

OBITUARIES



Leith P. Mullings (Courtesy of Paula Vlodkowski, The Graduate Center, CUNY)

Leith P. Mullings (1945–2020)

Leith P. Mullings died in New York City on December 13, 2020. Her research transformed how scholars understand the interrelationship of racism, gender oppression, and class by demonstrating how forms of oppression are multiplicative and create acute stress and chronic strain, even as people mitigate subjugation through collective resistance. She was a powerful and influential scholar and public intellectual, a collaborative and inspirational leader and activist, and a beloved and dedicated teacher and mentor. She was president of the American Anthropological Association from 2011 to 2013.

Mullings was born on April 8, 1945, in Mandeville, Jamaica. Though her parents moved to New York shortly after that, she stayed in Jamaica, raised by her grandmother, until joining her parents in New York at age three.¹ Her father, Hubert W. Mullings, was among the first African American licensed CPAs in New York State, and he taught accounting at Baruch College. Her mother, Lillieth H. Mullings, earned a nursing degree from Queens College and served as a nurse at Queens Hospital, becoming the intensive care unit head nurse.²

Her family was not always middle class, however. “My early life,” she explained, “mirrored the struggles and efforts of millions of Americans of African descent. My father worked at several jobs simultaneously while attending college at night; we lived for a time in a public housing project on the Lower East Side and for a brief period received welfare.” She credits her family’s success to both luck and pluck. Although her family was respectable and hard-working, Mullings believed structural forces and free tuition created opportunities. She wrote,

Throughout, my parents retained a faith in education as a liberating force, as did many African Americans. Because the City University of New York was at that time tuition-free, my father, mother, and all five children were eventually able to attend college. But it was always clear that it was not hard work (though we worked hard enough) but the luck of being in the right place at the right time that separated our fortunes from those of others who struggled as hard. (Mullings 1997, xiii)

Mullings went to Jamaica High School in Jamaica, Queens, where she edited the school’s newspaper, *The Hill Topper* (Baillin and Dinkin 1961, 69). At sixteen, she followed in her mother’s footsteps, pursuing a nursing degree from Queens College. But she also enrolled in Introduction to Anthropology, taught by Hortense Powdermaker, when Alabama’s Bull Connor turned high-pressure fire hoses on young people who were ruthlessly clubbed and attacked by savage dogs for demanding civil rights. When Powdermaker described freedom and equality as “American” values in class, Mullings asked how she could do so when freedom fighters were being burned, beaten, and murdered. Powdermaker replied that an essential feature of anthropology is its ability to capture and analyze the differences between what people say and what people do. Mullings “was impressed by anthropology’s commitment to turn its lens not only on that which is manifest but also that which is concealed” (Mullings 2015, 5). “Anthropology mattered to me,” Mullings reflected, “because, at its best, it was premised on the view that the circumstances surrounding me at the time—war, violence, racism, and poverty—were not ‘natural’ or given, and the conditions in which they emerged could be understood through comparative and historical analyses. . . . As such, it held out the hope that if the conditions under which these human problems arose could be known, they could be addressed” (Mullings 2015, 5).

She earned a bachelor’s of science in nursing from Cornell University/New York Hospital in 1966 and then pursued graduate study at the University of Chicago. Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and David Schneider held sway over the department, which was dominated by symbolic anthropology. “As graduate students,” she explained, “we decoded symbols while Chicago burned” (Mullings 1997, xv). She felt like a stranger in the secluded Hyde Park neighborhood surrounding the university and tried to limit her contact with the academy, immersing herself instead in what she called “the real Chicago”:

The Chicago of the late sixties; the Chicago that burned after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the black

communities just across the Midway that were occupied by the National Guard; downtown Chicago, where students were brutally beaten for protesting the war at the Democratic National Convention; the inner city, where the Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton, was assassinated by the police while he slept. (Mullings 1997, xv)

As Mullings wrote her master's thesis and studied for her qualifying exams, she "taught first aid, dressed bullet wounds, attended Marxist study groups, and worked as a nurse in a community clinic" (Mullings 1997, xvi). She earned a master's in 1970 and began fieldwork on social movements in Tanzania. When she turned twenty-five, she became a part-time teaching assistant at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. She actively participated in the exciting intellectual environment created by Julius Nyerere's bid to transform Tanzania into a self-reliant democratic socialist state and the broader Pan-African and anticolonial movements of the era (Mullings 1997, xvi). For the next forty-five years, she would continue studying and participating in social movements as well as teach.

She earned her PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1975. Her dissertation fieldwork was in southeastern Ghana, where she developed case studies of people going through psychotherapy as they participated in traditional healing and sanctified churches. She analyzed how relations of production impacted therapeutic systems. Her research led to her first book, *Therapy, Ideology, and Social Change: Mental Healing in Urban Ghana* (Mullings 1984).

After briefly teaching at Yale, Mullings was hired in 1980 as an assistant professor at Columbia University, where she taught in both the School of Public Health and Department of Anthropology. She then moved to the City University of New York, joining the Graduate Center faculty full-time in 1983.

In 1996, Mullings married Manning Marable (1950–2011), an influential public intellectual, a prolific scholar of Black history and politics, and a Black studies movement leader. Marable was her second husband, and he immediately embraced her two children: Michael Tyner, who is now an independent filmmaker, and Alia Tyner-Mullings, who is now a sociologist at Gutman Community College.

Their intellectual partnership, which emerged from deep love for each other and a shared commitment to the liberation of Black and brown people, formed the hub of dizzying intellectual fervor involving faculty, students, and activists that swirled between CUNY, the New York Academy of Sciences, and the Institute for Research in African-American Studies that Marable founded at Columbia University in 1997. Marable also founded *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, to which Mullings was a frequent contributor. It was the beginning of an astonishing period of collaborative work produced by Mullings and her many collaborators (Davis et al. 2002; Marable and Mullings 2000; Marable and Mullings 2002; Mullings and Wali 2001; Mullings et al. 2001; Schulz and Mullings 2006).

Their marriage coincided with a turning point in Mullings's life regarding having more security and experiencing fewer of the stressors she studied. Encouraged by Marable to share her experiences, she published *On Our Own Terms: Race, Class, and Gender in the Lives of African American Women* in 1997. It was a poignant book of essays on work and family, gender and kin, health and public policy. In its introduction, she detailed how difficult those early years were for her when "adequate childcare was so expensive that even when I worked in the child care center one day a week in exchange for a rebate on the expenses, it still took a significant portion of my salary." She shared her challenges of writing and researching "while juggling work outside the home, small children and household responsibilities, both in a marriage and later when I became a single parent." Although she found it "exhilarating" to identify experiences she had in common with working-class Black women, she concluded that "we have the moral and theoretical responsibility to employ the time for reflection allowed by our relatively privileged status to address people's real problems" (Mullings 1997, xix).

In the early 1990s, Harlem wore the years of private and public neglect and the outmigration of the middle class, small businesses, and manufacturing jobs. In 1991, *The New York Times* described Central Harlem as "a community with one of the highest crime rates in the city, [and] garbage-strewn vacant lots and tumbledown tenements, many of them abandoned and sealed, contribute to a sense of danger and desolation that pervades much of the area" (Ship 1991, B2). Harlem did have its challenges with high unemployment, housing precarity, and an infant mortality rate twice that of the rest of the city. But Harlem remained the city's social, political, and cultural heart for African Americans of all classes. Mullings saw Harlem as a vibrant, resilient, and creative community with both potential and opportunity.

The Harlem Birth Right Project (1993–1997) perhaps best exemplifies her approach to research. Funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it focused on reproductive health, mainly infant mortality. The project team identified the social, economic, and political variables that may lead to greater vulnerability among African American women (Mullings et al. 2001, 86). In this project, Leith Mullings provided a way to solve a vexing conundrum: If race is socially constructed, why do racial lines demarcate health disparities? By combining ethnography, empirical public health research, and a shrewd understanding of how an environment of racism and a racist environment impact people's lives and bodies, she showed that persistent racism creates disparate health outcomes. From the beginning, the community in Central Harlem was part of the research design, implementation, and analysis. Employing participatory action research, Mullings created a research team that identified systemic stressors and strains that adversely impacted reproductive health for Black women. She and her team of research collaborators were able to prove that "while race may not be biological, racism has biological consequences"

(Mullings 2005b, 87). This one simple statement has helped to explain the material effects and lethality of racism.

Mullings helped train and mentor young women in ethnographic methods. Many have had illustrious careers, including Deborah A. Thomas, Alaka Wali, Sabiyha Prince, and Patricia Tovar. She and her collaborators went beyond describing the toll racism had on poor Black and brown bodies; they coupled their analyses of dire straits with a sensitive and provocative set of analytics that demonstrated how people are resourceful, righteous, and resilient. The book that culminated this project was entitled *Stress and Resilience: The Social Context of Reproduction in Central Harlem* (Mullings and Wali 2001). This book exemplifies her long-standing interest in the dialectic of oppression, resilience, and resistance.

Out of this research, Mullings theorized the “Sojourner Syndrome,” a framework for examining severe health disparities as the articulation of power in the nexus of race, class, and gender. It is an essential analytical and theoretical rubric that “emphasizes the necessity of examining how race, class, and gender operate in the lives of African American women and how they interact to produce health effects. . . . It invites us to understand race, class, and gender as relational concepts: not as attributes of people of color, the dispossessed, or women but as historically created relationships of differential distribution of resources, privilege, and power, of advantage and disadvantage” (Mullings 2005a, 78–79).

What makes it so compelling and such a robust theory is its ability to name and connect issues that go frequently unnamed, rarely labeled, and never associated. It considers the distinctive way that race, class, and gender impact Black women across the class spectrum by foregrounding how agency and resilience interact with racism and sexism. It also incorporates how, at the same time, these modalities can serve as an axis of liberation and celebration.

With this theory, she turned the culture of poverty thesis on its head. She demonstrated that without the rich networks, spiritual succor of community, and the creative strategies of survival, African American women would be worse off. The networks of kinship, spiritual ties, and wonderfully complex and innovative means of adaptation, all of which are rooted in African American culture, provide a bulwark against even more misery and poverty. The “behavior” that so many social scientists obsess over was not pathological; it was redemptive. It mitigates the devastating impact of a very dysfunctional government system mired in pathological racism.

As the Harlem Birth Right Project was wrapping up, Mullings and Dána-Ain Davis convened a team of researchers called The Community Outreach and Research Project, which included Ana Aparicio, Audrey Jacobs, Akemi Kochiyama, Andrea Queeley, and Beverly Yuen Thompson. The team focused its research on how welfare reform changed people’s lives in Harlem and the Lower East Side. They found that people continued to experience food and health insurance insecurity and that “job” training was not meaningful. Funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation,

this group worked collaboratively with the Children’s Defense Fund, Citizen Action of New York, and the Citizens’ Committee for Children to inform members of the community about legal, financial, and educational resources.

In 2005, she wrote a pathbreaking *Annual Review of Anthropology* article, “Interrogating Racism: Toward an Antiracist Anthropology,” which reshaped the way anthropologists explained and interrogated racism in the new century. It was an effort to provide future scholars with a road map to navigate the very tricky and notoriously slippery concept of racism in a sophisticated and historically grounded way. She synthesized and offered important context to a massive amount of contradictory research on racism written over the last hundred years. Her literature review asked and answered a series of vital questions: When, how, and why does racism emerge historically? What are the varieties, directions, and manifestations of racism in the contemporary world? What do we know about how racism is maintained and reproduced? How does racism intersect with other forms of inequality such as class and gender? And, finally, what are some strategies to combat it? This synthetic article demonstrated how racism is integral to new forms of globalization while appearing to have withered away.

In 2013, she gave the Presidential Address at the 113th AAA annual meeting in Chicago, which was simply titled “Anthropology Matters.” She described how anthropology responded to and contributed to twentieth-century social movements. Although she was critical of anthropology’s role in perpetuating “slavery, colonialism, imperialism, segregation, and eugenics” (Mullings 2015, 5), she also described how social movements, particularly of the 1960s and 1970s, reignited an “oppositional stream of engaged or activist anthropology in the United States, spotlighting the important issues of difference, inequality, and power” (Mullings 2015, 7). She highlighted the consistent counter-hegemonic genealogies of scholar-activists that have contributed to anthropology by contesting how knowledge is “defined, created, and controlled and by making the experiences of women, workers, and people of color central to the analysis. Perhaps most important was the unity of theory and practice from which these subaltern formulations emerged” (Mullings 2015, 8). For those of us who might “let anthropology burn,” Mulling’s address shows us how anthropology can be a project that aligns with oppressed and exploited groups and can help in our fight for equality, liberation, and freedom.

She concluded the address by arguing that anthropological theory and methods “are uniquely positioned to make a decisive contribution to solving human problems through education, advocacy, and empowering subaltern groups” (Mullings 2015, 4). To illustrate, she described two of her own research projects. (She would continue to be involved in these projects until she died.) The first was a comparative racism project in Latin America. In the wake of the first African American president of the United States, Barack Obama, in 2008, and the first Indigenous president

in Latin America, Evo Morales of Bolivia, in 2006, there has been a fast and ferocious resurgence of racism throughout the Americas. In this context, Afro-descended and Indigenous people and their allies created “Observatories against Racial Discrimination in the Americas” in Guatemala, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil to address incidents of racism, most of which were not well documented otherwise. Joining Charlie Hale, Pamela Calla, and others, she collaborated with researchers to network and link these observatories to engage in sustained comparative research that traced and documented the making and contestation of state-led racial projects in response to Black and Indigenous mobilization. The goal of the project was to formulate antiracist strategies and train young scholars and activists to lead in the future. This observatory research, she explained, was “a quintessential example of what anthropological approaches can yield, generating important new theoretical perspectives on race and racism and providing knowledge that can empower subaltern populations” (Mullings 2015, 11).

The other project she used to explain the import of anthropology was the African Burial Ground project in Lower Manhattan that began in 1991 when the federal government rediscovered a six-acre burial ground containing upwards of 15,000 intact skeletal remains of enslaved and free Africans who lived and worked in colonial New York between 1630 and 1795. Led by Michael Blakey, the project produced several methodological innovations in anthropology, including setting a new standard for community involvement. In 2010, the National Park Service commissioned Mullings and Dána-Ain Davis to conduct an ethnohistory assessing the impact of the African Burial Ground project twenty years later (Davis and Mullings 2014). Mullings explained that “anthropologists played an important role in assisting the descendant community to reclaim their social memories of survival, resistance, and struggle—so important in the current ideological context of the hegemony of ‘color-blind racism’” (Mullings 2015, 11).

Despite taking her roles as mother, partner, teacher, mentor, collaborator, and friend as seriously as she took her critical scholarship, she rose to the academy’s pinnacle as a distinguished professor and president of the AAA. She was a founder of the Association of Black Anthropologists, a councilor of the American Ethnological Society, and integral to launching the Society for the Anthropology of North America. She won the Prize for Achievement in the Critical Study of North America and the Chair in American Civilization from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. She gave distinguished lectures worldwide, including in Merida, Havana, London, Durban, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, Cairo, and other places.


In 1997, Manning Marable hired me to join the relatively new Institute for Research in African-American Studies that he founded at Columbia University. Leith was very influential in my appointment. I had the opportunity to participate in that heady intellectual environment that Leith and Manning helped to facilitate in fin de siècle New York. The future brimmed with hope and change. Her hope and opti-

mism, mixed with urgency and excellence, were infectious and motivated all of us to use anthropology to address people’s real problems. Personally, she always encouraged me to pursue history of anthropology because we needed to understand the past to change the future. As a young anthropologist who did not do ethnography, this gave me the confidence to keep pursuing this line of research with the same understanding that she first learned from Hortense Powdermaker. If we can understand how anthropology articulated and resisted racism with historical and comparative research, we can make anthropology matter and be responsive to real human problems.

Throughout her career, Mullings used research to inform and empower people engaged in social movements. With clear and compelling prose, she showed policymakers, the public, and social scientists how race, class, and gender collide and collude to make people experience ravenous racism in different yet pernicious ways.

Beyond her many articles, books, and grants, Leith Mullings stands as a pillar of what is still good and virtuous about the academy: uncompromising integrity; steadfast support of family, students, and colleagues; and an unparalleled commitment to improving the health and well-being of others. I think most people will remember her for her steadfast support and tactical advice and the blocking and tackling she did for so many of us so we could succeed.

A unique moral compass guided Leith Mullings as she charted a course that combines cutting-edge and politically astute scholarship with uncompromising ethics. We all need to continue her struggle and her vision. Peace be to her memory and let her rest in power and with Manning.

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NOTES

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1. The National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Washington, D.C.; Series Title: Passenger Manifests of Airplanes Arriving at Miami, Florida; NAI Number: 2774955; Record Group Title: Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787–2004; Record Group Number: 85. Ancestry.com. Florida, U.S., Arriving and Departing Passenger and Crew Lists, 1898–1963 [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006.
2. See https://baruch.scholarships.ngwebsolutions.com/ScholarX_DonorDetails.aspx?donorid=25221.

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