Afrocentricity is the centerpiece of human regeneration. To the degree that it is incorporated into the lives of the millions of Africans on the continent and on the Diaspora, it will become revolutionary. It is purposeful, giving a true sense of destiny based upon the facts of history and experience. The psychology of the African without Afrocentricity has become a matter of great concern. Instead of looking out from one's own center, the non-Afrocentric person operates in a manner that is negatively predictable. It takes no great gift to begin to identify the symbols which will, in their completeness, transform the whole of the African world and necessarily influence European and Asian thought.

(Asante, 1988, p. 1)

Introduction

Molefi Kete Asante is the world's foremost expert on the subject of Afrocentricity. As progenitor of the term, Asante has initiated a dialogue about Africanity that has penetrated multiple community levels and has been unmatched throughout the world. Scholars from virtually every field of study have utilized, commented upon, or built careers around the Afrocentric paradigm (Hamlet, 1998; Turner, 1991; Zeigler, 1995). In short, Asante gave the world a new vocabulary for discussing, interpreting, and understanding Africana experiences—one which, as the epigraph states, cautions African Diasporic peoples from “looking out from one's own center” to make sense of and function in the world. Whether people have accepted or rejected
the ideas inherent in the paradigm, the fact is that people all over the world have grappled with what it means with respect to how they interpret the human condition.

Asante is among the top 10 most-cited Black scholars, holding company with William Julius Wilson, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W. E. B. DuBois, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, and Martin Luther King, Jr., among others. Although he has been quoted as saying, “I am not pleased with my level of production, because I have far more books in my head than I have energy to produce” (Shea, 1997), Asante has written more than 60 books and 300 articles. He has positioned himself among the elite few who can claim to be the most prolific scholars in the world. More than 4,000 of his published and unpublished papers, as well as personal correspondence, are housed in the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Even though Asante’s distinguished career is marked primarily by his association with Afrocentricity, he has accomplished much more. Not only has he developed competency in the Akan, French, Spanish, Arabic, Greek, German, Yoruba, Latin, Swahili, and Middle Egyptian languages but he is also cofounder (with economist Robert Singleton) of the Journal of Black Studies, the leading vehicle for refereed, academic discourse concerning Africana peoples. He has been editor of the journal since its inception in 1969. Furthermore, Asante developed and launched (at Temple University) the first departmental doctoral program in African American studies in the nation. As of 2004, there were only two other such programs (at the University of Massachusetts and the University of California, Berkeley). Several other universities offer joint doctorates with African American Studies or doctoral minors and area certificates. Moreover, he cofounded the National Communication Association (NCA) Black Caucus, the National Afrocentric Institute, and The World University, and was the first president of the Society for International Education, Training and Research (SIETAR). In 1978, he was elected to serve a two-year term as vice president of the International Communication Association, and he served a two-year term as vice president of the National Council of Black Studies from 1988 to 1990.

Asante has been recognized by countless organizations for his commitment to liberatory progress, as exemplified via his research, community service, and teaching. Because of his achievements, he has received many accolades, not the least of which are his doctorates of humane letters from Sojourner-Douglass College and the University of New Haven. He has held endowed chairs and distinguished professorships at several universities, including Howard and Marquette, and served as consultant to many colleges and school districts concerning curricular reform. Asante has also directed more than 120 doctoral dissertations—an impressive record of advisement by any standard.

Although his scholarly presence can be witnessed all over the world, he has concentrated his studies on the African Diaspora, writing and speaking about African descendants in the United States Germany, Sweden, Italy, Mexico, France, China, Japan, Brazil, Senegal, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica, Trinidad, United Kingdom, Zimbabwe, and Canada. For nearly 40 years, he has built an entire career as an ambassador of social justice and has advocated the reformation of Black Diasporic cultural consciousness. This most serious endeavor has led to his “return” to Ghana, where he was “enstooled as a traditional leader in Ghana in 1993, with the title Kyidomhene of Tafo and the Akyem name Nana Okru Asante Peasah” (Turner, 2002, p. 713). Asante shares this Ghanaian name with a king who granted land for the building of a cultural center in Ghana. He has also established residency in Ghana and returns periodically from his U.S. home. This link has fortified his development of discourses about African-centered experiences.
Indeed, the moment the word centricity is discussed, his paradigm of Afrocentricity emerges, not only among academicians but also among people across generations, cultures, and belief systems. Very seldom does any concept borne in academia permeate the public consciousness as has Asante's brainchild, Afrocentricity. Afrocentric is an adjective that is used to refer to commercial goods such as clothing and textiles as well as to one's philosophical and cultural orientation to the world. Remarkably, entire corporate marketing campaigns have adopted “Afrocentric” themes to appeal to Black consumers. From Asante's intricate skein of multimethodological but primarily humanistic writings has emerged a standpoint that has been criticized (Lefkowitz, 1996; West, 1993) as much as admired (Ani, 1994; Zeigler, 1995).

Although scholars have written mostly about Asante's academic contributions, this chapter presents a more comprehensive approach by discussing how his life conditioned his scholarship and how his scholarship has helped shape intercultural communication studies. We do this by exploring his personal background, academic experiences, and contributions to the field of communication. This discussion is followed by a conclusion and a list of selected references from his body of writings.

Biographical Information

Arthur Lee Smith, Jr., now known as Molefi Kete Asante, was born in Valdosta, Georgia, on August 14, 1942, just 20 miles north of the Florida state line—an area of pinewoods, sandy soil, and Spanish moss. Asante noted, “That [how far it is from the Florida line] is important to say because the line was not a real demarcation of where my relatives lived. They lived throughout southern Georgia and into Florida” (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004). His parents, Lillie Mae Wilkson and Arthur Lee Smith, Sr., both native Georgians, were blue-collar workers, as were the majority of U.S. Blacks in the 1940s. They both came from loving households, but Asante's father's family was slightly better off than the Wilkson family. In the late 1800s, Asante's paternal great-grandfather, Plenty Smith, was a farmer who owned an impressive 150 acres of land in Georgia. Although the revenues from this land did not last three generations (until Asante's childhood), the memories and value of self-determination did; hence, they were impressed upon Asante and his 16 siblings.

Lillie Mae Wilkson, a native of Naylor, Georgia, was a “domestic who cooked and cleaned in White people's homes” (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004). Although she had only a fourth-grade education, she was very wise. Arthur Lee Smith, Sr., originally from Dooley County, Georgia, worked for the railroad until he injured his back and could not work, which only exacerbated the economic hardships his family of 17 children was already experiencing. In an oral history interview with historian and previous doctoral program student Diane Turner, Asante described the modest conditions in which he was raised:

We were poor. Certainly, there were great joys in our family and so on, but the poverty meant that you were denied certain things. I went to school with shoes that had holes in the bottom of them. I experienced poverty in the sense of hunger, of sometimes not having enough food to eat. My parents had a hard time feeding all of us. They were creative in the way they cut the bread, diluted the juices, and used the meat gravies. There were eventually 16 of us. All of them didn't live in the same house, at the same time, but at least 9 children lived in the house at one time. (Turner, 2002, p. 715)
Asante was the fourth child and the eldest boy and had three older sisters. Growing up in the racially segregated south, Asante began picking cotton and laboring in tobacco fields before and after school, until he was 17 years old. He was raised with Christian values and encouraged to have cultural pride and to be hard-working and self-reliant—lessons he learned from both parents. He recalled, “My father was the smartest person I have ever met. He was brilliant. He went to 6th grade, but he read everything. He studied French and German and he took correspondence courses on how to repair radios and watches” (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004). Asante described his mother as being gregarious and loving to be around a lot of people. He surmised, “[T]hey both were an inspiration to me. I guess that is why I love being around people; I love to read and I love critical thinking.” His love for reading and critique was evident even as a young student.

Academic Background and Experience

With Molefi Kete Asante's interest in reading cultivated at an early age, he enjoyed composition and literacy throughout school and performed well academically. He attended elementary school in Valdosta, Georgia, until he was about 10 years old. In 1953, at age 11, Asante's parents enrolled him in a boarding school named Nashville Christian Institute in Nashville, Tennessee, operated by the Churches of Christ. He matriculated through Grade 12 and graduated from high school at the Institute. In the summers when school was no longer in session, Asante would return home to work in the fields and earn money before he returned for the fall term. After graduating from the Nashville Christian Institute, he was accepted at Southwestern Christian College in east Texas, where he earned his associate of arts degree. He then attended (and became one of two Black students to integrate) Oklahoma Christian College in Oklahoma City. After receiving his bachelor's degree, he was granted a four-year scholarship to attend Pepperdine University in California. This was a critical juncture in his education because heretofore he had been groomed for the clergy. He made speeches and recited Bible verses in his home church and found that the church congregation responded very well to his oratorical delivery.

At Pepperdine University, Asante was mentored by and took classes from Fred Casmir, whom he described as “one of Hitler's youths” (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004). He meant that Casmir had been recruited to join an organization known as the Hitler Youth, which began in 1926 and soon included more than half of Germany's youth. The Hitler Youth (known in Germany as Hitler Jugend, or HJ) was originally called the youth movement of the German Workers’ Party (later named the National Socialist German Workers’ Party). Boys and girls could join the HJ at age 10, and the organization functioned as both an early indoctrination of Nazi ideology and an introduction to military training in preparation for becoming a soldier. Somehow, despite Hitler's promilitary and antieducation stance within the HJ, Casmir still became interested in academia. He was particularly intrigued by research concerning persuasion, undoubtedly germinated by his participation as one of Hitler's youths.

Casmir's work in persuasion earned him a national reputation at that time, and Asante was pleased to study with him. In 1965, Asante graduated from Pepperdine with his master's degree in speech communication. He had learned about argumentation, social influence, and public communication strategies, and he was trained well enough to feel comfortable transitioning into a doctoral program. He decided to remain in California and continue his graduate education, and pursued a doctorate at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). His primary mentors at UCLA were Charles Lomas, Ned Shearer, and Paul Rosenthal. Asante's dissertation advisor, Charles Lomas, specialized in revolutionary rhetoric and taught courses aligned with his research interests. Lomas's national reputation was
garnered from the speech discipline's embrace of his pioneering work, *Agitator in American Society*. When Lomas left UCLA for a sabbatical leave to Britain, Ned Shearer replaced Lomas as Asante's committee chair and dissertation advisor. Maulana Karenga came to UCLA to give a talk at about this time, and Asante was impressed by the accuracy of his nationalist critiques of European dominance and his thesis that African Americans have too often conceded to European Americans their agency to define themselves culturally. This notion of a displaced sense of agency to define the cultural self stimulated Asante's thinking about worldview and cultural orientation and led to some early unwritten formulations that would later become the paradigm known as Afrocentricity. Asante credits Karenga for having “opened my eyes” (Turner, 2002, p. 718). Shortly thereafter, Asante became president of the local chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

In 1968, Asante defended his dissertation on Samuel Adams and the rhetoric of agitation during the American Revolution. When he finished writing his dissertation, he simultaneously completed the writing of what would one year later become his first published academic book: *Rhetoric of Black Revolution* (Asante, 1969). This book was soon followed by *Rhetoric of Revolution*, written with Andrea Rich (Asante & Rich, 1970), and *The Voice of Black Rhetoric: Selections*, written with Stephen Robb (Asante & Robb, 1971). Given that 1969 was the latter part of the civil rights movement, the Black Panther Party had been founded in 1966, and Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated in 1968, these themes for Asante's books were not only timely but also cutting-edge for the fields of communication and Black Studies. They were directly aligned with both his educational training as a rhetorician specializing in the discourse of agitation and his developing political and cultural consciousness.

In 1968, aside from his graduation with a doctorate in speech communication, two critical moments occurred in Asante's career. First, Asante convened with a few other Black communication scholars at a Speech Association of America (now the National Communication Association) conference and protested the exclusion of African American communication studies from mainstream disciplinary discourse. Along with Charles Hurst, Jack Daniel, Lucia Hawthorne, Donald Smith, and others, Asante assisted in the development of what is presently known as the Black Caucus of the National Communication Association. Second, Asante began his first job as a tenure-track assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Purdue University. He was the only Black professor at Purdue. Along with Orlando Taylor, who was hired at Indiana University in 1966, Asante was one of the first Black communication scholars teaching at a Big Ten university.

Despite the pervasive presence of racial tensions, Purdue was a great location from which to launch a career because it was a large, well-respected university with great resources. During the one year Asante was there, a White liberal scholar named Robert Kibler befriended him and was one of only a few colleagues who actually engaged him intellectually. This friendship was not enough to keep Asante at Purdue, however. Because living in the Midwest was too uncomfortable for him, he decided to accept an offer to move back to UCLA “under an edict from the chancellor of the campus that all departments should hire African Americans” (Turner, 2002, p. 716). Asante recalled:

They brought me back for two things: One, to join the speech communication faculty as an associate professor with tenure; and two, to direct the Center for Afro-American Studies. They needed a candidate who could be acceptable to both the Black Panthers and the US Organization, a group created by Maulana Karenga out of the debris of the Watts rebellion. I was the person acceptable to both factions. (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004)
The offer was attractive, so at age 27, Asante took both positions and held them from 1969 to 1973, during which time he also cofounded (with Robert Singleton) the *Journal of Black Studies*. In a personal interview with the first author of this book, Asante explained that he and Robert Singleton approached the publisher of Sage Publications in 1969 with a proposal to start the new journal. In the tradition of Black radical activism, Asante and Singleton authoritatively stated, “Look, you don't have any Black journals. You have 12 to 14 journals, and there is nothing on Black people. We want you to publish this journal and give us full editorial rights” (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004). To their surprise, the publisher at Sage accepted their offer immediately and asked Asante to be editor and Singleton to direct the advisory board. The *Journal of Black Studies*, which is published six times per year, maintains the highest circulation, subscription, and citation rates among all Black Studies journals.

In 1972, Asante was a visiting professor at Florida State University before completing his contract term as director of the Center of Afro-American Studies a year later. He also traveled to several countries throughout Africa in 1972 (including Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya) and had a life-changing experience. After having made this journey, he could no longer ignore the fact that his cultural and ideological orientations resonated more with ancestral behavioral and cultural traditions of Africa than with those of the United States. Opoku Ware II, an Asantehene, suggested “Asante” as a last name. Asante noted, Kete was the name I took from a good friend of mine who was a student at Cal Tech at the time I was at UCLA. His name was Kete Bofah... Molefi was a name chosen in solidarity with the South African struggle. It’s a Southern African name, actually Sotho. (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004)

Molefi means “keeper of the traditions.” So Asante shifted from his Anglicized name of Smith to his new, more ideologically satisfying and culturally appropriate name: Molefi Kete Asante.

After his visiting professorship at Florida State University and his trek to Africa, Asante planned to leave UCLA. The Center for Afro-American Studies prospered; however, the speech department did not fare so well. In 1974, the Department of Speech stopped offering a doctoral program and began making financial cutbacks. In 1973, before the downgrading of the speech program, Asante left UCLA to accept a post as professor and chair of the Department of Communication at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo. This was a major decision because he had a toddler daughter, Kasina Eka, and he had to consider the career of his wife of seven years, Ngena, a St. Louis native who was an economist. She supported the move, and Asante moved the family to Buffalo, New York, where, at the young age of 30, he was promoted to full professor with tenure and appointed to chair of the department.

Asante maintained his position as professor and department chair at SUNY for 12 years, and he was chair of the department of Black Studies for two of those years. He stepped down as chair of the department in 1979 and was divorced from his wife Ngena after 13 years of marriage. He then took a one-year visiting professorship at Howard University. In 1981, Asante married Kariamu Welsh, a choreographer. He and his new wife accepted one-year Fulbright Fellowships to study mass media and dance, respectively, in Zimbabwe. They were formally invited by the deputy minister of communication, Naomi Nhiwatwa, who also held a doctorate in communication. During their one year of study, they helped to establish two institutions: the Zimbabwe Institute of Mass Communication (ZIMCO) and the Zimbabwe National Dance Company. Shortly after their Fulbright research was completed, they had a son, Molefi, Jr.,
and in 1984, they decided to move to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Asante was appointed professor and chair of the Department of African American studies at Temple University. He chaired the department until 1996 and has remained at Temple University ever since. In 2002, he married Ana Yenenga, a registered nurse, who serves as his agent for literary and speaking engagements. During the time he has been married to Ana Yenenga, Asante's reputation for scholarship and political activism has increased. He was chosen as one of the 12 African scholars to present plenary sessions at the African Union's historic meeting of 500 African and Diasporan intellectuals in Dakar, Senegal in 2004. In addition, because of his Afrocentric philosophy, he was selected to write a column for the Johannesburg City Press, a paper with a circulation of 3.5 million in South Africa. In October 2004, he was asked to draft the preamble to the constitution of the United States of Africa.

Asante has influenced legions of scholars, yet he finds himself continually inspired by the writings of Cheikh Anta Diop, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Maulana Karenga, Marimba Ani, Theophile Obenga, and Marcel Griaule. Black rhetorician Charles Hurst's early book, *Effective Expression: A New Approach to Better Speaking* (1965), was awe-inspiring for Asante because no Black person had authored a mainstream text in communication before. It encouraged him to strive for excellence despite the challenges. Ignoring envious colleagues who admonished him to "slow down" and "not work so hard because you might run out of ideas," Asante has always been a community organizer and has always been a prolific writer, saying,

> When I became a full professor, I decided that I was not going to be like other full professors: that is, not going to produce. I wanted to continue to produce, and I wanted to demonstrate that if you work hard, and if you are consistent, and you are focused, you could really make a major impression on the world. (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004)

**Developing Afrocentricity**

Afrocentricity is a paradigm that simply promotes the following:

[A] perspective which allows Africans to be the subject of historical experiences rather than objects on the fringes of Europe. This means that the Afrocentrist is concerned with discovering in every case the centered place of the African... [T]he Afrocentric study of phenomena asks questions about location, place, orientation, and perspective [italics added]. (Asante, 1993, pp. 2–3)

It is an orientation that centralizes Africa in every area of inquiry. The potency of this approach is in its ability to facilitate the retrieval of agency in defining African Diasporic identities, concepts, and worldviews. Its precursor, Negritude, promulgated by Senegalese president Leopold Senghor, never gained the prominence of Afrocentricity. Although it emerged from West Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, it was assigned to the province of a literary paradigm.

For those who are unfamiliar with Afrocentricity, it is important to note that it is a conceptual and ideological lens through which one sees the world as an indigenous, collectivistic African. So, for example, an Afrocentric psychologist explores the mind holistically from the perspective of an African with a traditionally collectivistic worldview; therefore, the mind is conceived as part of an interdependent relationship between the mind, body, and spirit. Although other aspects of holistic psychological health (such as spirituality) may be included, from an Afrocentric perspective, the mind or psyche is not detached from the rest of the self.
In fact, Okechukwu Ogbonnaya (1994) recommended an Afrocentric remedy to the seemingly static classical psychological perspective that does not account well for an identity in motion. He recommends understanding the person as an intrapsychic community. In this community, several selves (or identities) reside, and they must do so harmoniously to avoid chaos and psychological disorder. Each self exists, not in competition with other selves (as happens with an individualistic cultural and conceptual orientation to psychology) but as a collective that appreciates the differences other selves offer. This interplay mirrors the movement and rhythm of life that must be present in any community, and that are necessary for psychological, spiritual, and physical health.

Afrocentricity was conceived while Asante sat in a speech class as a student at UCLA. He heard an instructor discussing the definition of speech as “uninterrupted spoken public discourse” (Asante, 1970a; 1970b). He was baffled by this negligent, grand theoretic notion of speech, which did not apply to his experience as a Black man growing up in a traditional Black church. The call-and-response between an inculcating preacher and engaged congregation and the overlapping affirmation of the message via glossolalia, instrumental rhythms, and oratorical cadence were dynamic facets of speech as exemplified in the experience of the Black church, but they were missing from this professor's explanation of what constitutes public speech. Asante knew this slippage in thinking had to be reconciled, and Black rhetoric had to be accounted for in some way. Then, it dawned upon him, “If we [Black people] had to define speech, our definition would have to include all those ‘Amens’ and ‘That's rights’” (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004). That moment marked the critical turn for Asante, and he subsequently began to critically examine “the location of the African” in every context, whether it was on television, on the radio, in person, or in the curricula. As an Afrocentrist, he continually investigates location, place, orientation, and perspective. There is a distinct difference between an Afrocentric orientation and a Eurocentric one. One unique facet, besides the obvious fact that one sees the world through an African worldview and the other through a European one, is that Afrocentricity is in part marked by sentinel statements. Asante offered an example:

I turn on the television, for example, and there is Henry Louis Gates, hosting his “Wonders of the African World” series (on the BBC and PBS cable stations). He says, “I may travel to Africa but Harvard is my home.” Already, by making that statement, I say, “I can locate him”—I can intellectually locate him by the statement that he has made. These are sentinel statements, and these sentinel statements tell me basically where people are. All of us make them; it just gives you a general idea where people are coming from. So, that sentinel statement allowed me to know exactly where he was. (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004)

Asante contends that Afrocentricity has provided African American studies a critical core it was previously missing. Too often, Asante criticizes, African American studies has become a series of courses as opposed to a set of perspectives concerning the study of people and phenomena. It has become devoid of a focused place where a scholar can build multiple disciplinary [meaning the African American studies discipline] theories that do not replicate course offerings and perspectives in other departments. He posited, “We locate it differently; I mean we can look at the same text, but we do a whole different thing. We do Afrocentric critiques. That's what we began to do and that's critical work that gives you different answers.” (M. K. Asante, personal communication, April 11, 2004). By this statement, Asante is suggesting that Afrocentric orientations toward the world are unique in that all phenomena are interrogated with respect to how they fit in a larger, global picture. Rather than accepting that the classical rhetorical canons are invention, organization, style, memory and delivery, for
example, the Afrocentrist will ask what other classical perspectives there are. If it is evident that classical excludes non-Europeans, then the Afrocentrist thinks about the legacies of the Ghanaians, Senegalese, Egyptians, Caribbeans, Chinese, Japanese, and so on. After such a search, it is likely to be discovered that there are classical canons outside Europe that predate Aristotle and teach us things Aristotle did not imagine because it was not part of his universe of discourse.

Because of this kind of influence of Afrocentricity, scholars have critiqued Eurocentric international politics and domestic economic policies, for example. Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity are not competing paradigms. Eurocentricity promotes the ideals, perspectives, values, beliefs, practices, and motifs of Europe; Afrocentricity, without replacing Eurocentricity, seeks to promote the ideals, perspectives, values, beliefs, practices, and motifs of Africa.

Afrocentricity has been criticized for being retrogressive with respect to homosexuals and women. The debate about this issue of homosexuality, as it relates to Afrocentricity, emerged after the following statement written by Asante was published:

Homosexuality is a deviation from Afrocentric thought, because it makes the person evaluate his own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness. While we must be sensitive to the human complexity of the problem … we must demonstrate a real antagonism toward those gays who are as unconscious as other people… The rise of homosexuality in the African American male's psyche is real and complicated. An Afrocentric perspective recognizes its existence, but homosexuality cannot be condoned or accepted as good for the national development of a strong people. (Asante, 1988, p. 57)

This Black nationalistic stance has been interpreted as abrasive and exclusionary. Some readers find this declaration so off-putting that they discount the whole paradigm and write off Asante entirely. For others, this was a risky statement that exemplifies an ideological approach some are afraid to place in writing. In either case, Asante continually refutes the claims that he is homophobic and reiterates the purposes and investigative concerns of the Afrocentric paradigm as being disconnected from patriarchal, dominant interests and in favor of liberation for all Blacks. As he explains why he wrote that statement, he reiterates his concern that homosexuals have relational interests and seemingly consistent individualist orientations that do not always jibe well with the collective interests of the composite, progressive Black Diasporic community.

In spite of the controversy around this paradigm and the beliefs of its progenitor with respect to homosexuals, Afrocentricity remains the most pervasive canonical approach in the fields of African and African American studies. It has affected other fields including communication, sociology, social work, literary criticism, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and many other disciplines.

**Contributions to Communication Research**

Although Molefi Kete Asante has spent the majority of his career maintaining productivity and employed in both communication studies and African American studies, all his degrees are in communication. Therefore, many of his early writings are in this field. This segment of the chapter explores his contributions to the field of communication as seen in three subdisciplinary areas of inquiry: rhetoric, media and public communication, and intercultural and interracial communication.
Trained to be a rhetorician specializing in the rhetoric of agitation, Asante wrote about eight articles and three books on the topic within the first three years after graduating from UCLA. Because he had been taught to deconstruct the impetus and exigency of rhetoric, in his first academic book, *Rhetoric of Black Revolution* (Asante, 1969), he systematically uncovered the politically charged practices and objectives inherent in revolutionary discourse. By addressing the strategies, tactics, themes, and audiences of militant rhetoric, he was able to develop a structure for analyzing the nuances of Black and non-Black revolutionary rhetoric (Asante & Rich, 1970a; Asante, 1970b). Asante offered some samples of this type of rhetoric in the first book (Asante, 1969), but then, in the same vein as Carter G. Woodson's (Woodson, 1925) *Negro Orators and Their Orations*, Asante and Robb (Asante & Robb, 1971), introduced 20 famous Black rhetors and their speeches for future rhetorical consideration. The orators included including David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, Benjamin Mays, H. Rap Brown, Stokeley Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The release of *Contemporary Black Thought* (Asante & Vandi, 1980) signaled a critical turn in Asante's work. He was no longer concerned principally with just the formation of agitational rhetoric; instead, his focus shifted to the ideology of Black cultural consciousness. He investigated the aspects of rhetoric that influenced Black audiences and began to ask new questions about what inspired them, not necessarily what agitated them. One place where he uncovered unique dimensions of Black rhetoric was within the context of the Black church (Asante, 1970a; 1970b). In examining oratorical features within the Black church, he discovered linguistic practices at work, what are now called tropes or constitutive components of a Black rhetorical canon: repetition, call-and-response, polyrhythm, and epic memory. Repetition refers to the use of the redundancy of themes, phrases, and words to stimulate the audience. Call-and-response, through its interactive form, holds the attention of the audience as the speaker's rhetoric issues the call (to which the audience responds with Amen!, Hallelujah!, Alright! Preach!, or Tell the truth!). The call-and-response can also be nonverbal, as is demonstrated through polyrhythm. The multiple rhythms within the rhetorical episode include the organ, the drums, the speaker's cadence and speech patterns, and the congregation's verbal responses. These parts of the canon are enhanced by epic memory, which refers to the preacher's invocation of ideas that call to mind relevant parts of the congregation's individual and collective experiences.

In the late 1970s, the canon was not so well defined, however. The concept of nommo, or the spoken power of the word, had become well-known, but there was much work to do beyond that. Asante helped to outline several of these rhetorical tropes, but more importantly, he helped to develop an Afrocentric frame in which to understand these patterns. The advent of Afrocentricity came with the 1971 release of his landmark essay “Markings of an African Concept of Rhetoric” (Asante, 1971), which was published in *Today's Speech* (now known as *Communication Quarterly*). Any scholar interested in Afrocentricity will see the subtle and not-so-subtle traces of Afrocentricity in that essay as Asante unravels a critique of western intellectualism while speaking honestly, yet fervently, about African rhetoric and its “concern for coherence and participation, but also in its relationship to the stability of the traditional society” (Asante, 1971, p. 16). His groundbreaking and best-selling books—*Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Asante, 1980), *The Afrocentric Idea* (Asante, 1988), and *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Asante, 1990)—explored these ideas in depth. Because of Asante's multifaceted program of research, his conceptual work concerning Afrocentricity was
being developed in concert with his other adjoining areas of research: Black language, Blacks in the mass media, interpersonal communication, and interracial and intercultural communication. Obviously, these early think pieces on Afrocentricity laid the foundation for his continuing work in Africana studies and communication studies.

Media and Public Communication

Asante’s work regarding the mass media and public communication began in the mid-1970s. His first published book (with J. Frye) on this topic was *Contemporary Public Communication* (Asante & Frye, 1976). Throughout his writings, Asante has discussed the effect of televisual images on Black cultural consciousness and argued that television was used as a tool to rally people into the civil rights movement because there were frequent reports on demonstrations, agitational rhetoric, and social justice initiatives. Asante pointed out that television also often showed White storeowners protecting their stores and restaurants, leaving an implicit message that the private interests of White citizens were of more importance than the collective public interests. The effect of television on Black consciousness was multifold. Televised demonstrations in one part of the country could be shown to others in another part of the country, and the result was greater sympathy and a more galvanized set of activists. For some, the images shown “shattered their dreams of a humanitarian society” (Asante, 1976, p. 139). Maintaining this line of inquiry, he coedited *The Social Uses of Mass Communication* with Mary Cassata (Asante & Cassata, 1977), which explored producer constructions and audience consumption of Blackness via public mediated communication. Realizing the need for a companion text explicating the rudimentary aspects of mass communication discussed in their *Social Uses* anthology, Asante and Cassata also coauthored a mass communication textbook (Asante & Cassata, 1979).

Asante’s ongoing analyses of U.S. media control of cultural mindsets piqued his curiosity about whether similar issues existed throughout the African Diaspora. So, when he conducted his Fulbright research in Zimbabwe, he decided to address the challenges and disparities of mass communication resources and needs in Zimbabwe, releasing two funded research monographs in 1982: *Media Training Needs in Zimbabwe* (Asante, 1982b) and *Research in Mass Communication: A Guide to Practice* (Asante, 1982a). After articles and books comparing Black and White television, his last monograph concerning mass media was an Afrocentric study, coauthored with Dhyana Ziegler (Asante & Ziegler, 1991) that broadly explored mass media in Africa. Asante’s research concerning public communication enveloped critiques and explanations of institutionalized forces at work within a given society. One example of this is his essay with Alice Davis (Asante & Davis, 1985) on Blacks in the workplace. Despite the fact that this work would be presently categorized as organizational communication, it fits the description of public communication as well. By examining it outside of its disciplinary borders, Asante affords us a glimpse at how Afrocentric analyses traverse disciplinary borders and help to illumine habitual practices that serve to subdue the unique cultural voices of institutional members.

Intercultural and Interracial Communication

In much the same way that the preceding research has helped to outline new directions in the field, Asante attempted to do the same groundbreaking work in intercultural communication, a newly emerging part of the field in the early 1970s. Even as he began to make segues in this area of endeavor within communication, he was elected as the first president of the newly forming Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR). Truly, the nature
of his writings within each line of his research is persistently interdisciplinary. This partly explains his attraction to Black Studies, which by nature is interdisciplinary. Intercultural and interracial communication scholars have always admitted and embraced the hybridity of perspectives, methods, and approaches to the study of race and culture—albeit usually dominated by Eurocentric paradigms, at least within U.S. literature. If there is a satisfying home for Asante's work in communication, intercultural communication is it.

There were several influences on Asante's thinking about race. As previously mentioned, he read and was initially inspired by DuBois, Garvey, and Karenga. He studied and advocated the teaching of Black rhetoric (Rich & Asante, 1970) via his research and activism as he cofounded the NCA Black Caucus. Furthermore, he had resided and gone to school in Tennessee, Oklahoma, Indiana, and California, and eventually moved to New York and Pennsylvania. So, he had many socially and racially different experiences, beginning when he was a child picking cotton for money in the fields of the racially segregated south. As a teenager with a job shining shoes, without provocation he was spat upon by one of his White patrons (Early, 1993), and as an adult he routinely experienced racism and discrimination within the predominately White institutions in which he has chosen to work throughout his career. So after years of witnessing and personally experiencing dehumanizing acts of violence and disregard, “transracial” or interracial communication was a natural, therapeutically gratifying area of research interest because it gave him a place to psychologically work through and conceptually articulate the effects of a racially subjugated people.

His earliest writings, Toward Transracial Communication (Asante, 1970c) and How to Talk to People of Other Races (Asante, Allen, & Hernandez, 1971) were sponsored by the Center for Afro-American Studies and the Transcultural Education Foundation, two organizations with which he closely worked. Subsequently, he landed two book contracts with well-reputed academic presses to write about interracial communication—one with Harper & Row and the other with Prentice Hall. Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America (Asante, 1972) and Transracial Communication (Asante, 1973) were the two publications (the latter was more well-received). These books set the stage for other articles and books on African American communication carryovers (Asante, 1975) and intercultural communication (Asante & Newmark, 1976; Asante, Newmark & Blake, 1979). Eventually, Asante's landmark book, Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication (Asante & Gudykunst, 1989), was written. The first edition of this book, published 10 years earlier with Eileen Newmark and Cecil Blake (Asante, Newmark, & Blake, 1979), had modest sales and limited use in the field, but the second edition, coedited with Bill Gudykunst (Asante & Gudykunst, 1989), was sine qua non. With insightful chapters written by leading scholars in intercultural studies, the Handbook remains a critical source for explications of various paradigms central to the study of race, culture, and communication. Although Asante chose not to coedit the third edition with Gudykunst, he coedited (with Virginia Milhouse and Peter Nwosu) a spin-off of the Handbook titled Transcultural Realities (Milhouse, Asante, & Nwosu, 2001).

Asante's contributions to communication inquiry can be generally captured in three major lines of research: rhetoric, mass media and public communication, and intercultural/interracial communication. He has also written about the necessity of teaching Black communication in postsecondary institutions (Rich & Asante, 1970). His work has been monumental in the field of communication. In 2002, the National Communication Association awarded him the lifetime achievement award for rhetoric—the Douglas Ehninger Award for Distinguished Rhetorical Scholarship.
Contributions to Africana Studies

Asante is self-trained in the area of Africana studies. Although none of his degrees is in Africana studies, since the beginning of his career, he has established a reputation as a respected researcher, disciplinary leader, and administrative figurehead in the field. When there was no program in which one could attain a doctorate in African American studies, he created one. When there was institutional resistance to funding the program because of doubts about how it would express its disciplinary uniqueness, Asante relieved this ambiguity by developing and refining a solid curriculum based on a unified Afrocentric perspective, which no other department could claim to have. When there was a large body of unsatisfactory Eurocentric reference sources purporting to represent African Diasporic experiences, Asante offered an alternative set of sources: encyclopedias, atlases, high school textbooks, and other source materials. Although he has critics, as all pioneering thinkers do, no one can debate his influence on generations of scholars over the last 35 years. His writings are ubiquitous in Africana studies and cover two major areas of research: (1) philosophical and historical perspectives on Africana experiences, and (2) creative works.

Philosophical and Historical Perspectives on Africana Experiences

Technically, the majority of Asante's writings could fit under this rubric; however, for the sake of simplicity, the discussion in this section focuses on his responses to critics of Afrocentricity and his extensions of the Afrocentric paradigm.

Asante has argued that Afrocentricity is an alternative to a most obvious and hegemonic grand narrative that presupposes Europe as the center of intellectual thought. For example, as mentioned previously, the implication that classical (or traditional) is a term reserved for Western antiquity is one that mimics the colonialist mentality that African thought is primitive (Jackson, 1995). Although Afrocentricity as metatheory was created approximately 20 years go, there is still much confusion about the concrete objectives of Afrocentricity. A common misconception is that Afrocentrists are anti-White (Lefkowitz, 1996). That is not true; they are anti-oppression. In some respects, Afrocentricity has been resentfully received by the academy as a hostile takeover rather than a movement to construct space for the study and criticism of Black particularity throughout the Diaspora. It is this intellectual xenophobia that has inhibited the progress of cultural models and critical practice within academic institutions.

Although the backlash from both Black (Crouch 1995/1996; Gates, 1993; West, 1993) and White (Lefkowitz, 1996) scholars concerning Afrocentric studies utilizes essentialism as an apparatus to justify the critique, essentialist politics and highbrow appropriations of African heritage (in the form of fictitious and historically inaccurate “Middle East” Egyptian studies) have been the catalysts for the present Afrocentric movement. The idea of essentialism presupposes that there is an unchangeable, consistent essence to something, so to say that Afrocentricity is essentialist is to say it tries to argue that there is a single authentic blackness. However, for years Europeanized media have taught television and film audiences that there is only one way to be Black. So Asante's aim is to offer a recuperative set of discourses in which Diasporic Africans are able to retrieve agency to define their own selves.

Asante (1993; 1999) asks us to consider how scholars are to make sense of the ambiguous European canon formations grounded in Egyptian ethics (ma'at) without references to the indigenous cosmology or philosophers that inspired the axiological system. Africanist and Afrocentric scholars such as Chiekh Anta Diop, John Henrick Clark, and Chancellor Williams have been chastised for introducing their cultural orientations and correcting the chronological
schedule and historical context in which those orientations are rooted. In fact, Asante introduced a redesignation of the chronological suffix A.D. to a.b.a. (at the beginning again) just to illustrate the antiquity of the world vis-à-vis the European timeline. Each of the previously mentioned scholars, including Asante, have been amid this hostile debate on chronology because it is believed that they have somehow illegitimated European history by countering claims about Greek and Roman primacy in oratorical philosophy. They are not competing so Africa gains one-upmanship over Europe; they are correcting a historiographical error.

The fact is that every culture has its own unique perspective on rhetoric. The Western intellectual tradition must be interrogated and decentralized for other cultures to locate where their cultural legacies and sensibilities fit in the epistemological structure of the world in general, and rhetorical studies in particular (Asante, 2000b). So, to some degree, Afrocentricity is just one step in the demythologization of “classical” rhetoric (Hamlet, 1998). This does not mean that we should avoid celebration of Greek and Roman intellectual traditions, but those traditions should not be considered as the final arbiter of excellence. The Chinese (Kowal, 1995; Lu & Frank, 1993), Native American (Basso, 1970), and African (Asante & Abarry, 1996) cultures each has its own classical rhetoric. Without these cultural rhetorics in major theory and criticism texts throughout various disciplines, we are left with a void in the study of those respective disciplinary traditions (Asante, 2002a; Asante & Asante, 1985). These are the central epistemological, onto-logical, and axiological concerns Asante has raised via his numerous research studies of both Black rhetoric and Ebonics.

Creative Work on Black Community Consciousness

As a corrective measure for omissions and oversights of African cultural legacies, Asante has developed many reference and pedagogical materials for secondary- and post-secondary level readers, as well as for general audiences. A partial list includes the following: Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans (Asante & Mattson, 1991), Classical Africa (Asante, 1993), African American History: A Journey of Liberation (Asante, 1995), African Intellectual Heritage (Asante & Abarry, 1996), Classical African Activity Book (Asante & Mitchell, 1996), Teacher's Guide for African American History (Asante, Harris-Stewart, & Mann, 1997), African American Atlas (Asante & Mattson, 1999), The Egyptian Philosophers (Asante, 2000a), Customs and Culture of Contemporary Egypt (Asante, 2002a), and 100 Greatest African Americans (Asante, 2002b). Egypt vs. Greece in the American Academy, edited by Asante and the Afrocentric theorist, Ama Mazama (Asante & Mazama, 2002), added to the discourse on history for general audiences as well as scholars. These reference sources are extensions of Asante's existing Afrocentric works that have sought to equip his readers with sources of pride in African ancestry and cultural traditions. Perhaps what are most innovative for a college professor are his African and African American history textbooks and ancillary materials developed for high school teachers and students. Each of these texts is published with Peoples Publishing Group under the “Asante Imprint,” and they hold the distinction of being the only existing historical high school textbooks written from an African-centered perspective.

Asante is also a novelist, painter, and poet. Because of his support of Black publishers, he has consciously chosen to have his creative written works published by Sungai Books, African American Images, and Peoples Publishing Group. Whether it is a book of African (Asante, 1991) or African American names (Asante & Muntaqim, 1997), or an historical novel such as Scattered to the Wind (Asante, 2001a), Asante works hard to develop varied sources of pride for African American people. In fact, he confesses that the writing of the historical account of
the legendary Mzilikazi of South Africa's sojourn to Zimbabwe found in *Scattered to the Wind* represents “the hardest work I've ever done” (Turner, 2002, p. 729). His poetry, as demonstrated in his book *Love Dance* (Asante, 1996), is also a lyrically creative way to express his endearing commitment to community and unbridled love for one's total self—culturally, socially, and personally. In 2003, Ama Mazama translated his book *Afrocentricity* (Asante, 1980) into French, and it was published in Paris by Menaibuc under the name *L'Afrocentricité* to great fanfare when more than 200 people came out to a book signing and presentation at the Sorbonne.

**Conclusion**

Asante has written extensively about both historical (Asante & Abarry, 1996) and contemporary concerns (Asante, 2001b). His work can be found intercontinentally and has influenced countless scholars. Every facet of his career has been marked by social, cultural, and intellectual activism. He has unabashedly spoken on behalf of Africans throughout the Diaspora. He has shown us that although no human being is flawless, the best we can do as human beings is to love one another and enhance the morally impoverished conditions in which we live. His undying love and commitment to African Diasporic communities is unquestionable.

*The Utne Reader* identifies him as one of the “100 Leading Thinkers in America.” Through his Afrocentric and Africological studies, it is no exaggeration to say Molefi Kete Asante has made a significant impact on world consciousness. He has certainly left and continues to leave an indelible imprint on the field of communication because almost every study of African American communication is either based on or addresses his work. His pioneering efforts, prolific record of research, and nurturing relationships with his students and community are an inspiration to us all.

**References**


Further Reading


Note

1. This is not the same name given by Turner (2002) in her 2002 interview with Asante. Turner's notation was incorrect, perhaps because of a transcription error. Wilkson is the name Molefi Asante gave to the authors of this book on November 8, 2004.

Molefi Kete Asante

Born as Arthur Smith in Valdosta, Georgia.
Received high school diploma from Nashville Christian Institute.

Received bachelor of arts degree from Oklahoma Christian College.

Received master of arts degree from Pepperdine University.

Received doctorate from UCLA.

Published *The Rhetoric of the Black Revolution*.

Served as associate professor, Department of Communication and as director of Afro American Studies.


Published *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America*.

Changed name to Molefi Kete Asante, which means “keeper of the traditions.”

Published *Transracial Communication*.

Became professor and chair of the Department of Communication at SUNY, Buffalo (1973–1982).

Became charter member of The World University (1973–1982).

Served as president of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research (SIETAR).

Published *Intercultural Communication: Theory into Practice*, with Eileen Newmark.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Received doctorate of humane letters from the University of New Haven, New Haven, Connecticut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Published <em>Contemporary Black Thought</em>, with A. Sarr Vandi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Published <em>Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Consulted with the Zimbabwe Institute of Mass Communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Became Ralph Metcalfe Chair for Distinguished Scholars, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Served as professor and chair of the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. Continues to teach and remained chair until 1996.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Created the first doctoral program in African American Studies at Temple University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Published <em>The Afrocentric Idea</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Published <em>Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication</em> with William B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Founded the National Afrocentric Institute and was named president (1989–present).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Published <em>Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Received doctorate of humane letters from Sojourner-Douglass College, Baltimore, Maryland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Founded Asante Imprint Books, Peoples Publishing Group for Afrocentric Infusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Served as Walter Annenberg Chair for Distinguished Scholars, Howard University School of Communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Published <em>Malcolm X as a Cultural Hero and other Afrocentric Essays</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Published <em>African American History: A Journey of Liberation</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Received the Morgan State University College of Arts and Sciences Award for Distinguished Academic Service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Published <em>African Intellectual Heritage</em> with Abu Abarry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Received the Nguzo Saba Award for Scholarly Initiative (NAKO).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Served as president of the African Writers Endowment Foundation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Published <em>The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Published <em>Scattered to the Wind</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Published <em>Transcultural Realities</em> with Virginia Millhouse and Peter Nwosu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Lectured at many schools, including Columbia University, Dartmouth University, Harvard College, Howard University, Penn State University, Princeton University, University of Manchester (UK), University of Leeds (UK), University of Michigan, and University of Pennsylvania.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Published the *Sage Encyclopedia of Black Studies* with Ama Mazama.

- Asante
- Afrocentricity
- interracial communication
- African American studies
- black studies
- African studies
- rhetoric

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