



IN MEMORY OF PROF. ANA MONTEIRO FERREIRA: AFROCENTRICITY AND WOMEN STUDIES

**Molefi Kete Asante
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All humans travel from birth to death, this is our common experience. We neither escape it nor ignore it. However, it is something remarkable that a person rises from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from being a student to achieving recognition for work well done, from relative obscurity to legacy. It is the case with Professor Ana Monteiro Ferreira who shattered boundaries, broke barriers, and announced her willingness to challenge both patriarchy and hierarchy. It was her temperament to contest what she considered to be irrational, unethical, and unjust.

I did not simply write this essay to praise Ana's good name, but I can tell you this; she was as fine a scholar, as great a friend, as authentic as a human, as outstanding a professor as you will ever know. She loved her family, her dear João, Pedro and Sofia, her sister, Olímpia, and her grandchildren. She never tired of speaking of Professor Laura Pires, her mentor, and friend. She became for my wife, whose name is Ana Yenenga, and I, a confidant, someone we trusted with our opinions and emotions. She was our consultant and our counselor.

Our grandchildren traveled with us from the time they were four years old by train, car, and airplane. After one particularly stressful trip we had with our grandson Jamar and granddaughter Ayaana, we were at the end of our minds and told her of the antics of our granddaughter who may have been twelve at the time. We had begun to fear traveling with her because of fights with her brother, temper tantrums, and outright stubbornness. We told all of this to Ana Ferreira, she listened and spoke with a definitive personal authority. "She will be alright," she said to us "I was the same way when I was a child." Indeed, Ayaana is now completing her college degree as an outstanding student and superior person. She remembers Professor Ferreira fondly as someone who believed in her when she did not know who she was or what she was doing.



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When Ana Ferreira arrived in Philadelphia, she was already a mature thinker having been educated in Portugal with a background heavy in Women's Studies, sociology, literature, philosophy, and social theory. This foundation prepared her for an encounter with the emerging episteme being advanced by Africologists who were examining in detail for the first time the possibilities of the intellectual gifts that Westerners could receive from Africa, South America and the First Nations peoples of the world. She was not the first person from Portugal to perform this feat but she was the first to truly understand it.

I remember having a debate in 2016 with the eminent scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos at one of the major conferences of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, where the President of AERA, Dr. Joyce King, insisted that the marquee event be this discussion between Boaventura and myself with a couple of other respondents. His work is quite spectacular in some way because he has arrived at the point where he sees that the West might learn something from the South.

I have said as much in my books, *Facing South to Africa* and *Radical Insurgencies*. Although I had been a teacher to Ana Ferreira she knew the European intellectual tradition much better than I did and often gave me advice regarding specific thinkers. She had told me that Sousa Santos knew the limits of the Western thought but had no idea of the gifts of Africa or of African people. In the discussion before these hundreds of educators I advanced the idea that what we have not tried was the episteme emerging from our investigations, explorations, and theorizing from the perspective of African agency. To his credit, Sousa Santos saw this point and accepted it.

There was a reason that scholars had not explored this way of viewing; the reason was the racial ladder that had been created to classify and describe human beings. It was



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the same way that Police Officer Chauvin treated George Floyd when he put his knee on his neck until he died. Black people as less than was the formula for murder. If one thought of whites as superior and all other humans as lesser beings then there would be no reason to take serious the thoughts or lives of African people. The ladder that had been established by people like Charles Darwin, Blumenbach, Linnaeus, and Buffon attached descriptions to people who were Nordic-Aryans, Mediterranean, Orientals, American Indians, and Africans. Of course, since this ladder with its descriptions created by the European writers became an acceptable part of the European understanding of humanity there was no way to break the hold on the mind of the West. It was as if whites in America and elsewhere said, "We all know there is nothing in Africa to discuss."

I think that this is where Ana Ferreira decided to question the accepted reality and to listen to other scholars who believed that there are many ways to view humanity. Africans, for example, have always known that human beings had different languages, complexions, hair textures, and traditions, but Africans did not classify people as being superior or inferior because of such differences. Differences exist, but we are all human and it is our interconnectivity and not our intersectionality that defines us.

It is possible to see how Jean-Francois Lyotard influenced Ana Ferreira's *The Demise of the Inhuman: Afrocentricity, Modernism and Postmodernism*, when he writes in the introduction to his *The Inhuman* that "Humanism administers lessons to us. In a million ways, often mutually incompatible." She knew that humans could prevent interrogations by offering suspicion, and by engaging in "thinking that gnaws at everything."

So, Ana Ferreira questioned, challenged, and provoked those of us in the field of Africology to see that the race paradigm that had been artificially created, because in the end humans were 99 percent the same, was a false paradigm. Thinking racially prevented



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many Europeans from appreciating that all humans originated in Africa and that it might be a good thing to explore what is it that Africans have thought about issues of justice, governance, kinship, and humanity. We had to rethink the contrived "evidence" of African inferiority and women subservience to man...

Every episteme affects the shaping of the mind and the mind affects the shaping of the knowledge and therefore culture. Each cultural group over time comes to regard its knowledge as true. Knowledge should be based on truth so that it will sustain the culture in which it arises. In this light, epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge and questions why we think the way that we do and why we believe what we believe? It interrogates the source of knowledge thereby questioning the study of origins and therefore the study of humanity from the distant past until now.

Ana Ferreira quickly saw that Afrocentric theory was grounded in an African *sebayet* (wisdom) based on human history which began in Africa and as such opposed the false narratives of Africa and her people grounded in the construction of race. Afrocentric theory is therefore regarded as a danger to the most prominent epistemes that consider people of African descent as genetically inferior and in some cases subhuman. When choosing avenues that lead to truth, epistemes should be investigated in relation to where African women, men and children are placed in theories and stories particularly those pertaining to creation.

Menes united the clans of Egypt around 3400 BCE. Nearly eight hundred years after Menes, the African philosopher, physician, geometer, Imhotep built the first pyramid, the Sakkara Pyramid for King Zoser, and Ana found this knowledge awesome enough to know why we started with Homer instead of Imhotep in our approach to human intellectual



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history. The pyramids contained much more of human knowledge than anything in existence around 2600 BCE.

Ana Yenenga and I traveled throughout Kemet with Joao and Ana Ferreira, looking past its Christian and Islamic history, to its original African moral and ethical ideas to understand the meaning of the ancient culture. It was African in every sense and that is why we call it classical Africa.

What was developed by the ancient Africans of the Nile Valley were prototypes of many of the cultural products, icons, contributions that we see in other parts of the continent. Classical civilizations exist because they have the capacity to inspire other nations and societies

Maat, for example, is the first spiritual idea in the ancient world, predating anything in Europe, Asia, or the Americas. It is fundamentally about unity, truth, justice, righteousness, order, harmony, balance, and reciprocity. These are the wellsprings for other African societies.

It should be clear that this race idea, once unleashed on the world, led to the acceptance of its murdering dagger by various other nations. It is not something that affects only Europeans, although this is our current and most popular reality; the Arabs have continued the dangerous race paradigm until now it sits in the heart of a country like Sudan and has affected Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, and other nations in the Islamic world.

We know from science that it was on the virgin plains, near the Omo River, and at the river's edge in ancient Africa *Homo sapiens* stood up and walked. Humans prospered and lived, multiplied and traveled to other parts of the land, and during this time there were no multiple races that continued until now, and although there appeared, in time,



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many families, these did not constitute separate races. There was but one people, humans.

The advent of various ideologies of conquest, beginning with the males' conquest of their mothers, and the dawn of patriarchy led to the hierarchical notions of one gender over others and one people over others. There is little wonder why we are in the current quandary over the conception of humanity or the question of equity, equality, and justice

It is, in effect, the organizer of Western civilization's most potent weapon against humanity and has become the penal colony of all failed ideas. Like ether, which was considered a rarefied elastic element accepted as permeating all spaces including that between particles of matter, with vibrations that made light and various radiations until it was proven false, so, too, race as a discriminating and dangerous idea has been proven false. We are all humans being human.

Of course, as far as we know this ascripto-biological notion of hierarchy appears in just a few cultures; it is not something that was at the very beginning of human history. Western "man" perhaps the leading promoter of dualities made it possible for ascripto-biological domination to take place in the minds of intellectuals who saw only savage and civilized. As we have shown the evidence points to the European proselytizing of this concept of race in every conceivable institutional manner. One might consider Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* as a portrait of the stampede of Eurocentric domination of the native cultures of South America.

Racial invasions and persecutions of the First Nations Peoples can be seen as the super spreaders of the race virus. In southern Argentina, as in Chile, and other areas of South America, the European conquest meant ruthless murders of First Nations people as



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if they were non-human as seen in the archival information at the Museo Yamana in Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego.

No ancient African philosophy argued for the separation of people into human and subhuman, being and nonbeing, Jew and Gentile, Arab and heathen, or "pure" white and nonwhite. These bifurcations, honoring separateness and the attendant traits applied to various peoples, truly meant that we would have an unnecessary layer between groups of humans. These separations were not the results of strategies dictated by Africans or planned by Africans to keep apart from whites; these were the machinations of power held by whites to arrange a false reality. This schizoid order of conceptual arrangements would ultimately bring masochistic misogyny, racial bigotry, and brutal extermination of fellow humans.

Power is expressed in a series of interconnected institutions that carry out the policies of a particular governing group. Having the speaking voice and the writing hand the West described the concept of race in terms that would privilege whiteness and condemn blackness and prosecuted this description through its institutions. This is the power of life over death. It is ultimately the bringer of violence, of separateness, apartheid, separation of humans into various sectional ties.

So now, how do we become human? Our practical objective is to dismantle the *House of Race* to erect the *House of Humanity*.

To dismantle means to take a structure apart piece by piece and if necessary, throw them into the trash heap of history. This requires us to revisit the structure, examine its central parts, and remove them from the angle of our perspective to provide an avenue toward recuperating the society. We know that the common wisdom is that it cannot be done because it has been here for centuries, but all ideas and ideologies can be



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transformed, found useless, dispensed with, and replaced with other and perhaps better ideas and ideologies.

Ana Ferreira's human project was grounded in the optimistic belief that human beings can see truth and then transforming themselves and their societies. Our humanity is neither to be seen through some negation of other people nor as being the opposite of cultures considered inferior barbaric, degraded or effeminate.

Ferreira quickly realized that America's dynamic ethno-racial configuration was comprised of African Americans, Asian Americans, Euro Americans, Native Americans and Latinx. Various theories, such as Afrocentricity, decoloniality, and deconstruction, have been employed to understand the complexities of the vestiges of power and domination. Like embers of a dying fire, the remnants of white supremacist's views as seen in the attempted seizure of the American capitol on January 6, 2021, can still cause a burning fire. In the end, however, the darkness will come and the end of one of humanity's most enduring penal colonies, race, will be banished from the earth. Until that time arrives human beings will still have the books and articles of Ana Maria Monteiro Ferreira as signposts to a more human and humane society.

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