surprise you about the work?

Interviewee: To me the most interesting thing was learning about the diaspora in America. I knew a certain amount about Africa and North America, everyone knows about Brazil as a place for the African diaspora but to know that Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, all these places have a black history. We had articles on the long established diaspora in India, people from east Africa taken as slaves into the Arab world, and there are obviously a lot of people of African descent in the Arab world.

Interviewer: Education is obviously essential for the two of you, how did the Martin Luther King-After School Program get started?

Interviewee: Once we had these tools we were able to go out and start these centers. Boston and Baltimore were the ones we were closely associated to but they were done in other cities like San Francisco and Newark. Skip helped to raise money to get it into schools. I remember going to a school in Newark where the kids were using the product in class. A student was at a computer and he was looking at the screen then looking at my
face and he couldn’t quite believe that I had showed up. I remember going to a church basement in Baltimore to start the program with the mayor who is now the governor. We had a curriculum, we had foundation money, and we hired a good manager to work with a group of teachers to develop the materials. It lasted as long as the finding lasted. The CD-ROM doesn’t exist anymore because everything is online as part of the general Encarta. Another spin off was the Africana.com website which eventually ended up in AOL Time Warner. It is slightly different but again the thought was to create this database of information. Figuring out different ways of sharing it with teachers and students was challenging.

The main reward was seeing the kids. On the book tour adults would say that they had been waiting for this all their life, which was moving. But these African American kids were learning to work with the curriculum, they were being taught to use word processing properly, and other general computer skills. This helped them deal with the digital divide. It is interesting to see how all these things spun out of this essentially educational project. It is a scholarly project but it is fundamentally about the dissemination of information and making it available.

I’m glad we did it not in the least because the way in which this sort of information is now generated and shared on the web is uncurated, people just put up things and nobody cares. Wikipedia is not bad but it is very uneven, there are lots and lots of sites where people put up things and much of it is just fantasy, lies or interpretations. However, Encarta is a large body of work and information that has been checked.

**Interviewer:** How easily accessible is this reference works to the general public?
Interviewee: I assume that most school libraries have access to Encarta through the web. I think there is a certain value to having it as a separate thing because people that are looking for something specific know where to go. There is so much rubbish in the world and more everyday on the web. There is lots of very good stuff, but the ratio of good to bad is not so terrific. Every encyclopedia has its mistakes, we have our mistakes, and in various editions you try and correct things, then of course the world changes. But I think having some curated information is the difference as opposed to Wikipedia where the information is crowd sourced. You can predict which things will be good on Wikipedia, the mathematical articles will be good, people that are interested in computers and computing are mathematically inclined and it is clear what information is right and what is wrong. There are a lot of people watching who will correct the information. An article about a living person can be easily corrected as well. But, there are lots of things where you have to make a balanced judgment. There are partisans all over the place and various views, so with Wikipedia what you get is a weird assembly of bizarre views.

Interviewer: The Encyclopedia Africana Project in Ghana struggled with legitimacy. They claimed that they had been bestowed with the honor and duty of fulfilling Du Bois dream of editing the Encyclopedia Africana. Did their claim interfere with validity of your work?

Interviewee: The Encyclopedia Africana Project did struggle with legitimacy, when Du Bois died he was in Ghana, after trying to do it for more than 50 years. He had the support of the government and the OAU and it was reconceived. Though his original vision is more like what we did. The one based in Ghana was going to be by Africans.
about Africa. They did publish some biographical volumes under the direction of a decent person but he did not have the resources. After Nkrumah died, he lost the connections, it was Nkrumah’s connection to Du Bois that led to the support, but with him gone, it got lost.

And they have not done very much, we did contact them and ask if they wanted to collaborate but they didn’t want to. There was enough difference in what they were doing and still aiming to do and what we wanted to do that it didn’t seem unreasonable just to go ahead and do it. It (an encyclopedia) does not necessarily come from governments or international organizations, it comes from the putting together of scholarly advisory boards, all of which we had already done. I felt that at that point they had been at it for 40 years and it needed to be done!

I think it was closer to what Du Bois originally sketched, and more in line with our own interests. Skip and I were people who had worked all our grown up lives with African American studies, and have always been very aware of the connections of the parts of the diaspora, which of course Du Bois was too. There is some evidence that he suggested an *Encyclopedia African* because the great *Encyclopedia Judaic* had just come out in the first decade of the twentieth century. If you look at that you naturally think diaspora, because the Jewish world is a diaspora. Du Bois inhabited the diaspora, he co-founded the Pan African movement, he moved to Africa at the end of his life. He represented the United States in Liberia at the inauguration of the Liberian president. Liberia is a very important place in the African diaspora.

I suppose it would have been harder for us to do what we wanted to do if they had already completed their work but they had done 3 volumes in 40 years and biographical
volumes, nothing on country essays. There are some important scholarly works that have been sponsored by international organizations, the *UNESCO General History of Africa* is very good, but how are you going to write the history of Nigeria, without upsetting someone. There are disadvantages to writing with that kind of support. A critical discussion of Nkrumah after he was ousted in the coup would be possible to write but not while he was alive. They were laboring under these circumstances, but their main challenge was money.

**Interviewer:** What might have happened if Du Bois had succeeded in creating the *Encyclopedia Africana*?

**Interviewee:** It was almost funded in the 1930s but it got squashed, probably because he was too left wing, it was part of general anti-communism. It is interesting to try and image what would have happened if he had succeeded. There was a fair amount of material, he wrote a lot of proprietary essays, but in a way it was fitting just as the first great European encyclopedia came about during the European enlightenment, with Diderot. It is interesting that the encyclopedia on the black diaspora has sound, images, moving images as well as text. It could not have been done this way until the time we did it.

Articles for Encarta didn’t have to explain what Martin Luther King looked or sounded like on the mall, we could just show it. We wrote articles integrating all the elements, the moving pictures, the maps, the timelines, the photographs, the audio clips of which there were many. Skip managed to persuade the people at Motown to give us the rights to use clips of everything for a very small amount of money. So again, instead
of describing a piece of musical work you could just listen and that makes a difference in what you write.

The other thing which we learned, which one is bound to learn when doing both a print and CD-ROM version at the same time, is that that you can put in a lot of available data on the CD-ROM because the storage cost of additional information is nothing. The marginal cost is practically zero, whereas in the book additional information takes up more pages or more words. In the book people would say, “Oh, you wrote an article on Du Bois, and it was only twice as long as your article on Grimke, and Du Bois is more than twice as important as Grimke.” The digital world doesn’t show itself that way, you just read the article, you don’t go around comparing. People always want you to say more.

Students now live in a world where they can just grab what they want, watch it, and make their own interpretations. And that’s just it, now you have so much more access to materials; you don’t just have the book in the library about Hawthorn, all the Hawthorn letters are on the web. There are diaries on the web of people who knew him that were published at the time so you can assemble evidence and check peoples claims against your own reading, it’s a different world.

Interviewer: Do you think students really know where to go to find accurate information?

Interviewee: The trouble is there is just so much, that’s been the problem. It is not that these kids couldn’t eventually figure it out. If their job for six months is to figure out if this article about King is correct, they could do that. But if you want to write something
about Dr. King next week you have got to identity the right body of primary and secondary material to look at, and that is a deep skill, a lot of us older people do not have it because older scholars grew up without it. We have to learn how to do it. Scholars learned how to use libraries and archives, now we have to learn how to use the web. It is constantly changing, every so often you check and things disappear and things move. The correct way to reference a link to is say the day that you accessed it, but it is no use to somebody to tell him or her what the web said on August 11, 2012 if it doesn’t say that anymore.

The way the web operates is like a vast encyclopedia. If you Google something you will find the Wikipedia article, but you will find other encyclopedia articles and often they are pretty much the same, cut and pasted. In the old days it was a real project to find the answer and now you can go looking yourself, sometimes you find the answers to these questions. You can contact people with Facebook and find information and ask anyone if they know the answer. It changes everything.

The general idea of a Wiki is to provide a place to interface, to ask questions on certain topics. The real challenge now is like the challenge that led to the invention of the research library, you got all this stuff in the library but you don’t know where to find it unless someone organizes all of it. These things need to be done with online databases, because there is too much stuff there. Google tells you what the favorite answer is to your question because of the way the algorithms work. But if you are coming at it in a new way then you don’t want to know the favorite answer, there can be a million answers, which there often are in research, but that is not helpful. In the end one needs centers of authenticated, reliable information. People can say what they would like, there is free
speech but you want correct information and you want to train people on how to find it. Some things can be very glossy, unreliable and totally driven by an agenda. Learning how to be slightly skeptical about those things is part of learning to research. There are people who know things, and will immediately see that there is a problem because they are trained but the average person in not in a position to do that. I think it’s a very interesting time.

I give a fair number of lectures around the country and I would say in the last year or two five or ten times I’ve been introduced as having been on the faculty at Drexel University, by a provost. I have never been to Drexel University. But it has gotten into some database somewhere, and when people are looking around for things to say, it doesn’t seem unreasonable so they say it, why doubt it. I have no idea where it started, I should probably look it up and find out, so on the other hand many people just look at my own websites. I never interfere with my own Wikipedia page, because in my view it’s a very weird account of my life. With anything we should look at the author and try and examine what it is they are trying to do, sell books or such; which is something we should teach people.

**Interviewer: Is it essential to continually print more editions?**

Interviewee: Well two things, we got money to put these in libraries in Africa, and it is still the case that internet access is still problematic in Africa so having a physical book is essential. It exists and it is not going to run out and if it does they will print more, if people want it. I don’t really think it is a question for a person like me, I’m a book person, I have my kindle, but to abandon books is not in my plan. There is something
satisfying about the digital version because of all the additional material so we will print more if the next generation is interested in the book. There is a sort of symbolic function of the encyclopedia to middle class and upper middle class families, to having this thing that says these are the things that we have done. The physicality of the book is making a statement, but again that is for a certain generation. As long as the information is available to people I don’t myself think that it matters much. It should be made available in the ways people will use. I got my copy.
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