



Crafting a legacy is a very delicate adventure and can be quite deliberate or unintentional. In her book, *A Journey that Matters: Your Personal Living Legacy*, Erline Belton reminds us of the importance of establishing a “living legacy.” According to her, “...our living legacy encompasses all of who we are; our personality, our passion, our pain, our joy, our sadness, our progress, our mistakes, our love, our hate our hopes, our dreams and much more” (

<http://www.lyceumgroupbooks.com/page1.php>

). The dictionary defines legacy as an inheritance, the passing down of a gift, the bequeathing of something passed through generations. African Americans are a people who have struggled to establish legacies, to pass forward cultural gifts constrained by a past history of enslavement.

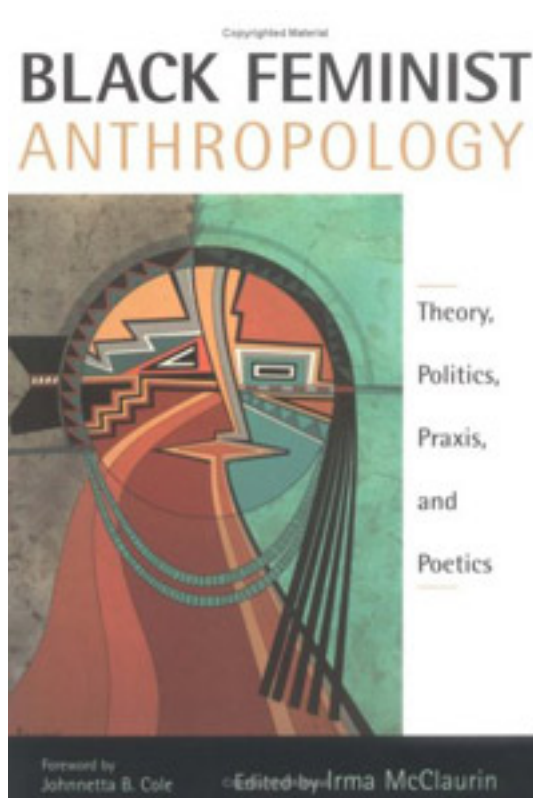
We often think of legacy as something that follows us after death. Each of us, I think, hopes that when we pass from this realm of existence into a new one that we leave something behind. But legacy building should begin while we’re still alive. Such was the vision embedded in the making of the edited volume, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics*—to create a living intellectual legacy.

Written by IRMA MCCLAURIN, PHD / CULTURE AND EDUCATION EDITOR
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The genesis of this book, first published in 2001, began quite modestly as a panel. For several years, my colleague, Dr. France Winddance Twine and I had observed at the annual meeting of the Association of American Anthropologists of 7,000 scholars that our viewpoint as Black women anthropologists was rarely visible. We agreed to put together a panel on Black Feminist Anthropology for the 1996 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropology Association.

My additional motivation was having been denied the opportunity to teach the Graduate Introductory Seminar in the History and Theory of Anthropology at the University of Florida. I was told by my then department chair at the University of Florida, “You cannot teach theory until you’ve written theory.” It was a blow, I had thought my first ethnography, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America*, was certainly theoretically informed, especially I was even more disturbed after learning that an even more junior white male faculty member was allowed to teach the course after the senior faculty member retired. This incident lingered in my memory.

Fast forward to the AAA Conference of 1996. The large room for the panel on Black Feminist Anthropology turned out to be packed to the rafters. Afterwards, members of the audience demanded that we do something with the materials.



I circulated the panel abstract and our biographies among various publishers in the exhibition hall. One particular acquisition editor took time to explain that developing an enduring edited volume was more than simply a collection of conference papers. I am indebted to the advice she imparted. I remember drafting the Call for Papers—predicating it on the Black Panthers Ten Point Program. There were twelve points that characterized the book, of which six were non-negotiable. The most important four were the following: 1. The tone had to be “autoethnographical,” a style of writing that was very new to the discipline at the time; 2) authors

had to articulate an operational definition of “Black feminism;”3) they had to discuss how their own personal history influenced the kind of anthropology they had chosen; and 4) they must theorize about their anthropological approach—the chapters would be less a description of their ethnographic research and more an exercise in theorizing about the work.

Contributors will testify that I functioned like the Editor from Hell. Some chapters were rewritten more than three times. But by the end of that writing journey, something extraordinary had begun to take shape. In the words of the reviewer:

Thank you for the opportunity to review ...[the] manuscript *Black Feminist Anthropology*. I strongly recommend publishing the book. It is a unique, engaging volume that makes a significant contribution to anthropology, African-American Studies, and Women’s Studies. ...Luckily there are no weak chapters. Quite the contrary the papers are all very good, and they are organized well so that the book proceeds to make a strong series of arguments about the genesis and development of critical intellectual traditions in general, and Black feminist perspectives in particular. ...What marks these essays is a consistent theoretical depth, an engaging style of writing, and an almost always uncanny clarity in their arguments. ...Let me also add a personal note: I really enjoyed reading the book. It was a good deal of intellectual gain with very little pain (i.e., in terms of the style, clarity and flow of the argument). *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics* was published by Rutgers University Press in 2001.

I had imagined the book from the start from an historical archaeological perspective. I imagined people reading the book twenty-five years in the future, and am indebted to my colleague Dr. Kamari Clarke who suggested I include a time line and to the professors who trained me at the University of Massachusetts Amherst to see the world from a four-field perspective: in anthropology, Ralph Faulkingham, Robert Paynter and the late Sylvia Forman and from Political Science, Carlene Edie.

From its conception to now, I envisioned that *Black Feminist Anthropology* would be a major contribution and intervention to the history of anthropology. As I wrote in the introduction:

This book , *Black Feminist Anthropology*, is formulated out of a set of ideologies, theories, ethnographic methodologies, and social commitments that we owe much to ideas both inside and outside anthropology. It is self-consciously fashioned as an act of knowledge production and sees itself as a form of cultural mediation between the world of Black scholars and the entire Western intellectual tradition, between Black anthropologists and the rest of the discipline, and between Black and white feminists. But more importantly, it is an intervention—a Black Feminist intervention. (2)

Did *Black Feminist Anthropology* fulfill its promise; were we successful? I think so. First, we had the powerful Foreword by my mentor, friend and Sister anthropologist, Dr. Johnnetta Cole who wrote:

Each of the essays in this impressive anthology is in some way a response to mainstream anthropology and “the way we’ve always done it.” While the goal of objectivity is not simply tossed to the side, the sister anthropologist are in tune with the view of the sociologist C. Wright

Mills, who said that while he would strive for objectivity, he would never claim to be detached from the people and the problems he was studying. (x)

Dr. Kimberly Eison Simmons, was one of the most junior contributors and recently shared her thoughts about the experience being in the book:

This was a great experience for me (being included in the volume with my mentors). ... Being a contributor also meant stepping out as a Black feminist anthropologist (thinking about feminist anthropology & our own positionality & experience and then moving toward black feminist anthropology). This was a bold move.

In the culture of academia, what matters most is external validation. With its publication, *Black Feminist Anthropology* set a new standard. In its review, *Choice Magazine* wrote the following:

[A] refreshing and inspiring collection of nine articles and a superb introduction.... Each author brings personal experiences of racism, sexism, and other challenges to bear on what are without exception successful examples of what C. Wright Mills called “the sociological imagination.” Where biography, intellectual activity, and activism are presented as a seamless whole. This book succeeds in going beyond Mills’s vision in unparalleled ways. ...All levels and collections.

In December 2002, I received word that *Black Feminist Anthropology* had been selected as an Outstanding Academic Title by *Choice Magazine* for 2003. The selection was further proof of the book’s enduring impact. Here is *Choice’s* description of their selection criteria:

...This prestigious list reflects the best in scholarly titles reviewed by *Choice* and brings with it the extraordinary recognition of the academic library community.

...The list is quite selective: it contains approximately ten percent of some 7,000 works reviewed in *Choice* each year. *Choice* editors base their selections on the reviewer’s evaluation of the work, the editor’s knowledge of the field, and the reviewer’s record. (

<http://www.goodreads.com/award/show/10117-choice-magazine-choice-outstanding-academic-title>

).

They also pay attention to: “overall excellence in presentation and scholarship; importance relative to other literature in the field; distinction as a first treatment of a given subject in book or electronic form; originality or uniqueness of treatment; value to undergraduate students and importance in building undergraduate library collections.” Without a doubt, *Choice* felt *Black Feminist Anthropology*

fit the bill.

I am truly a born-again anthropologist, but in my heart I am first and foremost a poet, and so I close with a poem for my Black feminist sister anthropologists.

Poem for my Black Feminist Anthropology Sisters Today and Forever

Yes, he certainly knows his higher mathematics, and he can read Latin better than any white man I know, but I cannot bring myself to Believe that he understands a thing he is doing. It is all an aping of our culture. All on the outside. You are crazy if you think that it has changed him inside in the least. Turn him loose, and he will revert at once to the jungle. He is still a savage, and no amount of translating Virgil and Ovid is going to change him. In fact, all you have done is to turn a useful savage into a dangerous beast.

--Unknown author, quoted in Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," 1979 [1950]

They see us as "dangerous beasts."
They treat us as if we don't belong –
intruders, if you will.
Occasionally we are mentored,
but when we rise (above our mentors),
as brilliant people are wont to do,
they try to push us back,
to put us on lockdown.

Sometimes the threats
that block us
from achieving
to our fullest potential
may even come from people
who look like us—
"Skinfolk" as Sister Brackette Williams labeled them—
Even other women may turn out
NOT to be "kinfolk,"
not to be supporters,
but negators—"haters," in today's parlance,
who would rather
see us ALL fail
than have one of us—
especially one of us of color—
rise above the crowd.

Among feminist anthropology scholars,
you still don't cite us—

as Sister Lynn Bolles
and Sister Faye Harrison
continue to remind us.
You still don't use our books.
Our words and experiences
as Black women and women of color
are not part of the canon
of "MUST READ" feminist literature.

Occasionally,
and on certain occasions,
one or two of us (never more)
are given the key
to the intellectual "Sister John,"
but at what price?

Anthropology tells its own history
of women in the discipline.
We valorize and elevate
Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict,
Elsie Clews Parson
but that history,
even when viewed through a feminist lens,
continues to turn
its intellectual back on Zora Neale Hurston
and on us, her intellectual progeny.

As I have been fortunate to travel
and move around this country
and the world, I have encountered
a fair share of My Black Sister Anthropologists,
my Sisters of Color Anthropologists,
my LGBT Sister Anthropologists;
I have inscribed on my heart
these Sister narratives
of how we continue
to struggle
against being labeled
"dangerous, Intelligent beasts."

We labor, as our mothers and relatives before us,
without much support,
in the fields of academic departments
planting and tending the crops
of anthropology, and women studies, and Black Studies
where far too often—though not always—but far too often

our treatment
is barely one step
above academic sharecropping,
where we are forced
to feel indebted and grateful
if granted tenure
as if we had not earned our place.

They treat us like “dangerous beasts.”
And make us feel routinely
As if we don’t belong;
They block us from the professional mobility we have earned;
they intervene and steal our best students;
they ignore our contributions to the growth of the departments
until someone else, who does not look like us
recycles our very same idea—and then it is viewed as “brilliance.”
We are tired;
we are sick and tired
of being treated like “dangerous beasts.”
We are your former students,
we are your colleagues
and some of us even thought
we were your friends.

It is into this field
that Black Feminist Anthropology
makes its grand entrance.
It is a collection of testimonials
of personal and professional witnessing.
It is an archive of our Black women’s
resistance and resiliency
in the field of Anthropology.
It is our historical anthropological legacy.
It is our small but powerful
contribution to the ongoing tradition
of cultural critique in anthropology in general
and feminist anthropology specifically.
It is our righteous way of saying
“We are here to stay—deal with us”:
but with justice, with equality, and above all else
with Respect.
But deal you must.
But most importantly, it is a Survival Guide
for Black Feminists everywhere.
It doesn’t matter the discipline,
this book is for you.

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May it be your intellectual guide.
May it be your spiritual support.
May it remind you of the tradition from which you have evolved.
May it provide you
the ammunition and ambition
to challenge those who dare stand in your way.
To Black Feminists, in anthropology,
and everywhere else,
this book of Black Feminist Anthropology:
Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics
is our gift to you.
It is the gift of nine Black Feminist Sisters
brave enough to bare our souls
and share with you the truths of our lives,
our research, and our experiences with Anthropology and Feminism.
Cherish the gift.
May it give you strength.
But above all else
remember: it is our Legacy to you.
Add to it, strengthen it, and
PASS IT FORWARD.

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©2013 McClaurin Solutions. Irma McClaurin is the Culture and Education Editor for *Insight News* and a faculty member in Center for Leadership Development at the Federal Executive Institute, Charlottesville, VA. She is also the CEO of McClaurin Solutions, a consulting firm specializing in Executive coaching, diversity and organizational management, strategic communications, development and more. The views expressed in this essay are entirely hers. She is currently working on a memoir and compiling her *Insight News* essays into a book.

This article is derived from a presentation entitled “The Making of a Legacy: the story behind “Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis and Poetics” for the AFA invited session entitled “Engaging Black Feminist Anthropolog(ies): Questions of Methods, Theory, and Practice within and outside the Discipline” at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Anthropologists, Chicago Hilton, Chicago, Illinois. The panel was organized by Dr. Riché Barnes (Smith College), who could not attend. Panelists included myself, Corliss D. Heath (ABD student, U South Florida), Dr. Kimberly E. Simmons (U South Carolina, and unable to attend), Dr. Rachel J. Watkins (American U), and Bianca C. Williams (University of Colorado, Boulder).

Artspeak: Black Feminist Anthropology—Building an intellectual legacy one book at a time

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