

Introduction

Mythology is not necessarily a culture's fabricated origin or creation stories. An additional understanding of mythology is storytelling and symbolism that narratively utilize the core factual variables of an event, phenomenon, or persona and assume license to enhance the story's dimensions with benign or innocuous embellishment. Along these lines, Black cultural mythology is a framework of analysis and categorization that is attentive to the infusion of hero dynamics, legacy tools, heritage practices, and ancestor acknowledgment in Black literature and cultural behaviors. This is an important perspective, particularly in regions where Black legacy and heritage practices are marginalized because Blacks represent fewer numbers in the population, or because regions have national histories of enslavement that have led to institutionalized patterns of *selective memory*. Black cultural mythology is vital in regions where Black history and heritage are contested, overlooked, undermined, neglected, ignored, and deemed invisible. However, sustaining the visibility of this heritage, Black writers have demonstrated an imaginative, almost archaeological, search-and-rescue success in continuing to use Black historical figures, heroic episodes, and legendary folk images as content for their work. Black cultural mythology aims to create a greater collective cultural self-awareness of the imperatives of hero dynamics, legacy tools, heritage practices, and ancestral knowledge that inspire a reawakening of the cycles of oral-to-written-to-oral narrative. It accounts for antiheroics in its many forms and is a critical tool that is innovatively attentive to the theoretical and philosophical matters of cultural memory and its practice.

As an introduction to a new theoretical approach, this volume is an invitation to scholars working in diverse orientations to cultural memory studies to consider new contexts and catalysts for comparative discourses about African diasporic survival and legacies. Reflecting history, cultural theory, critical thought, and aesthetics, this book explores an African American *mythology*

defined as epic and hyperheroic post–Middle Passage survivalist behaviors and feats that suggest collective practices and sensibilities that are dynamic, functional, and culturally defining enough to be recycled in narrative form as sacred heritage artifacts. Black cultural mythology’s intellectual genealogy is historical, theoretical, and aesthetic. It is interpreted from the cues found in a host of formative activist worldviews, observations, and scholarship that reflect diverse aspects of Africana sacred remembrance and heritage. Black cultural mythology is a framework that harmonizes the *narrative memorial* of African American culture. It negotiates a vision of what African diaspora communities lost in specificity during the enslavement period yet gained in organic survivalist behaviors and practices. Salamishah Tillet’s warning about the snares of civic myths and of the myth of the African diaspora do not apply to Black cultural mythology’s emphasis on diaspora agency in remembering the feats of survival and elevating mnemonic cues of heroic legacy on its own terms. It shares Tillet’s concern for how American “civic myths mandate the exclusion of colonialism and slavery from the national memory,” which is a challenge neutralized by Black cultural mythology’s conceptually mature set of organic critical attributes.¹ Rejecting the over-remembrance of “slavery” managed as an American and Western historical narrative preoccupation framed in terms of bondage and oppression, the attributes ensure that diaspora memorial and factually mythic discourses evolve along a path defined by their own nonhegemonic, self-determined, and even self-defensive survivalist needs.

The field of cultural memory studies is already quite nuanced in its approach to the effects of *enslavement* on African/a identity, collective memory, and amnesia. Even though Black cultural mythology emerges from a different disciplinary logic and functionality, all the discourses participate in a broad project of Africana cultural memory studies. Key cultural memory and collective memory sources offer little about theorizations of myth and mythology, amid their other compelling observations about the nature of remembering. In *The Collective Memory* (1968) sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’s orientation to processes of engraving identity on new soil is a foundational gem on which Black cultural mythology draws, and it is adjacent to Molefi Kete Asante’s revisionist chronological marker of “beginning again.”² Halbwachs reflects on how people “engrave their form in some way upon the soil and retrieve their collective remembrances within the spatial frameworks thus defined.”³ Asante’s concept of “beginning again” is the conceptual affirmation of reinvented Africanness on American soil, which is centered on survival and emphasizes conceptually reconstructing

the narrative of African American historical experiences for optimum agency. In Africana literary studies, Carol P. Marsh-Lockett and Elizabeth West treat this phenomenon in terms of survival plus memory:

More than their bodies came with displaced Africans who survived the Middle Passage, and more than bodies remained for those who escaped capture but endured the legacy of colonialism on their homelands. Africans who crossed the Atlantic brought with them cosmology, a will to survive, and an enduring presence rooted in memory and all of which, across the centuries, has left a distinct philosophical and cultural imprint throughout the diaspora.⁴

As cosmology informs one aspect of engraving identity on new soil, literary critic and cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman redirects our interest in and exposure to outright acts of violence more toward instances of “the terror of the mundane and quotidian.”⁵ As if to precisely describe and remember the existence that Africans were surviving and to account for the holistic identities of Africans before encounters with the diaspora, Hartman describes Africans as “unwilling and coerced migrants who created a new culture in the hostile world of the Americas and who fashioned themselves again, making possibility out of dispossession.”⁶ She then interrogates readers’ and society’s responses as “witnesses” or “voyeurs” and questions our motivation for “self-reflection” particularly in view of the pain and suffering from the enslavement era.⁷ Black cultural mythology’s compatible interest is in this phenomenon, but as a *meditation* on how the culture has immortalized itself in the diaspora, particularly through philosophies on survival and commemoration and in structured literatures, both fiction and nonfiction. Hartman writes of “the uncertain line between witness and spectator,” which is also a demarcation of interest to Black cultural mythology. Witnesses offer a testimony of remembrance. A spectator watches with an unaffectedness and distance that allows a greater level of disengagement. Black cultural mythology strives to jolt the reader-spectator out of this gaze by alerting him or her to the resistance-based cognitive survival and the hyperheroics of historical actors whom Hartman describes as “self-made.” To Hartman, self-making is “a central tenet of democratic individuality” tied to the body, labor, and the ability to become a self-made man or woman.⁸ In Black cultural mythology terms, there is another dimension to this process of self-definition—the grit and the force responsible for resistance and achievement. The attributes and

properties reveal continuity and serve as core critical guideposts to describe cultural heroics that have been mined from traditions of Africana sociopolitical thought and cultural theory. The attributes equip us with the tools to explore with deeper precision the phenomena of surviving and witnessing.

Studies on trauma have provided key discourses on cultural memory phenomena and have well documented diasporan literature reflecting enslavement-based experiences. Ron Eyerman in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) has a primary interest in identity as he views enslavement as a “trauma.” Specifically, “as a cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of cultural identity and the reworking of collective memory.”⁹ His focus is more on loss than empowerment through memory, namely “a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion.”¹⁰ Black cultural mythology favors an adaptation philosophy over Eyerman’s premises of loss, disruption, fragmentation, victimization, fracture, and social crisis; and it prioritizes narratives on resistance efforts that are more consistent with liberation discourses.

Nancy Peterson in *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory* (2001) suggests that “literary texts can produce a desire for historical memory.”¹¹ Specifically, “readers will become implicated in the historical events and traumas surrounding the texts they read. This investment in the text, then, creates the possibility of transferring historical memory to a community of readers, as a community with the potential to construct and nurture collective memory.”¹² In her study of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), she introduces how a writer “uses mythic sources to conceive of the past as dynamic and not fixed; myth allows the development of a historical consciousness that is not only factual or objective but constructive and fictional.”¹³ Peterson allows for the factual premise of myth/mythology instigated by fictive texts, and distances her approach from the rigidity of the field of history’s skepticism about myth. She writes that “mainstream American history is so relentlessly optimistic and teleological that it has become painfully difficult to articulate counterhistories that do not share these values,” as its “postmodern culture works against the sustained engagement with memory.”¹⁴ Mack Freeman’s reaction to Peterson’s ideas suggests a space and justification for a Black cultural mythology methodology: “Indeed, as Peterson implies, the sort of postmodern playfulness one finds in a good deal of contemporary fiction can serve as an accomplice to a kind of amnesia. The task, therefore, is precisely to *remember*, but to do

so in a way that moves beyond the facile modes of historicizing that too often distort or obscure the lived reality of human suffering.”¹⁵ Chapter 7 presents a view of a new literary history of Black cultural mythology that comparatively features writers such as Robert O’Hara whose historical play *Insurrection: Holding History* (2004) can certainly be categorized as postmodern yet also as surmounting facile modes of historicizing when subjected to a Black cultural mythology reading. However, Peterson’s concern for trauma, restated by Freeman as human suffering, is limited in its own way, especially from a disciplinary Africana point of view that insists on fully extending remembrances of oppression, trauma, disruption, and suffering to a more complete narrative about modes of resistance, survival, and futurism.

In *Amnesia and Redress in Contemporary African American Fiction: Counterhistory* (2011) Marni Gauthier researches many of the same variables within a set of multiethnic literatures, including the African American contribution of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997). She does not consider mythology as a variable, but her ideas about amnesia and truth-telling in different cultural contexts are adjacent to those of Peterson as she, too, relies on historical fiction to mark the impact that literature can have on history. Black cultural mythology’s interest is not in amnesia but in a forward-looking, pragmatic, yet also sacred ways of delving more deeply into the processes involved in the remembrance of survival. Scholars mention survival often but frequently as a brief item among lists of cultural concerns or achievement. Extending its analysis and theorization better prioritizes survival as a concept with vitality. This critical act challenges society’s often static expectations of how fruitfully history can bloom into functionality and relevance when provided with a new lens from which to gaze at cultural phenomena.

Because of Toni Morrison’s critical discourses related to memory that affirm her novels’ commitment to exploring ways communities manage local histories and collective memory, critics cover much of her repertoire in cultural memory criticism. A. Timothy Spaulding’s *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (2005) is a study of not just Morrison’s work as the African American sample in a multiethnic literary comparison, but of several of the most active African American novelists whose works reflect an aspect of cultural memory. Exploring additional works by Octavia Butler, Ishmael Reed, Charles Johnson, Jewelle Gomez, Samuel Delany, and Edward Jones, Spaulding chronicles novels that present a “retelling of slavery.” Spaulding’s contribution is identifying this nearly two-decade corpus of postmodern novels “as an epoch of sorts within the African American literary response to the history of slavery.”¹⁶ Spaulding’s

work is an adjacent discourse, but Black cultural mythology provides tools for itemizing the critical dimensions of how African people heroically responded to and behaved within histories of not only enslavement but also during the entire diaspora experience. Its conceptual tools inspire a more uniform critical process that shares with Spaulding a goal for society to “interrogate our past” but also to honor the sacred survival beyond enslavement with guideposts that reinforce a psychologically and sociologically relevant awareness of the culture’s mythological structure.¹⁷

In a broader view of cultural memory studies, a survey of how Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning’s volume *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (2010) intersects with Black cultural mythology is philosophically informative. The topic of mythology weaves its way through discourses on European and American cultural memory. In the volume, contributors regard enslavement as a trauma addressed in discussions of collective memory. Cultural markers such as the terms “Africa,” “Black,” and “slavery” are not indexed in the volume, but several essays are informative. Jan Assman’s contribution articulates core human concepts tied to memory as he defines the history of cultural memory in a culturally neutral way. He views it as “the connection between time, identity, and memory in their three dimensions of the personal, the social, and the cultural.”¹⁸ Specifically, he asserts, “Cultural memory is a kind of institute. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another.”¹⁹ Assman and Eyerman discuss traditional aspects of collective memory and cultural memory in depth, but Black cultural mythology pivots from many of these theses with a new lens to consider what it looks like to merge cultural memory with cultural heroics to yield cultural mythology. Assman, in particular, uses terms such as “mythical history,” which is at the intersection of cultural memory and time.²⁰ In a discussion of time, he clarifies, “The cultural memory is based on fixed points in the past. Even in the cultural memory, the past is not preserved as such but is cast in symbols as they are continually illuminating a changing present. In the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and memory vanishes.”²¹ Assman’s final observation defends the legitimacy of a group’s privilege to rearticulate the parameters of myth, memory, mythology, and heroics on its own terms without the burden to justify its culturally centered symbolism and meaning for its unique intellectual enterprise.

Jeffrey K. Olick's contribution to collective memory and the sociology of the mnemonic demonstrates the depth we can anticipate as Black cultural mythology discourses join the conversations related to social memory:

Work emphasizing the genuinely collective nature of social memory has demonstrated that there are long-term structures to what societies remember or commemorate that are stubbornly impervious to the efforts of individuals to escape them; powerful institutions, moreover, clearly support some histories more than others, provide narrative patterns and exemplars of how individuals can and should remember, and stimulate public memory in ways and for reasons that have little to do with the individual or aggregate neurological records. Without such a collectivist perspective, after all, it is difficult to provide good explanations of mythology, tradition, and heritage, among other long-term symbolic patterns.²²

Black cultural mythology could indeed be what Olick extrapolates from criteria from Halbwachs and Émile Durkheim, that "groups themselves also share publicly *articulated images of collective pasts*."²³ Specifically,

Durkheim developed a sociological approach to what he called "collective representations," symbols and meanings that are properties of the group whether or not any particular individual or even particular number of individuals shares them. In this sense, very few people may be able to identify key figures or events of the Civil War, but those figures or events may nonetheless be important elements of American collective memory. Whereas survey researchers may conclude that a particular image or event not remembered by very many people is no longer a part of the collective memory, for a true Durkheimian, culture is not reducible to what is in people's heads.²⁴

Olick's presentation of such conceptual flexibility gives complete license to phenomenology experts (e.g., Africana phenomenology) to do the critical work of discerning what is usable or remarkable from historical, literary, or other artistic narratives and artifacts, as signposts of sustaining cultural value. Black cultural mythology's attributes function in this way, as a revisionist offering

to a public hungry for a stabilizing and preservationist logic that defends its core heritage from “traumas” of contemporary neglect and belittlement.

Finally, Renate Lachmann’s essay in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (2010) approaches literary specificity and application that relates to Black cultural mythology’s interest in the self-awareness and deliberateness in which authors participate in cultural memory. She suggests that “authors of literary texts like to explicate their own memory concepts. Some develop intricate mythopoetic theories which betray the assumption of philosophy or literary theory.”²⁵ It has been refreshing for writers such as Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, and Suzan-Lori Parks to share their theoretical orientations to myth and memory, particularly to exonerate cultural and literary critics from overimposing a lens of historical relevance onto an often fictive literary text. For example, Colson Whitehead’s basic description of his novel *John Henry Days* (2001)—a central model of Black cultural mythology possibilities in literature explored in chapter 7—as an “anxiety myth” gives readers less of a critical roadmap from which to draw assumptions about his craft and storytelling.²⁶ Yet authors who infuse their texts with historical sensibilities invite cultural memory explication.

Critic Herman Beavers evaluates the writerly process concerned with these goals in the work of novelist Charles Johnson, another writer featured in chapter 7. He observes that “the assertion of memory is so important to the emergence of new literatures, so heavily associated with acts of breaking silence and bearing witness.”²⁷ Johnson, himself, is concerned with exploring Africana survival through his corpus of black philosophical fiction. He writes, “Black experience becomes a pure field of appearances with two important poles: consciousness and the objects, others, to which it is related intentionally. We describe *how* these appear, and note that Black subjectivity (memory, desire, anticipation, will) stain them with a particular sense.”²⁸

Trudier Harris shares with Beavers an interest in writers’ motives in constructing narratives reflecting memory, myth, and heroics, and her book *Martin Luther King Jr., Heroism, and African American Literature* (2014) is notable for the author’s thoughtful deciphering of the processes of African American heroism. Her introduction on “The Ambiguous Nature of African American Heroism” emerges as an important clarification about African American perceptions of the relationships between folk heroics and legendary iconic lives such as King’s. She narrates ambiguity primarily in a sense that, even to African Americans, King is a hero and, related to Black cultural mythology’s itemization, possibly also an antihero. Her measures of the potential for African American heroics to be abstract, flexible, and revealed

through “sustained reflection” are discerning, and her goal is to account for the role of the writer in managing heroics.²⁹ She explains:

First, each of these writers recognizes King as a heroic figure, whether they applaud that heroism or deride it. Second, the heroic traits that ensure King’s transcendence of the ordinary to extraordinary inclusion in literary works is based, in part, on African American folk traditions; thus, several of these works showcase occasions in which the folk imagination and cultural patterns drawn from folklore help to shape African American literature. Third, the inherent ambiguity of African American heroic folk traits makes for political as well as literary entanglements that call into question the life of King as incorporated into the literature as well as the intentions of the writers in preserving, tainting, reclaiming, or elevating King’s historical legacy.³⁰

Harris’s investigation into the writer’s motive is broadly folkloric and generalized, yet she captures the collective process. She itemizes the impulses:

Together, these seemingly contradictory conditions indicate that African American heroes are embraced, shaped, defined, and re-defined to coincide with cultural needs, to highlight long-standing cultural patterns, and to emphasize that ambiguity in heroic construction—or, indeed, suspicious or questionable actions in heroic construction—provide opportunities for continuing celebration, instead of rejection, of cultural heroes. Consequently, the very act of writing about such figures is evidence of celebration, even if the portraits depicted are less than complimentary.³¹

Harris’s qualification mirrors historians’ necessity to distinguish between truth and fabrication:

Placing Martin Luther King Jr. in the African American folk and literary heroic tradition is not to suggest that either aspect equals his life. The act is an exercise in claiming and perception, not in absolute truth. . . . In the African American imagination, folk narratives carry equal weight to researched narratives, for indeed the masses seldom read the latter. People nonetheless have extensive perceptions of their heroic historical figures. Folk

stories, literary creations, and biographies all have their kernels of truth—and those kernels carry weight in proportion to those creating and putting them forth. They all carry *a* truth that, perhaps collectively, yields a substantial portion of *the* truth.³²

Harris's study shares with Black cultural mythology an interest in "the impact of historical heroic creation on artistic heroic creation," and her study on King is a discourse in Africana cultural memory studies that affirms how literature is a "site of reclamation" of African American heroics.³³ Harris addresses myth briefly, but her conclusion's itemization of topics such as immortality, the institutionalization of the King holiday, how his assassination is a part of African American traumatic cultural memory, and the national King Memorial in Washington, DC, further suggests how her study aligns with Black cultural mythology and African cultural memory studies. While Harris is not consistently measuring cultural memory, one of her final comments is relevant: "While time may diminish memory, literature may refresh it because literary portrayals shape and reshape with the times."³⁴ Harris announces the early twenty-first century as "a time when African American writers can take even the most revered of their historical figures and, trusting in their creativity, produce works about them that, without excessive derision or undue veneration, are engaging, provocative, and well crafted."³⁵ Approaching remembrance as survivalist mythology with even more attributes than heroics, myth, cultural memory, and immortality is a dynamic, forward-moving engagement. It expands theorization and application to literature, holidays, monuments, and commemoration in a more comprehensive way that extends the impact of the seeds Harris plants in her literary study of King's legacy, which, through the book's dedication, indicates her respect for "the sacred."

This demarcation between Black cultural mythology and the ebb and flow of cultural memory and collective memory discourses is celebrated for the synthesis and synergy it reveals among cross-disciplinary divisions of intellectual labor. The new orientations to the worldview of diasporic memory in a Black cultural mythology theorization are not for the faint of heart, but the path along a new map of idea formation, which reflects on ways myth and mythology emerges from latency in cultural memory discourses, will be rewarding.

In the field of history, there is a tension between history and memory. Milton C. Sernett, in *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (2007), conveys this in a dialectic that pursues balance or a leveling that does not

discredit or marginalize memory in the field of history's hierarchy of the two and its processes of selectivity. "‘History’ and ‘memory’ jostle together in confusing fashion in the public mind. While professional historians explore the past with the intent of discovering ‘the way it really was,’ none have been totally successful in extracting themselves from ‘the politics of memory.’"³⁶ He further explains that "the historian nevertheless analyzes the past with a critical—and . . . more secular eye than the keepers of ‘memory.’"³⁷ Sernett quotes Civil War historian David W. Blight's argument that memory

"is often treated as a sacred set of potentially absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage of a community. Memory is often owned; history, interpreted. Memory is passed down through generations; history is revised. Memory often coalesces in objects, sacred sites, and monuments; history seeks to understand context and the complexity of cause and effect. History asserts the authority of academic training and recognized canons of evidence; memory carries the often powerful authority of community membership and experience."³⁸

Then, he features much of Michael Kammen's approach to memory from *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (1993):

"Memory," it is said, is a "social construction" to suit the needs of individuals and groups of one kind or another. "Memory" selectively gleans the past for what is useable in the day-to-day struggles of various segments of society for a place at the national table where goods and services are distributed. Since the past cannot be remembered in its totality, individuals and groups create their histories out of selective memories, conflating and confusing the analytical categories of "memory" and "history" about which the scholars talk. . . . "What history and memory have in common is that both merit our mistrust, yet both must be nevertheless nourished."³⁹

The historian's practice of taking exception to memory is duly noted, and Sernett eventually confesses that "‘History’ often sets itself in judgment over ‘memory.’"⁴⁰ For a book such as his *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History*, Sernett has the unenviable task of convincing historians that

memory is also a relevant trope. His approach paves the way for a more nuanced exploration of memory that does not place traditional and newer disciplines in a hierarchy. The linkages between Black cultural mythology and Sernett's step beyond the boundaries of the historian's craft to construct a volume that prioritizes myth and memory are delightful and reveal great possibilities for collaboration across disciplines for the benefit of a robust field of Africana cultural memory studies. There is a shared interest in stories, fabrications, legend, elaborations, mythmakers, the symbolic, icons, "dreamed up" testaments, hagiography, mythologizers, and folklore in assessing the "durability" of memory of historical actors.⁴¹

From Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally's classic collection on the study of memory in African American historical and cultural studies, the final, anchor essay by Pierre Nora also reinforces the hierarchy, and since *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (1994) is the first text that comes to mind upon the mention of African American cultural memory, it must be addressed and even *decentered* as a central text for Africana-based idea formation regarding myth, memory, mythology, and heroics. The ideas about memory in the Fabre and O'Meally volume are not necessarily representative of the most contemporary points of view. The volume has a diversity of contributors, but the collection's final essay, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" by Pierre Nora, heavily differentiates myth from history. His essay favors the methodology of professionally trained historians in deciding the final word about the value (or limited value) of myth and memory orientations to the past. Significant for its closing argument to the volume, it manages to blur the rights of newer disciplines to conceptualize myth and memory in frameworks that may compete with those of the traditional discipline of history.⁴²

Also, it is not too bold to assert that Black cultural mythology is a twenty-first century inheritor of Carter G. Woodson's motives, which sustained the early twentieth-century formation of Black history practices. According to historian Pero Dagbovie in *The Early Black History Movement: Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston Greene* (2007), the early Black history movement is responsible for "the first significant body of scientific historical scholarship" on the diaspora population of African Americans.⁴³ In his study of the roles of Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Johnston Greene as key agents whose commitments pioneered the field that ensured the institutionalization of the "black historical professions," Dagbovie highlights their success in "popularizing black history."⁴⁴ Just as Dagbovie emphasizes Woodson and Greene as "two of the most important figures in the early

black history movement,” as both “forerunners” and “figureheads” based on how they were “willing to sacrifice” and how they advanced their goals as a “life-and-death struggle,” the theorization of Black cultural mythology also has key figures, addressed here as *exemplars*.⁴⁵ There is no need to include Woodson as an exemplar of Black cultural mythology because his craft served a prerequisite calling, to preserve and advance the actual historical narrative of African Americans. Instead, his work in popularizing Black history is that of a methodological forefather. His method of “taking black history to the masses, the working class, and the youth throughout the nation” as a “source of pride” was successful and is the foundation of the now stable “black historical enterprise.”⁴⁶ The contemporary generation has scarcely known a time when we did not have ready access to annals and narratives of Black history. But in contemporary generalist Black history and Black History Month practices, especially in the public domain, the masses’ engagement with history is at times rote, disengaged, and unimaginative. Black cultural mythology blooms as an inheritor of early Black history activity to energize behaviors toward history by introducing a new, compelling *logic* for legacy practices that celebrates the heroism and impulses of survival and that challenges us to meditate on the tactics for survival embedded in our history’s epics and mythologies. Woodson’s *African Myths and Folktales* (1928) and *African Heroes and Heroines* (1939) share the language of myths and heroics. The former is a collection of legends and folk tales aimed at youth audiences. The latter is

a biographical treatment of [continental African] heroes and heroines intended to show the possibilities of the field. These leaders of a despised people measure up to the full stature of the heroic in the histories of other nations. With their record the youth in quest of the dramatic in history may read with unusual interest these exploits of an all but forgotten people. The curriculum can hereby be enriched with this racial heritage which will broaden the minds of the youth and make for better citizenship in the modern world.⁴⁷

Woodson’s stated audience for *African Heroes and Heroines* is junior and senior high school students, and he issued the second edition of the book to meet the post–World War II demand for “literature on the background and the present status of Africa and Africans.”⁴⁸ In dedicating the book to “My Uncle George Woodson who in captivity in America manifested the

African spirit of resistance to slavery and died fighting the institution,” Woodson affirms his respect and honor for his family’s survival sustained by the heroic legacy of fighters such as his uncle.

Aligned with Woodson’s Black history enterprise, Black cultural mythology is the organic effort to begin to map, label, categorize, and formalize the heretofore random, yet consistently illuminated, ideations of myth, memory, mythology, and heroics. The metaphor of *constellations* is appropriate for the seeds and fragments planted in the traditions of sociopolitical, cultural theory, and aesthetic discourses on the broad aspects of African American mythology. Again, borrowing from Dagbovie’s exploration of the early Black history movement, the matter at hand is “infrastructure”—specifically, what is the infrastructure of the field’s organization of knowledge related to myth, memory, mythology, and heroics?⁴⁹

Black cultural mythology isolates the matter of popularizing Black history that Woodson and Greene inaugurated in the early Black history movement by redirecting historical inquiry more toward exploring the dimensions of myth, memory, mythology, and heroics in society’s expectations of and uses of history in memory practices and as legacy tools. Burnis R. Morris, in *History, the Black Press, and Public Relations* (2017) follows this line of inquiry as well, emphasizing Woodson’s Black history “public-education program” and “campaign.”⁵⁰ In fact, the language he uses to describe Woodson’s work aligns even more with Black cultural mythology. He writes of Woodson’s goal “to honor a subject whose past was clouded by misinformation and contempt,” its goal “to save the black race from extinction,” and the way Woodson’s program sought to be an “antidote” to “low self-esteem.”⁵¹ This framing is compatible with chapter 1’s discussion of the field of Black psychology’s priorities of maintaining African American mythological structure.

Inevitably, Woodson would smile upon the innovative efforts of Black cultural mythology as an applied version of many of his objectives. Dagbovie observes that Woodson “foreshadowed modern Black studies scholars in stressing that the study of African descendants be scholarly, sound, creative, restorative, and directly relevant to the black community.”⁵² The differences, or sometimes *tensions*, between how disciplines and subfields approach the study of myth, memory, mythology, and heroics do not interfere with the organic idea formation of Black cultural mythology. Instead, the comparisons reinforce uniqueness and disciplinary specificity. Comparing the historians’ views of memory and myth to the approaches of the exemplars discussed

in chapter 1 further delineates how Black cultural mythology is forging a new intellectual tradition.

As a theoretical work, this volume responds to Houston A. Baker's approach to keeping intellectual creativity grounded. In a warning to beware of when and if one truly is creating something new, Baker's checklist highlights the role of theory to explain, to adequately predict, to order understanding, and to help us to better appreciate the depth of phenomena, particularly in terms of going "beyond the tangible in search of metalevels of explanation . . . in intellectual discourse."⁵³ Baker's description of African American origins is one of many cultural-literary indications of the mental, psychic, and emotional character, disposition, and worldview of Africans. As a response to the dislocation from Africa to the Americas, he corroborates that Africans "were compelled not only to maintain their cultural heritage at a meta (as opposed to material) level but also to apprehend the operative metaphysics of various alien cultures. Primary to their survival was the work of consciousness, of nonmaterial counterintelligence."⁵⁴ Heroic and biographical literatures help to "inscribe a unique personhood in what appeared to be a blank and uncertain environment"⁵⁵ that has defined the continuum of Africana experience and its intellectual traditions that reflect survivalist impulses from the grit of these experiences. Baker notes, "Our intellectual history privileges the unseen and intangibly personal. The trajectory of this process is from what might be called the workings of a distinctly syncretic spirit to autobiographical inscriptions of spirit work."⁵⁶ Black cultural mythology extrapolates from Baker's layering of the narratives and heroic recollections of African American survival.

As an inquiry into historical theory, defined by Alison Moore in her discussion of cultural historiography as "a model of theoretical criticism [that] engages both descriptive and prescriptive readings of historiographic practices, with a view to evaluating their epistemological value,"⁵⁷ Black cultural mythology emerges as an *organic* response to Africana survivalist priorities emanating from its own genealogies. Valuing how literature appropriates the historical to influence identity and memory extends Black cultural mythology's relevance to cultural history. Africana cultural memory finds itself on the margins of discourses within the field of cultural memory studies, within a subject area loop of topics of enslavement memory in fiction and the history of enslavement memorials and commemoration. Moore describes this difference and its processes in terms of how "we each reinvent historiographic innovations for ourselves in parallel fashion, and

without reference to examples in other places.”⁵⁸ This is consistent with Cilas Kemadjiv’s sense of invention/reinvention, where he suggests, “The mythification of postcolonial heroism arises from the effort to understand one of the decisive questions for the future of postcolonial peoples: how to invent functional identities that allow them to mark their presence in the world, how to be part of the world without the risk of breaking apart.”⁵⁹ As such a reinvention, Black cultural mythology is a conceptualization that indicates a rupture and a shift away from relying wholeheartedly on models immersed in other disciplines’ priorities and orientations.

Black cultural mythology directs our interest toward the *forces* responsible for diasporan survival, fortitude, and memory practices cultivated and maintained during and after the dehumanizing and threatening, fight-or-flight conditions that have always accompanied African life in the United States, in the Caribbean, and in Afro-Latin America. The framework intersects with cultural criticism and history, yet also significantly with literature and aesthetics, as Black writers have been the most consistent storytellers compelled to revive and recycle the culture’s archive in creative, spiritual, and embellished ways with attention to a folkloric inquiry into African diasporic bravery, courage, valor, superhuman feats, boldness, fearlessness, daring, audacity, gallantry, chivalry, nobility, guts, spunk, and grit.

African American historical and cultural studies reflect an understandable preoccupation with what is heroic in the experiences of African people on US soil. Whether referencing African precolonial exploration of North America, feats of freedom along the Middle Passage, revolts, the creation of maroon societies, or broad African resistance responses to the perils of enslavement and postenslavement, African people whose relocations have sustained the diaspora have experienced an inordinate set of conditions that foster the emergence of acts and sensibilities that compel heroism for survival.

Africans arrived in North America culturally whole and with knowledge, skills, histories of achievement, and survivalist resilience from which they drew to endure the hostilities of a new environment and socio-legal status. The heritage of most enslaved Africans is broadly West African, and a cultural point of reference for this inquiry is embodied in the observations of writers such as Isidore Okpewho, who reorients Western academic assumptions toward a more culturally relevant philosophical understanding of precisely what is *epic*. African narratives such as the feats of Sundiata of Mali, the tales of Yaa Asantewaa’s fight against the British, and the valor of Usman dan Fodio and others who opposed the European assault on Africa are central to African pre-enslavement cultural memory that is a shared

transatlantic feature of diasporic African remembrance. This study does not linger on the historiography of African ethical and moral contexts of heroism, but they are parts of the origin narrative and cultural etymology of consciousness for African people transplanted to the US and the broader diaspora through the disruption of enslavement. However, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (2009) stands out as a profound treatise on frameworks of "disremembering," "re-membering," and "memory, restoration, and African renaissance" that Ngugi offers to address his early twenty-first century "thinking on the decolonization of African memory."⁶⁰ Ngugi contemplates memory concerns for both Africa and the diaspora:

Here then is the major difference between the continental African and the diasporic African. Forced into a crypt, the African in the diaspora tries to break out of the crypt, and grasps whatever African memory he can reach, to invent a new reality. On the continent, the reformed African tries to enter the crypt and store his inventions there.

It seems to me that what is needed is to break out of the crypt. We have to confront the realities of our past and mourn the dead in a proper way. Zora Neale Hurston must have had such an idea when in 1945 she proposed to W. E. B. Dubois the purchase of a hundred acres for a "cemetery for the illustrious Negro dead," so that "no Negro celebrity, no matter what financial condition they might be in at death, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness. We must assume the responsibility of their graves being known and honored." The lack of such "a tangible thing allows our people to forget, and their spirits evaporate."⁶¹

Ngugi's synthesis of African and African diaspora worldviews gives us much to consider, and his vision of a remedy for the problematic he and Hurston perceive is compatible with Black cultural mythology. He suggests something greater than

a physical site for the remembrance of a few. It is a matter of re-membering the entirety of Pan-Africa. Every year across the continent and the entire diaspora there should be a month, a week, even just a day of collective mourning for the millions whose souls still cry out for proper burial and accordance of proper

mourning rites. And accompanying these formal performances should be works of art, music, literature, dance, and cinema that connect our past to our present as a basis for the future.⁶²

Mourning and funeral rites are not specifically isolated variables in the theorization of Black cultural mythology, yet they are implied in the emphasis on sacred inheritance and ritual remembrance. Appreciative of Ngugi's framing of the transnational and intergenerational remembrance phenomena and standing on a collective African and Pan-African past that supports and intersects with the continuum of African culture that evolved in the diaspora, this study on Black cultural mythology is interested in a postenslavement, African-centered *philosophy of heroism*, defined organically from diasporic experiences with survivalist impact, achievement against the odds, and the extension of human capacity beyond the ordinary. While Ngugi speaks of diaspora populations reaching for African memory, the diaspora is additionally itemizing the memory practices that it has created on new soils, beyond the African homeland.

The disruption of enslavement requires a psychological deconstruction of what occurs cognitively to groups of people when they experience collective trauma. Such a speculation about African people and their traumas includes survivalist responses to capture in the West African terrain, to forced pedestrian travel across this terrain from familiar to unfamiliar continental regions, to imprisonment in dungeons, and to a terrifying nautical relocation journey. This also includes the survivalist camaraderie of the Middle Passage complicated by losses such as companion death, by the dispersal of captured communities of Africans at different ports and auction blocks, by anxieties of original and future family separation in the new environments, and more. In essence, new research on a comprehensive transgenerational Black psychology framework is needed to account for the psychology of Middle Passage survival as a prerequisite to understanding the psychology of chattel enslavement survival. Matters of geography, intergenerational familiarity with environments, and exponentially increasing diagnoses of European-American oppressors' pathology become part of the narrative of cognitive survival that contributes to an understanding of the depth of African American heroics and the culture's articulation of antiheroics. Antiheroics relay information and warnings about a culture's opponents and enemies against whom African people in the diaspora have and must continue to maneuver for survival.

Interdisciplinary nuances of topics of myth, memory, mythology, and heroics appear frequently in cultural studies scholarship about diasporic

experiences, yet not in a considerably coherent way. Terminologies and ideas appear as overlapping constellations without a key or a map to guide interpretation. In response to this, Black cultural mythology represents a shift toward a more holistic study of the intersections of history with topics of myth, memory, and heroics that proceeds with a duality that accounts for multiple perspectives in healthy comparative engagement. First, Black cultural mythology captures idea formation and a mapping of the intellectual traditions from which a set of useful terminologies emerges to guide society's conversations about how to enhance present and future Black life with a more functional awareness of what is at stake when we choose to regard our mythologies as an active and ongoing process essential for cultural stability and self-esteem. Implementing the study of Black cultural mythology as an Africana curricular innovation is an exciting development. The second aspect accounts for a broader cross-disciplinary field of Africana cultural memory studies that prompts a collective push to layer related ideas about history, memory, amnesia, monuments, commemoration, museums, and heroics across the academy and community. This reinforces the understanding of how the disciplinary specificity of Black cultural mythology is one among many broad academic approaches to cultural memory studies. African historian Walter Hawthorne helps to recalibrate our understanding of the potential of theoretical work on memory and myth in his review of *Crossing Memories: Slavery and African Diaspora* (2011), a collection edited by Ana Lucia Araujo, Mariana P. Candido, and Paul E. Lovejoy. He calls for greater "logic" in approaches to memory studies that relies on "theoretical, methodological, and historiographical contribution[s]." ⁶³ He also emphasizes the value of work "that forces a rethinking of the way historical memory is constructed." ⁶⁴ Black cultural mythology is precisely this, a theoretical framework for conceptualizing postenslavement survivalist experience in the Americas. Formally, the theorization of Black cultural mythology proposes that in the African diaspora experience of beginning again and engraving identity on new soil, the logic and effect of memory practices can be itemized optimally when we equally prioritize the content and the function of what we recollect and retell. The function is to reinforce the culture's mythology as a transgenerational narrative map of survival maintained by an intellectual and aesthetic tradition concerned with immortalization and with the influence of heroics. An awareness that waves of ancestors, sociopolitical and cultural activists, writers, and artists, though underacknowledged, have had an intergenerational commitment to elevating Africans in the diaspora to heroic personhood despite predicaments of bondage and inequality, further

enhances the culture's commemoration of itself and its ongoing philosophical capacity to sustain sacred cultural remembrance. A set of critical attributes emerges as a tool to manage discourses related to this cultural phenomenon.

Shifting away from the broad collectivity of discourses in cultural memory, history, and theory, the chapters examine specificities and micro-discourses of Black cultural mythology's more organic idea formation. Chapter 1 offers a survey of the casual ways ideas about myth, mythology, and memory appear in broad Africana discourses. The chapter's first priority is highlighting foundational sensibilities mined from activists and thinkers such as abolitionist Maria W. Stewart, writer and journalist Shirley Graham Du Bois, culturalist scholars Larry Neal and Maulana Karenga, Black psychologist Amos N. Wilson, and early "Black myth" scholar Molefi Kete Asante. Its second priority is to expand this renewed sense of a latent intellectual tradition, by featuring many of the key discourses on memory that have been sustained by writers and philosophers such as Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde. This survey of the intellectual genealogy and tradition of critical thought ends with the presentation of over a dozen critical attributes that are the working conceptual framework for Black cultural mythology. Chapter 2 is a study of the diverse meaning of commemoration in an intervention format that relays commemoration historiography, the significance of the 1619–2019 Quadricentennial, and contemporary developments in the enslavement memory industry. This chapter is also an analysis of commemoration methodologies mined from Black perspectives on the 1776–1976 US Bicentennial and the 1865–1965 Emancipation Proclamation centennial in the writings of A. Leon Higginbotham, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, Derrick Bell, and Gil Scott-Heron. The next two chapters merge cultural criticism and theory with literary models to carry the discourse to fruition. Chapter 3 responds to the announcement of plans to place Harriet Tubman's image on the US twenty-dollar bill and explores the nation's irregular racial-cultural pattern of managing her hero dynamic. Chapter 4 stabilizes Haiti, its revolution, and its heroes as the first diaspora-wide mythology of a Black revolutionary event, which gives Black cultural mythology an even more formal legacy into the eighteenth century. Chapter 5 is an exploration of Richard Wright's philosophies and literature that represent not only the pinnacle of antiheroics (through *Native Son*), but also a sensibility of the relationship of the writer to his or her culture's myths. Chapter 6 tackles the complexities of managing mythology in spite of the tensions between the autobiography of a historical figure—Malcolm X—and historian Manning Marable's revisionist, or *deconstructive*, contemporary