Africana Cultural Memory in the Afroeuropean Context

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Abstract

With the publication of Black Cultural Mythology (2020), the discipline of Africology and African American Studies has a better resource that answers the call for methodological and theoretical tools to institutionalize Africana cultural memory studies as a robust subfield. This content analysis tests the applicability of the critical framework of Black cultural mythology—which emerges from a study of the African American Diaspora of the United States—with the Afroeuropean Diaspora, namely the Black British experience. A feature of this study’s methodology is evaluating the efficacy of the genre of anthology—in this case Kwesi Owusu’s Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader (2000)—as a comprehensive source suitable for content analysis and from which to infer a sense of the region’s approaches to cultural memory and memory-adjacent worldviews.

Keywords

Black cultural mythology, Africana cultural memory studies, Diaspora, Afroeuropean, Black British

Introduction

Africana cultural memory studies is a new subfield of the discipline of Africana Studies that has benefited from an accumulating body of work from

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diverse fields of study referencing African American, Caribbean, and Brazilian experiences related to memory (Araujo, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015; Bernier, 2012; Eyerman, 2001; Gauthier, 2011; Marable, 2006; Morrison, 1995; Peterson, 2001; Sernett, 2007; Spaulding, 2005; Temple, 2007, 2008, 2017, 2020; Tillet, 2012; Woolfork, 2008). The book *Black Cultural Mythology* (Temple, 2020) gathers these diverse and academically meandering approaches to cultural memory and includes them as part of the corpus of texts that support a formalized subfield of Africana cultural memory studies. The book’s concluding chapter, “Introducing Africana Cultural Memory Studies,” chronicles *memory work* and adjacent idea formation while highlighting different schools of thought in Africana cultural memory work. Over a dozen colleges and universities already offer courses on some aspect of memory within the Africana experience, even if they have yet to identify the courses of study as part of the newly formalized subfield of Africana cultural memory studies. In contrast to the frameworks of studies on cultural memory that have emerged from fields of History, Literature, and Cultural Studies, the conceptual framework of Black cultural mythology approaches cultural memory as a remembrance that is a more cyclical, deliberately narrated, hyperheroic, liberational, and triumphant worldview of legendary (real life), mythological activity of the African American past that inspires, builds self-esteem, and fosters pride.

This exploratory study adds to the existing body of scholarship newly categorized as Africana cultural memory studies by expanding the subfield’s geographical scope to include an analysis of the nature of Africana cultural memory in the Afroeuropean context, focusing on the Black British experience but also posing additional directions for future studies of Africana cultural memory practices in Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. While there are many critical approaches to Africana cultural memory, this study relies on the *uniquely Afrocentric* conceptual framework—Black cultural mythology—as a methodological guide for exploring the nature of cultural memory in the Black British experience, namely, following the imperative to “excavat[e] from within an immersion in diaspora consciousness and worldview” (Temple, 2020, pp. 254–255). The quality of *immersion* is what allows *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader* (2000), Kwesi Owusu’s critical anthology on Black British cultural and historical experience, to be a useful source for mining the culture’s latent orientation to cultural memory. The anthology does not explicitly itemize cultural memory as a critical topic of inquiry because Africana cultural memory studies was not a prominent discursive category at the time of its publication.
Methodology

Only a handful of studies address the matter of cultural memory in the Black British experience, and they are literary studies rather than history and culture studies (Rupp, 2010; Kamali, 2016; Novak, 2020). To further mine the nature of cultural memory, it is possible to rely on the conceptual framework of Black cultural mythology layered with the methodology of retroactively coding a comprehensive cultural anthology on the Black British worldview to reveal its unique cultural variables of memory, myth, mythology, heroics, and commemoration, which may differ from the assumptions of an African American application. As a sort of first glance toward the phenomenon, the anthology approach gives a credible initial survey. In this exploratory study, the initial methodology is based on conducting a content analysis of a comprehensive collection reflecting an Afroeuropean experience, namely *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader* edited by Kwesi Owusu. Contributor Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe (2000) describes the English-African Diaspora as one that “conventionally comprises African post-colonial constituents from the Caribbean, North and Latin America and continental Africa who find themselves in England for labor, schooling, political asylum, and frequently by birth” (p. 489).

The Black cultural mythology conceptual framework is Diaspora-relevant and is a tool that prompts a discovery of what new and culturally unique aspects of cultural memory ideation and practice emerge from the Black British context. The first book-length study on Black cultural mythology is based on the Diasporan experience, mostly in the U.S. but is also inclusive of some Caribbean experiences (Temple, 2020). It is based on broad cultural studies, critical thought, arts and letters discourses, and literature which yield an enhanced structural understanding of the conceptualization and behaviors related to Africana Diaspora mythological structure and memory practices. The originality of the conceptual framework’s theorization of fifteen properties, or attributes of Diaspora cultural memory and cultural mythology is how it presents a conceptual system of thought that adds specificity beyond label of “memory.” The concepts hold great promise for the critical exercise of exploring a Diaspora region’s worldview of remembrance, including retentions, gains, and new developments as people of African descent have reinvented themselves, over time, on shores beyond Africa. The stimuli will likely be different among distinct Diaspora communities, but many of the processes may be the same.

The parameters of the Black cultural mythology conceptual framework reflect a deconstruction based on the critique that society’s use of the single word *memory* benefits from further itemization into at least fifteen culturally
unique micro-variables that are at work when scholars and the community seek to describe the value of what we recall in our remembrances. Specifically, they are:

1. **Mythological structure**—functional intergenerational narrative of a culture’s accolades in order to build pride, confidence, and self-esteem.
2. **Commemoration philosophy**—worldview of how a culture systematically celebrates itself.
3. **Aesthetic memorialization**—using art and narrative as tools to promote and recycle key heritage markers.
4. **Hyperheroic acts**—amazing, nearly supernatural feats of the culture’s heroic personas.
5. **Epic intuitive conduct**—the force or inner spiritual trust in one’s awareness of surviving through harm, that guides, protects, and transmits a survivalist logic.
6. **Ancestor acknowledgment**—remembering generations who paved the way.
7. **Ritual remembrance**—ceremonially honoring ancestors and moments of grand activity that enabled survival.
8. **Historical reenactment of worldview**—reproducing grand heroic and historical moments in order to re-acquaint contemporary society with the past.
9. **Immortalization philosophy**—a culture’s functional ideas and behaviors about how each generation works to extend the certainty and promise of survival to and for future generations.
10. **Hero dynamics**—the culture’s evidence of high, noble, and acclaimed behaviors and efforts.
11. **Reconciliation and renewal**—processes of healing anxieties and wounds inherited from the past.
12. **Antiheroics**—sustained discourses about the enemy and how to tactically respond to enemies, villains, antagonists, detractors.
13. **Sacred observance**—honoring and acknowledging the contributions of cultural personas and the power of legendary cultural events in a spiritually transcendent way.
14. **Resistance-based cognitive survival**—the high activity and logic of the African mind to tactically survive and to change or improve oppressive conditions.
15. **Sacrificial inheritance**—acknowledging how the life we have inherited is a gift bequeathed from previous generations who suffered and shed blood in order for us to survive and thrive (Temple, 2020, pp. 84–90).
The study is also attentive to the emergence of additional properties or categories that are specific to the Afroeuropean experience and that may not appear in the Black cultural mythology study done on primarily the African American experience in the U.S.

For African American and Caribbean Diaspora experiences that ground the evolution of Black cultural mythology attributes, the first central feature of cultural identity is heroically and epically surviving enslavement and its reiterations in the form of segregation, institutional racism, and systemic oppression. The central cultural memory features of Afroeuropean cultural identities may be different based on nativity, citizenship, and migration experiences, and must be assessed for each cultural group’s or nation-state’s domain of experience. Micro-variables may emerge as even more distinct characteristics of cultural memory practices depending on the amount of time between Diasporans’ physical separation from a homeland. Likely, there may be a qualitative difference between recent and earlier migrants wherein cultural retention and cultural duplication on new soils will be easily apparent.

The second central feature is memory which includes how a culture recalls and values a collective history or experience, and the third central feature holds that when narrated or aesthetically represented, remembrances convey cues of dignity, heritage, pride, cultural lessons, and cultural data useful for the well-being and high mythological structure of future generations. Mythological structure is a cultural group’s intergenerational capacity to transmit heroic history for the sake of developing and transmitting pride, self-esteem, and worldview certainty (Temple, 2020; Wilson, 1987). These properties of Diaspora cultural behaviors evolve from processes of what theorists Molefi Kete Asante and Maurice Halbwachs, respectively, refer to as beginning again and engraving identity on new soil beyond original or early African/Africana regions (Temple, 2020, p. 2).

In redirecting Africana cultural memory studies toward configurations in the Afroeuropean experience, Scarabello and de Witte (2019) offer language that, though not specific to memory work, assists with the emergent conceptualization for beginning to uncover what cultural memory can mean. Organic to the Afroeuropean experience, they address the concept of “self-making,” which they apply in their study of Afro-Dutch and Afro-Italian populations. In particular, the authors are concerned with “identity, self-making, and social critique” as well as “the politics and aesthetics of cultural identity formation” (pp. 317–318). Their approach also parallels the concerns of cultural mythology and cultural memory when they explicitly itemize their attention to how people “shape their sense of being and belonging” (p. 319). Scarabello and de Witte do not extend their study to cultural mythology and cultural memory, however, their critical milieu for the above intersecting concerns is a reference point that illuminates cultural goals to address some of memory’s
variables that, heretofore, have not had undivided attention in scholarship. It is important, however, to review the European and even European-American contexts of cultural memory before advancing into the content analysis for the Black British experience.

**Influence of European and White American Memory Studies**

Scholars agree that memory has been a concern of societies since antiquity, but the late 20th century growth, or *invention*, (Erll, 2011, p. 13) of memory studies as a field of inquiry has been defined largely by concerns over Europe’s wars, colonialism, myths, and the Jewish Holocaust. Africana memory matters appear on the margins of the American and European cultural memory enterprise. There was an attempt in the early nineties to gather perspectives on African American approaches to memory relying on the conceptual methodology of a popular European model, *les lieux de mémoire*, translated as *sites of memory* (Nora, 1984), that yielded an important book, *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (1994) by Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally. Historians have been citing this volume, alone, as the singular text on memory in a broadly conceived version of Africana Studies with good reason. It has wide coverage of eighteen thematic essays, even though there is not enough uniformity or conceptual unity among the essays to sustain Africana cultural memory studies as a subfield of study. Moving beyond this early effort, over the past two decades, scholars have generated a noticeable additional corpus of excellent studies related to cultural memory addressing primarily African American experiences, from the joint spaces of traditional disciplines merged with versions of Africana Studies. This momentum and growth have matured recently to emerge into a *formal* subfield of the discipline of Africana Studies. The challenge ahead for Africana cultural memory studies is to ensure that it represents *global* memory perspectives on Africa and the Diaspora, and this essay on the Afro-European context is such a contribution.

**The Shift away from European Contexts of Africana Cultural Memory**

In 1994, when Fabre and O’Meally published the edited collection, *History and Memory in African American Culture*, the final volume represented a series of faculty seminars and a culminating conference in Italy framed theoretically to utilize “terms and concepts invented in France to describe French historiography” (Fabre & O’Meally, 1994, p. 8). To the editors’ credit, they
captured the full range of the debates about whether the concept of *les lieux de mémoire*, Nora’s French nationalistic concept on the relationship between history and memory, was suitable as a methodology to explore the African American and African Diasporan experience. African American Studies scholars, mostly in literary studies, such as Melvin Dixon, VéVé Clark, Susan Willis, and Nellie Y. McKay, stand out in the editors’ summaries. These critiques took “direct aim,” took “a strong stance against,” and were “pointedly critical,” of Nora’s French nationalistic assumptions about the intersections of history and literature; how some scholars enthusiastically applied it to the Africana experience; and how it “undermined” Africana traditions (Fabre & O’Meally, 1994, p. 11, 13, 15).

In spite of the skepticism with which seasoned scholars questioned the assumption that a French memory methodology was suitable to explore African Diaspora traditions, Nora’s anchor essay gave a clear closing argument: History is dominant and memory is a stepchild. This hierarchy placed a burden on History scholars to uphold the rights of professionally trained historians to have the final word in assessing the role, value, and function of memory in the academy. Sernett (2007) seems to have taken note of this, and when he wrote the remarkable cultural memory study on Harriet Tubman, he went to great lengths to justify his choice that myth and memory are as valuable as history. As one of many important texts in Africana cultural memory studies, Sernett’s contribution and his persuasion to convince historians of memory’s equal importance “paves the way for a more nuanced exploration of memory that does not place traditional and newer disciplines in a hierarchy” (Temple, 2020, p. 12). Sernett’s model of exhausting a comprehensive range of academic fields, historical archives, media, testimonies, art, and personal narratives to re-present Harriet Tubman to the 21st century, is a methodology duplicated by the anthology format and provides further rationale for exploring a cultural anthology to mine a culture’s memory-adjacent variables, especially if the anthology was published prior to Africana cultural memory studies emerged as a formal, conceptual category of inquiry.

The historiography of Africana cultural memory studies is still containable in a manageable list of key texts, demonstrating the newness of the subfield. Fabre and O’Meally’s (1994) *History and Memory in African-American Culture* continues to be a notable text that addresses memory directly, through multiple contributors. In contrast, there is a set of historiographical monographs that uncover commemoration and African American holiday celebrations and are focused excavations. They account for the worldview adaptations in memory, myth, mythology, heroics, commemoration, and the civic responsibility of memory documented in the identity and survivalist processes that represent the geographical shift induced by enslavement that relocated
Africans to the Americas (Clark, 2005; Kachun, 2003; Marable, 2006; Mayes, 2009; Wiggins, 1987).

Literary studies is another area with key texts that are central to Africana cultural memory studies, and this list also includes texts (Eyerman, 2001; Gauthier, 2011; Peterson, 2001; Spaulding, 2005) whose perspectives may linger too much on the trauma of enslavement rather than having a more Africological, liberationist and survivalist context for African American memory practices. These texts center the enslavement experience, traumas, and amnesias in primarily African American literature. Toni Morrison’s essay, “The Site of Memory” (1987) is a central reflection that has heavily influenced Africana cultural memory studies, and Fabre and O’Meally (1994) even mention it in their introduction. While most of these texts, beyond the Morrison essay, would not be prioritized in an Afrocentric curriculum on Africana cultural memory studies, the texts do pioneer interesting and well-argued perspectives. An additional study on Martin Luther King Jr.’s folkloric and heroic stature in literature (Harris, 2014) is more recognizable as an immersion study on cultural aesthetics, memory, and storytelling that aligns with the priorities of Africana Studies, rather than with English.

Historian Ana Lucia Araujo is the foremost scholar in History whose full repertoire of scholarship has cemented the contemporary significance of Africana cultural memory studies. Her works are grounded in enslavement trade history and contemporary sites of memory, and she addresses the rich archive of enslavement and the memorialization of enslavement trade history (e.g., monuments and heritage sites) from multiple perspectives, namely Brazil, the United States, and Benin (Araujo, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015).

A final category of scholarship is truly interdisciplinary, bridging popular culture, art, media, television, and film (Bernier 2012; Tillet, 2012). For some of these works (Woolfork, 2008) the titles do not reveal the depth of the text’s engagement with Africana cultural memory studies’ central categories of memory, myth, mythology, heroics, or commemoration, but the content is a part of the broader, transdisciplinary scope of Africana cultural memory studies.

Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader

This analysis updates our reading of Kwesi Owusu’s Black British Culture and Society: A Reader (2000) to account for the developments in Africana cultural memory studies that have emerged since its publication. Conceivably, if Owusu were to have compiled this collection in the current moment, there would likely be obvious references to cultural memory variables and
memory-adjacent categories. Owusu’s edited collection is 561 pages long, with forty-two essays, divided into four sections:

I. Classic Texts from Postwar Narratives
II. Critical Elements of a Black British Cultural Discourse
III. Cultural Studies and Black Political Debate
IV. Diaspora and New Trajectories of Globalization

The editor presents it as an “indispensable volume” on “key writings on the Black community in Britain, from the ‘Windrush’ immigration of the late 1940s and 1950s to contemporary multicultural Britain” (p. i). With “classic writings on Black British life” it “records the history of the post-war African and Caribbean Diaspora, tracing the transformations of Black culture in British society” (p. i). The volume’s grounding in cultural studies prioritizes the expansion of “reinventing critical traditions” and “constituting and reconstituting its object of study and methodologies,” which is the space where a Diaspora-based, Africana cultural memory studies discourse enters into the intellectual terrain.

Memory is not an indexed concept in Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader. In the preface, the list of concerns is comprehensive, though not inclusive of any key memory-adjacent terminologies. It references “economic and social issues such as health, religion, education, feminism, old age, community and race relations, as well as Black culture and the arts, with discussions of performance, carnival, sport, style, literature, theatre, art and film-making.” This assessment is not a negative critique; instead, it is an exploration of if and where newer conceptual discourses of “memory” would be categorized in the narrative. While this content analysis is sufficient to support an inaugural short-essay view of the potential nature of Africana cultural memory discourses in the Black British experience, an expansion of this study could emerge as a book-length project that cross-references its findings with field work and additional, more broadly scattered scholarship related to cultural memory, culled from various other sources beyond the anthology genre.

There are five essays that obviously, based on their titles, address memory-adjacent concerns: “Home is Always Elsewhere: Individual and Communal Regenerative Capacities of Loss” by Fred D’Aguiar; Michael McMillan’s interview with playwright Mustapha Matura, “Ter Speak in Yer Mudder Tongue: An Interview with Playwright Mustapha Matura”; Roxy Harris’s essay on “Openings, Absences, and Omissions: Aspects of the Treatment of ‘Race’, Culture and Ethnicity in British Cultural Studies”; “Writing home: Reconfiguring the (English)-African Diaspora” by Jayne
Ifekwunigwe; and “Harvesting the Folkloric Intuition: Ben Okri’s the Famished Road” by Ato Quayson.

From the Introduction, we also learn that Ferdinand Dennis’s “Birmingham: Blades of Frustration” (whose title does not give clues) also speaks to memory-adjacent concerns, particularly how “the message in the blues dance has changed, from nostalgia for the Caribbean islands, which presented the immediate displacement of Africans to the more profound nostalgia for Africa. By adopting Rastafari, the youth made the experience of exile a religion” (p. 9). Thus language of home, regeneration, loss, absences, folklore, nostalgia, displacement, and exile are some of the concrete terminologies that emerge in a sifting of Africana cultural memory and cultural mythology ideas from a Black British experience.

**Intergenerational Frustration and a Wavering Ownership of “Home”**

In Dennis’s critique of the frustration, youth expectations were in contest with parent and elder dreams to “work and eventually return ‘home’ to the Caribbean or Africa” (p. 9). This dream can also be considered a barrier to Diasporan investment in new environments in a cultural memory sense of “engraving identity on new soil” to the extent that there were limits to how much the first generation (dreaming of returning home and limiting how much they established roots, institutionally) laid groundwork for its eventual terms of cultural memory. In fact, D’Aguiar confirms an aspect of this when he confesses “London was spoiled for me by my belief that one day I would return to Guyana, and when that was no longer true, by a feeling that London did not belong to me, could never belong to me on account of my race, my minority status. A white majority made me aware on a daily basis that I was a visitor, a guest whose invitation to the club could, at a moment’s notice, be withdrawn” (2000, p. 197). Of note, D’Aguiar later authored the poetry collection *Translations from Memory* (2018), which reinforces his attention, as a writer, to memory.

In addition to the basic concept of memory, D’Aguiar conceptualizes “unbelongingness” and “in-betweenness” as variables related to home and distance from home. Most of his essay is a comparison between his displaced, enslaved protagonist, Mintah, of his novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) and himself. He confesses, “Neither Mintah, nor I for that matter, was born into in-betweenness or unbelonging. I was made that way. I insist that my status of removal is real in terms of geography, since there are maps I can point to and say I have lived there and there and there and I have never felt at home.
Or more likely I felt at home but the feeling never lasted, it soon wore off or was spoiled by some other, less salutary experience, or some thought more critical than appreciative of my place” (2000, p. 199). With such wavering of ownership of home, the question of investment in place is something new to consider in the processes of documenting the critical Diaspora-based variables of cultural memory and mythology. There is a no-fault pessimism in D’Aguiar’s witnessing, especially when he shares that “London was spoiled by a definition of Britain which never took my presence into consideration. As if I were expected to disappear just because the country’s appraisal of itself excluded me” (p. 200).

D’Aguiar shifts from the practical pessimism of the British landscape to associate cultural mythology with his homeland of Guyana. This is similar to what Ifekwunigwe does, as well, in her essay addressing the duality and competition between definitions of “home” and its influence on identity among biracial [what she refers to as “metis(se)’] Black British populations whose experiences also reveal “collective psycho-social problematics of a wider African Diasporan angst in its specific geopolitical manifestations” (p. 490). But there is a complexity that reveals that “home” (not England) is the source of the real cultural mythology that sustains. D’Aguiar differentiates between the potential to experience a sense of cultural memory-based heroics from his new environment, from borrowing cultural heroics from other regions of the African Diaspora, and relying on nostalgia from a remembered homeland. He shares, “I never hated myself for being Black in Britain, I hated Britain for not accommodating me. I never sang along with James Brown when he said, ‘Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud’—though I danced to the song’s funky rhythms—because I’d had enough pride for several lives from my Guyanese past and had known enough about Black history (from reggae celebrations of slave rebellion leaders and of Marcus Garvey, Haile Selassie and others; and calypsos about key incidents in Caribbean history or satires of the region’s politicians) to draw sustenance from more detailed and analytical sources than a pop song, such as history books and novels” (p. 200).

D’Aguiar’s pessimism is one that is uneasy with history (p. 201), viewing it as “untrustworthy,” and, to him, memory is “fragmented” (p. 201). He continues, “Those who belong to history and who suffered in it belong to an irrevocable past as far as recompense or redress is concerned. That aspect of history is dead. What lives about history is what the living entertain about it. History’s lessons are salutary only in so far as they remind us of how our ancestors f—– up and were f—– up in turn. The heroes in it did what they had to do with no notion that they might be serving the gods of return. They were preoccupied—and quite rightly so—with the villains of their return” (p. 201).
This narrative is both affirmative of the epic intuitive conduct of actors in the Africana past, but at the same time it is antithetical to the promotion of a positive cultural memory. D’Aguiar’s philosophy of history and memory is a pragmatic gem that reveals that he is aware of, though not wholly convinced of the value of, heroics, mythology, and the elevation enabled by cultural memory. His ideas pose challenges that are worth reconciling. He writes, “I need to forget in order to continue, but I must remember if I am to survive” (p. 202). But his understanding of values and potential are clear. He clarifies, “To repeat something that is unpleasant or dangerous requires both the impulse of pretending that this time is the first time and the memory of knowing how to proceed with care. Remembering and forgetting come into play at different stages but both know they are in the service of the individual who would never settle for one at the expense of the other” (p. 202). He understands that history can “inspire awe” and that a story is “a vehicle for change” (p. 202). D’Aguiar’s philosophical ideas are remarkable in the Black British discourse on memory and forgetting.

D’Aguiar merges his sensibility of home and unbelongingness with his character Mintah, and a closing idea is that “she spends a life on the move. She never settles for a new home for more than a few years before an enforced departure. She retains a memory of place where she grew up and spends years longing for it then not caring any more for anything but peace of mind. Her life is defined by leaving and never really arriving to a place where she can relax. Her memories are partly to blame for her unsettled nature” (p. 204). Notably, D’Aguiar’s philosophy could be useful in explaining the sensibility of early African arrivals to enslaved territories as well as other colonial era experiences. Thus, though complex, D’Aguiar gives the collection a pivotal philosophy that helps to define core elements of the Black British experience on its own migratory terms. Michael McMillan, in the collection’s interview with playwright Mustapha Matura, dates these types of sensibilities to the late 1970s. In Matura’s play As Time Go By, the protagonist Batee carries her disillusionment with England through the end of the play. Namely, she concedes, “‘Is five years I here and every night a go ter bed a pray dat when a open me eyes in de morning a go see de sun shining, home. An’ every morning a pray dat dis is me last day here . . . ’ By the late 1970s, this disillusionment had become quite widespread within the Caribbean community” (p. 259).

Thus, this comparative Africana cultural memory exercise allows us to consider the intricacies among different experiences within the Diaspora. The Black British experience, paralleled with other regions’ “first encounters” in new territories, reveals rich data about what Black migrants and transplants
felt, what they experienced, what their ideas were about the encounters, what
their reactions and responses were, and how they managed their own agency
to either fight and forge ahead in England as citizens or to return home. These
are contemporary options denied to enslavement era Africans who experi-
enced involuntary relocation with language and cultural awareness barriers,
but structurally and logically, the Caribbean reactions to English oppression
reveal more data about the Black British investment in forging a new Diaspora
in the midst of European racism and oppression. This is an enlightening
aspect of comparative Africana cultural memory.

The Return and Geospatial Cultural Identity
Politics

Matura’s discourse on what “the return” meant to Caribbean populations in
England captures the agency inherent in geospatial cultural identity politics.
Matura says, “I had come to the conclusion that this country was a prison and
that Caribbean people should return home. I don’t think English culture is par-
ticularly helpful to Black people from the Caribbean. That is a tragedy. We
seem to be stranded here. We came here to improve our lives but I feel that the
Caribbean spirit is stifled here” (Macmillan, 2000, p. 239). The freedom to
leave—to depart from the site of oppression and to have a homeland intact—is
a privilege that all generations have not had. It is also revolutionary in the sense
that some Caribbean populations chose to reject the European setting to which
they had postcolonial rights to enjoy, and to refuse to create Diaspora in the
English setting. Thus, Africana cultural memory practices for some populations
were not necessary because Caribbean populations sequestered their cultural
tools in a healthy, protectionist way, that disallowed and denied the need for—
at least for a generation or two— commemoration, ritual remembrance,
European-based African Diasporic mythological structure, and immortaliza-
tion philosophy. Again, the difference and organic understanding of what trans-
pired in terms of cultural memory in the Black British setting is unique.

In terms of heroics, Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, and the pantheons asso-
ciated with Rastifari, are heroic icons. Also, Reggae exerted an ongoing
influence for “Black redemption and emancipation” (p. 9). Inevitably, the
collection’s point-of-view is that “Black people in Britain saw themselves
predominantly as ‘guests’ of British society, to current trends stressing citi-
zenship, at the same time as ‘Diasporan’ links are made with North America,
Africa, the Caribbean and Asia” (p. 13). Cultural memory and cultural
mythology are among the anticipated new “critical thresholds” that will illu-
minate “stories waiting to be told.” (p. 13).
Memory turns up as a sustained discussion in Wright’s (2000) “Dub Poet Lekka Mi: An exploration of performance poetry, power and identity politics in Black Britain,” in which she powerfully rejects “current social anthropological discourse [that] tends to assume that Afro-Caribbean cultural practice does not constitute a ‘proper’ object for anthropological research” (p. 271). She rejects the way the field of study ignored Afro-Caribbean cultural identity in favor of a static social critique of “racism and social disadvantage” in terms “of negatives and absences.” (p. 13). In response, her approach to social memory is to link it with performance “where narratives of the past are re-visioned and past experiences are transformed through the re-enactment of cultural forms, especially those invested in speech, gesture, customs, rites and rituals collectively known as orature.” Wright also accounts for “the preservation of aspects of an African oral aesthetics.” This contribution to the volume elevates cultural memory and cultural mythology matters to a prominent place in the discourses of Black British Afro-Caribbeanness and Africanness, far beyond the pageantry of Carnival, which is another topic in the volume that is broadly adjacent to cultural memory discourses.

Wright’s dedicated section on “Social memory and performance” is powerful and is a central perspective that gives direction on how to advance a discourse on Africana cultural memory and mythology from a Black British context. Notice the acute memory-adjacent language:

This revisioning of the past through performance is particularly noteworthy because of the paradoxically characteristic ‘loss of history’ of diasporic Blacks. The very characteristic of the ‘migrant condition’ of Blacks in Britain, the intrinsic uprootedness and inevitable metamorphosis, alludes to inconsistencies and subsequent reimaginings of history. Because of its ability to re-create and repeat, performance acts as the bridge connecting the past, present and even future on a temp-social continuum. (p. 284)

She adds, “for many Afro-Caribbeans being Black in Britain had a considerably different meaning than in their respective host countries, a revised history or counter-narrative had to be performed to ‘justify’ their presence in Britain and empower this marginalized group in the fact of discrimination and racism. In doing so, Blacks contest their marginality by repudiating pejorative images [antiheroics] and affirming positive, more diverse Black imagery; by retelling and appropriating history in their terms” (p. 284).

Finally, Wright’s observations pivot on an understanding of enslavement that helps to both link and culturally differentiate what cultural memory and mythology’s notions of “beginning again” and “engraving identity on new soil” might mean in a Black British context. Thus,
This re-presentation of the Black self and narrative of modernity is unthinkable without reference to slavery, a symbolic Africa and the subsequent movements, dislocations, migrations peculiar to Black people in the Diaspora. They system of slavery fostered a complex system of ‘incomplete forgetting’ which has critically shaped the ways in which narratives of the past are constructed in diasporic societies today. Its dimensions included the implementation of aspects of ‘organized forgetting’, the systematic denial of many aspects of African history and culture. Also, it involved ingenious schemes to displace, refashion and transfer the memories of the system, to representations more amenable to those who wielded the ‘pencil and eraser.’ Moreover, the vast project limited the degree to which the enslaved Africans, who had the greatest motivation to, were able to forget those persistent memories. (pp. 284–285).

She quotes Connerton (1989) from How Societies Remember (p. 19) who differentiates between how Africa remembers (through “systematic cultural misrecognition”) and how Diasporic Africa “regenerates the living enactments of memory through orature” (p. 285). Wright’s thoughtful evaluation reveals that enslavement is also a consideration for Afro-Caribbean and African populations who are now Afro-Britons/Black British. Roxy Harris, in the collection’s essay assessing the history of British cultural studies notes that, “for Britain’s black population the recovery and conscious understanding of their cultural-historical narrative for the benefit of both themselves and others in an essential ingredient for their positive progress, given that their cultural antecedents were so viciously by the slave trade, slavery and colonial rule” (p. 397).

Cultural memory and cultural mythology in the current sense (based largely on the African American experience) are about hyperheroics of survival and beginning again, especially of superlative and legendary (versus normal, quotidian existence) memories elevated as heroic and worthy of particular commemoration. We know that we remember, but a deeper critical exercise into memory allows cultural memory and cultural mythology to emerge as more exceptional and meaningful categories worthy of new categorizations. Wright’s essay as well as the others in this group suggest that a revisionist evaluation of this particular Afro-European culture could sustain other critical categories or attributes of cultural memory.

Migration Myths and Nostalgia

The 1995 conversation between playwright Mustapha Matura and interviewer Michael McMillan, Matura introduces the issue of “myths” several times. It is not in a heroic myth context. His first use is suggestive of Black cultural mythology’s antitheroics because he deconstructs the “accepted wisdom that the English were fair, just and civilized. So you can imagine the
culture shock, to come to England and realize that all these values were just myths” (p. 256). Next, he reveals that his female character, Batee, from the play *As Time Goes By* “hated England” which “was unusual for people then. The myth was that immigrants didn’t say things like that. All they wanted was a job, a car and a house” (p. 259). These types of myths are not nearly stereotypes; instead, because they address perception and philosophy of place, space, and migration, these clarifications reflect a type of Black British hyperheroic personhood. As in Black cultural mythology, the way writers recycle narratives of heritage and journey remains a central feature of sustaining Africana cultural memory. The voluntary and economic choices for migration that 20th-century Black British populations had are a core difference that has determined what memory-adjacent behaviors emerged. Because the stable homeland was the buffer of Black nationhood (or virtual Black nationhood) in primarily African-descended Caribbean locations, twentieth-century Caribbean Black British transplants had a site of memory that was a reference point for their nostalgia, quantification of cultural loss and separation, and a beacon for the promise of one day returning “home.” These are significantly different attributes than what emerged among African Americans as cultural memory practices.

For African American popoulations, the Diaspora setting and context has an inherent clarification that the “beginning again” and “engraving identity on new soil” aspects of permanent, involuntary, and interruptive kidnapping and enslaved resettlement in a foreign land with language and cultural barriers (transference to an unknown European, colonial worldview) situate African American cultural memory as geographically grounded on U.S. soil and in historical events that occurred on U.S. soil—not in the lost memories of pre-enslavement African existence. Simply, enslavement is not as large of an active geospatial reference point for Afroeuropean versions of cultural memory in the same way it is for African Americans. As Roxy Harris notes, the slogan “We did not come alive in Britain,” credited to John La Rose drives this home. His point is that Caribbean populations represented matured activism and achievement in politics, labor, and “revolutionary social change” (p. 400) prior to migration to England. La Rose described it as a “leavening” that pre-dates on the ground encounters in England (qtd. in Harris, 2000, p. 400).

Harris’s essay addresses the “startling number of omissions and absences” in the Black cultural studies project that culminated with major works by Stuart Hall and then Paul Gilroy, among others. Again, Black British cultural memory studies idea formation is not considered an omission from Owusu’s anthology. We find that contributors were engaging with memory work and offering significant critical ideas to early 21st century Africana and Diaspora Studies. This inquiry questions if the topics of cultural mythology and
cultural memory can be subsumed in the types of omissions and absences that Harris suggests. Primarily, she notices the irregular focus on youth at the expense of older generations. In particular, “the concentration on youth has masked the historical continuities of their elders which helped to set the context within which they have acted” (p. 399). In fact, when Harris quotes Lawrence (1982), the quote is a nod to what we now call Black cultural mythology, as Lawrence praises the accomplishments of the early generation of post-1945 Afro British populations:

Who were the object of the police’s ‘nigger hunting’ expeditions in the fifties and early sixties when many of today’s youth weren’t even a glimmer in their parents’ eyes? Who fought the Fascists and Teddy Boys in Nottingham and Notting Hill in 1958? Who are the people who fought the trade union racism up and down the country for the last thirty years and more? Who initiated the campaigns against ESN placements and ‘sin-bins’? The fact that the youths have brought new understandings and different modes of struggle to bear up their communities’ struggles, does not mean that they are not still following in their parents’ footsteps or that they don’t stand firmly side by side with their parents in opposition to racism. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 132) (qtd. in Harris, 2000, pp. 399–400).

In the collection, Black British Culture and Society: A Reader, this quote is a powerhouse of cultural memory that conveys a concentrated sense of radical, agency-driven, Black British struggle that is suitable for celebration, commemoration, recollection in a sense of understanding sacrificial inheritance, and evidence of the culture’s ongoing resistance-based cognitive survival. Without grounding this description within the critical frameworks of Africana cultural memory studies, Lawrence’s ledger of early Black British heroic struggles is notable and is evidence of the types of episodes that are illuminated within Black cultural mythology and Africana cultural memory discourses. Harris’s vision is well-aligned with Black cultural mythology when she interrogates British cultural studies’ neglect of Lawrence’s view. She asks, “What lines of enquiry, therefore, would allow us to move toward a more comprehensive, sensitive and complex understanding of the historical trajectory, agency, achievements and setbacks of black people in Britain” (p. 400)? In this exploratory study, Harris is the most acute in hitting the nail on the head of noticing that some form of an active cultural memory or cultural mythology lens is active and functional, yet unarticulated. Her inquiry is also based on a celebrated Black British achievement model of institution-building embodied in “the active and creative cultures of achievement which have built the Notting Hill Carnival, the black churches, the supplementary schools, the International Bookfair of Radical Black and Third World Books
and centres of independent black publishing, to name just a few of the distinctive institutions within Britain’s black population” (p. 400). Keywords of “achievement” and “distinctive” are highly suggestive of a commemorative conceptual framework at play in Harris’s prompting of deeper engagement with Black British accomplishments. Harris even signifies on a central aspect of Black cultural mythology when she begins to question the intergenerational transmission of achievement ethics. She asks, “What elements, then, of their creative, struggling tradition did these black Caribbean migrants instil in their children in Britain? What forms of cultural transmission occurred and how did they occur? What alternative readings of the black population beyond those offered by the routine youth-oriented ones become available” (p. 401)? Harris should be credited as a visionary, as her inquiry is a clear opening for emergent Black cultural mythology and Africana cultural memory discourses, especially based on two salient points of her conclusion. The first, is the reiteration that her essay is “an argument for dynamic theory which pays close attention to and is shaped by the real acts of historically fashioned human agents” (p. 403). This is identical to the objective of Black cultural mythology, which empowers the international Diasporic concerns for self-making, self-documentation, and self-narrating our distinctive cultural accolades in deliberate and intergenerational ways. Second, she affirms that, “it is essential that ways be found for allowing the historical agency represented in the experiences of a broader fraction of Britain’s black population to be genuinely integrated with the concerns of cultural studies” (p. 403). In the U.S. model, this a concern for Africana Studies.

**Black British Memory in Literature and Art**

As a critical framework of Diasporan cultural memory, Black cultural mythology has an additional focus beyond providing an enhanced, comprehensive lens from which to engage with heroic survivalist memory: the roles of the writer and artist. The Black writer continues to be situated uniquely to be the most consistent recycler of the heroic vision and narrative of Diasporan people’s past. Much of this past is in interpretive stagnation, and the Black writer has been thoughtful, imaginative, and symbolically provocative in instigating public awareness of the heights of the Diaspora’s epic and inspiring past. In *Black British Culture and Society* we have already examined the memory-adjacent worldviews of playwright Mustapha Matura and novelist Fred D’Aguiar. However, the volume also has two lengthy and memory-relevant chapters on an artist—Uzo Egono—and on a writer—Ben Okri—both of whom have Nigerian backgrounds.
Reflecting the anthology’s ongoing theme that Black British populations have a lasting and complex sense of homeland, Uzo Egono “left his footprints on postwar British art by introducing a privileged understanding of those non-European sources which shaped its origins and informed his own original style” (p. 516). He lived in England for 51 years, until his death in 1996. His artistic breakthrough came in 1960, and as Oguibe (2000) describes, “it would seem that he had resolved is creative crisis by taking the route of nostalgia; a conscious appeal to memory and recollection as a tactic of relocation while finding his form” (p. 505). Much of his memory, nostalgia, and heroics work reflects a Nigerian past (pp. 505–506). Critics describe several phases of his work as “nostalgic evolution,” “nostalgic imagery,” and “cultural nationalism,” as well as creating a body of sculptures memorializing “images of fallen figures” of the Biafran War (p. 508, 510, 512). In the series Past and Present in the Diasporas, he “produced a monumental reflection on slavery, the legacy of Christopher Columbus, and the indefatigable nature of the human spirit” (pp. 514–515). The considerations of cultural memory and cultural mythology are uniquely prevalent in his final works, representing the nineties. Egono’s work covers many attributes of Black cultural mythology such as aesthetic memorialization, antiheroics, ancestor acknowledgment, hero dynamics, and sacred observance.

Ato Quayson’s lengthy essay on “Harvesting the Folkloric Intuition: Ben Okri’s Famished Road” is unique because it addresses cultural memory, collective memory, mnemonic systems, and mythopoeic (fictionalized mythology or mythological setting) discourse from a Nigerian cultural and cosmological context. Readers spend the vast majority of the essay wondering about its relationship to the Black British experience. However, Quayson’s (2000) thesis related to Black British experience, which he saves until the final paragraph of the chapter, is that Okri’s Nigerian aesthetics and sensibilities of heroic struggles—most against contemporary poverty and ghetto existence—emerge as an important “resource-base” during “the condition of exile or residence in the Diaspora where the need to negotiate multiple identities becomes most acute” (p. 543). This explicitly stated equivalent of what other contributors to Black British Culture and Society pose more generally as matters of home, nostalgia, dual allegiance, and so forth, gains specificity in Quayson’s exposé. The challenge of a U.S.-based cultural memory and cultural mythology is that the majority of collective memory is geographically confined to the experiential and historical borders of post-enslavement evolution and adaptation in a hostile environment, wherein the original Middle Passage journey interrupted the consistency of referents of “home” and “nostalgia” imbedded, in contrast, in the modern worldviews of post-WWII Diasporan and African pioneers to England. The memory-adjacent
cues in the anthology insinuated this uniqueness, but Quayson’s essay explicates the depth and complexity of, in this case, an African resource-base of migrants who rely on their home culture’s mythological structure for empowerment, confidence, self-esteem, and survival. Quayson’s articulation of how *The Famished Road* and other works by Okri reveal a modernist heroic struggle against poverty, corruption, and the spoils of 20th-century wars, challenges the field of Africana cultural memory studies to look toward contemporary African survival—instead of traditional and ancient African models of heroics and survival—to sustain a more balanced discourse on the breadth of Diaspora cultural memory and mythology. One example of this is Ngugi’s (2009) examination of African “re-memory,” in *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, which is in conversation with the emergent perspectives on a Diasporan evolution of epic survivalist heroics beyond the shores of traditional African homelands.

**Conclusion**

The richness, critical depth, topical diversity, and overall comprehensiveness of Owusu’s edited collection enabled this anthology study to be a successful exploratory methodology for relying on a single cultural source to initially characterize the Black British view of cultural memory and cultural mythology. As the field of Afroeuropean Studies continues to grow, particularly in terms of an increasing mobilization of scholars studying the Africana experience in Europe’s nation-states who could publish similarly comprehensive volumes on the legacy of creating culturally significant communities, or Diasporas, more anthologies will become available. Anthologies such as Mazon and Steingröver’s (2009) *Not So Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History, 1890-2000* and Keaton et al.’s (2012) *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* would be compatible to Owusu’s study. However, other anthologies addressing Afro-German, Afro-Italian, Afro-French, and Afro-Spanish Diasporan populations have limitations. Some have a single author rather than a vast collection of diverse voices. Some have editors who are not a part of the culture addressed in the anthology and who give broad disclaimers that question the cohesiveness of their collection (Lennox, 2016). Some are based only on literature (Kamali, 2016; Ponzanesi, 2004; Rupp, 2010;). Some are gender-specific, often including only the writing and experiences of women (Germain & Larcher, 2018). Others address the memory of Africa but not the emergence of Diaspora-based memory (Kamali, 2016). Others are cross-Diasporic (e.g., Afro-Hispanic) and address collective linguistic and colonization similarities
rather than a sustained focus on the unique national experiences of regional
Diasporan Africans (Ramsay & Tillis, 2018).

Moving forward, data generated from field work and from studies of more
diverse sources (individual articles, chapters, monographs, interviews) on the
nature of cultural memory and cultural mythology practices in regions of the
Afro-European Diaspora (and beyond) will expand the global range of Africana
cultural memory studies. Regarding the memorial and monument-based
aspects of cultural memory and cultural mythology, the commemorative nam-
ing of streets, parks, buildings, schools, and neighborhoods represents a more
localized form of cultural memory. The fact that the Afro-British experience
yielded new variables such as nostalgia and resistance to replacing memory of
home with a new Diaspora memory reinforces the need for flexible interpreta-
tions of the properties of the Black cultural mythology critical framework.

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