

Writing Black Women's Mythology: A Conversation with Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton

DEBORAH D.E.E.P. MOUTON, GULSIN CIFTCI, SILVIA SCHULTERMANDL

In commemoration of the proclamation of the end of slavery in the United States on June 19, 1865, writer, activist, and performer Deborah D. E. E. P. Mouton read from and discussed her memoir *Black Chameleon* at the 2023 Juneteenth Dialogue hosted by the Chair of American Studies at the University of Münster. The Juneteenth Dialogues are designed to enter into a discussion about systemic racism in the United States and to explore literary responses to the vulnerabilities of Black lives and strategies of (literary) resistance. With Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton, the focus of conversation was on the importance of mythology for Black women in the United States, the potentials of autobiographical writing, and the importance of literature today. Mythology, in Mouton's work, builds on what Audre Lorde called "biomythography" to combine personal experience, popular culture, history, and received narratives that are part of ancient storytelling traditions. In Mouton's hands, this becomes a technique for getting closer to some of the complex truths of a past grounded in enslavement. Mouton's reading from *Black Chameleon* and the panel discussion that followed are the basis of this interview. It has been edited for clarity. We want to thank the audience of the 2023 Juneteenth Dialogues as well as Dr. Ortwin Lämke and Frederik Köpke from the Studiobühne for providing the space for this event.

Silvia Schultermandl: Today is Juneteenth. We are thrilled to be the first stop on your book tour through Germany, and to have the opportunity to talk about your wonderful book, *Black Chameleon*. We do so in the understanding that Juneteenth is not only a celebration but also a commemoration of the continuous precarity of

Black lives and the struggle for racial justice in the United States and on a global scale. Your work as an artist, educator, and community organizer contributes to this fight for racial justice in multiple ways. Could you please tell us a bit about how your work is informed by your experiences and your activism?

Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton: In writing *Black Chameleon*, it was important to me to not only give you the experience of what it is like to be a Black American woman in the US, but to do so in a way that is complicated and funny and makes you cry and laugh and allows you to feel everything (we do). I hope that readers get this much out of my work.

Gulsin Ciftci: Your diverse range of involvement in the arts and activism, which Silvia pointed out, also shows itself in the range of artistic work you do. You became the first Black poet laureate of Houston in 2017 and, in 2019, you published your debut poetry collection, *Newsworthy*, which centers on the complicated relationship between the police, the Black body, and the way that media reports their interactions. This year (2023), you have not only published your memoir *Black Chameleon* but are also working on another big project, an opera piece, right? You are so productive across genres: What drew you to writing *Black Chameleon* as a memoir? And where did you come up with the idea of creating a Black woman's mythology, a technique which in your hands blends fantastic narrative modes with detailed descriptions of historical and biographical events?

Mouton: I actually didn't know that this book was going to be a memoir until the publisher told me that that's what we're doing. I started writing this as a short story collection around people in my family, and about halfway through, I got the feeling that it wasn't doing something a book should do. It should do more than just be a diary....Then a friend of mine asked me what kind of mythology I grew up with; this gave me a new perspective to consider. For so much of my young life there were no stories that directly reflected Black American experiences, much less stories describing what it means to take up space as a woman. Adolescence is already difficult to navigate.... There is this problematic statistic that says, "Women are most confident at the age of ten." That is terrible. When I started thinking about what happened to me at ten, one specific story popped into my head: the story of when a white man hurled obscenities at me at a restaurant. By revisiting this moment through mythological storytelling, I had a chance to challenge feeling like a victim. I was able to use mythology to navigate that. And I was so happy to have a publisher who supported taking my work in that direction.

Schultermandl: Speaking of your publisher, for your poetry collection *Newsworthy* you worked with Bloomsday Literary, an indie publishing house, but then switched publishers for your memoir. Can you reflect a little on that decision and what prompted the change? Do you think indie publishing houses play an important role in amplifying marginalized voices?

Mouton: I could not be the writer I am without Bloomsday Literary. Not only did they take a chance on me with my first collection, but many of their staff served as early readers of *Black Chameleon* before I began to query for agents. I think indie presses play a huge part in the ecosystem of the literary world. They pull people to publishing who may not have the huge platform necessary to get the attention of the larger houses. After publishing with Bloomsday, I was able to leverage my international success with *Newsworthy* into a larger deal. But even much of that was at Bloomsday's urging me to take a chance on myself and the work with a larger market. Then, when Holt entered the picture, they helped me elevate the book to a new level. Retha Powers is a phenomenal editor and really believed in me as a writer and in the book. It was kind of the perfect storm.

Ciftci: Being able to receive editorial support, especially when exploring new ways of telling stories and genre-blending, is crucial. With that in mind, perhaps we can talk a little about the ways in which you blend different modes of storytelling and how you let genres collide into each other. Perhaps we could start with the relationship between mythology and the specific myths that you've written into your memoir and their relation to trauma. Trauma is in some ways unspeakable, so in trauma narratives, silences, gaps, narrative loops play an important role. In your memoir, it seems like mythology is a means of filling these gaps. How would you describe the relationship between trauma and mythology?

Mouton: I wanted to think of this book as an American text specifically as well as a mythological text. Many American myths, such as the one where George Washington cuts down his father's cherry tree, are actually ridiculous. I think that American mythology is often a tool for writing revisionist history. And so, if there is a specifically American mythology, then in reclaiming this mythology, or revising it, I reclaim the ability to revise my own story. Which means that I could tell you the story about how this terrible man made me feel at 10 years old, made me feel objectified in the middle of a burger place. This story would only make you sad for me and pity me. Instead, I turned the story into a giant epic battle:

The land before us became a fast food desert. Acirema's sharpened finger brandished as a sword. One the length of three Cadillacs and the sharpness of the Crop God's tongues. He pointed at me. As if to initiate an ultimate duel....I held my air and looked for a way to fight back. (95)

This mode of storytelling helped me reclaim my agency. That's so much cooler than the story of a terrible man making a child feel bad! And so for me, there are two entry points into the mythology. One is in the sayings of my mother, grandmothers, aunts. You think of things like "Black women have eyes in the back of their heads"; or "women have eyes in the back of their head." These colloquial sayings that got me thinking, "Where do they start, and why did someone say this, and why do we keep believing it?" And then the next point of entry for me was revisionist. I posed the question, "If I get to write a new ending, what does that ending get to be for me?" You can't completely omit the trauma because the reality is, I am who I am because I've survived and adapted to said traumas, but what I can do is reframe them. And it can put power in different people's hands, and it can reshape how we look at trauma and the lens through which we look at it. The mythology was the vehicle that allowed me to revise some moments, or perhaps even be more honest in some moments.

Schultermandl: I wonder what this choice to shift to mythology at these very specific points in life and your narrative signifies. The racist, sexist, misogynistic form of aggression that you as a 10-year-old experienced almost figures like an initiation into womanhood. It suggests the end of childhood innocence and play, the hopscotch and the spontaneity you describe up until this point in the story. How does talking about the consequences of this *through* mythology help preserve some of the intimate details that you might *not* want to share with audiences? You still tell, but you get to tell on your terms. Is that also what mythology does?

Mouton: For sure! This is one thing I really wanted to do in this memoir. You know, there's a section that centers around sexual assault, and I am *not* gonna tell you that story, because I don't want to give that person more time. Not gonna do that! But I will tell you all the times that I was threatened and all the times that I survived it. All the times that I tried to get away and fought back, and all the times that I was empowered. For me, those moments are *way* more important than maybe the one time where you see me as less successful in my ability to defend myself. So, it is about curating a narrative and being able to say the parts I choose to let linger.

Here is also where the special potential of mythology comes into play. Of course, we don't remember every single story in Greek mythology. But it's the ones that stand out to us that we retell and find ourselves coming back to. This is also linked to my purpose in choosing particular stories. And then my editor suggested that I name the myths that I would want somebody to tell around a fireplace. For instance, "Let me tell you about the parable of the gardeners. Let's name that, so people can come straight to this story and tell you of it." Naming particular stories contributes to their mythical status by helping them linger.

Ciftci: I'm thinking about the genealogy of works and authors who have taken a similar path of making use of mythology in their re-writing of history, or their re-writing of experience. For instance, Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* or Rita Dove's engagement with mythology, both in her poetry and also in her play, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994). Rita Dove's play is a reworking of the Oedipus myth in order to tell, or re-imagine, experiences of formerly enslaved people. So, how do you situate yourself within this tradition? Do you think of your work as a "nod" to Lorde, Dove, or any other author?

Mouton: Oh yeah! I wanted to name this a biomythography, but I was told that that wasn't as marketable. Nevertheless, I think Audre Lorde was the one who gave me permission to write this way. I was looking for something that did just *this*, and I struggled to find it. And then I stumbled upon Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). And I was like, "Yes! I want to do this, but BLACK!" I also experimented with the right voice for my book, a voice different from Kingston's, a voice closer to Audre Lorde's. Lorde's *Zami* is still very different from my book, but it was a vessel and offered a possible approach. Virginia Hamilton's *People Could Fly* (1985) was also a big influence because her folktales straddled a line that I would call mythological. I consider mythology as a way to approach the origin story for Black Americans of the South. No one wants enslavement to be your starting point. But if being enslaved is your starting point, then you become what we have become; THAT, to me, is so much more empowering than remaining silent about the past. If the beginning of Black people in the Deep South entails coming into American history without permission or consent, how do remnants of that linger in us? And how do we reframe the remnants of this history for our own good? And how do I, as a storyteller, come to this history and retell this history? "Put us in the harshest situations, and we will be the cactus of the desert. We will survive and thrive and bloom and be beautiful." I wanted to tap into that and develop that legacy.

Schultermandl: You foreground this legacy and connect personal experiences of trauma and violence to the historical iterations that have occurred before you. There's this line in *Black Chameleon* that says, in reference to your daughter, "Even if all we have is a story, we still have that.... Maybe I can still give her a story that sounds like us" (267). And at the same time, when you introduce these myths, they're not rendered the same way they would be in classical mythology. They are mythology written from a first-person perspective. How did you arrive at this? Can you walk us a little bit through the process?

Mouton: There were some things that seemed innately like this is the mythology of my bloodline, of my kin, of my people. There were also moments when I felt that this is bigger than me and I can be more in the third person because I don't want readers to get lost on *me* for the sake of the story. But the connection to my kin is always present, sometimes even explicitly articulated. For instance, the names of everyone in this book are names of my family members, and I did that on purpose. When my daughter was six years old, she complained about not having a thigh gap, and I couldn't believe that this would concern her. So I responded like this: "Let me tell you why your body is built the way it is." The myth in "Why Our Knees Kiss" is predominantly in third-person perspective because I need to explain to readers why everything in our bodies that might seem wrong actually has a purpose.

I actually have a photo of myself putting this book together. I carried it around in a 3-ring binder for a year, just moving pages, making sure readers understood one story before introducing a new topic. I also have a photo of me sitting on my floor, completely surrounded by the pages of the book. There is something special about this idea of taking the physical papers and moving them, and trying to see what talks to what, what readers need to understand first. As a writer, it is impossible for me to have a conversation with my readers by talking about the harshest things upfront. In all honesty, that would probably make them not want to continue reading that book. But I *can* start to unpeel layers that make readers feel safer and safer, until we can get into an intimate conversation about those really harsh things. And I think that the mythology and the way that it's framed whether in the third person or the first person does some of that work.

Schultermandl: I am glad you brought up the reader you are having a conversation with. There are several sections in the book where you use the "you." You use it in the paratextual pages before the chapters, but also in the chapters themselves, asking things like, "Have I lost you? I am sure by now you are wondering why we must dive so deep into Death" (238). And then "Death" is with

a capital D. Who is the “you” that you imagine, who is your addressee? For instance, when reading “Why Our Knees Kiss,” I imagined a storytelling that happens in an intimate setting. I imagined a mother-daughter conversation like the one you just described. But what other forms of “you” pop up in the storytelling for you?

Mouton: I think “you” is sometimes Black women. Because as much as I feel this book has universal themes, and everyone can take something from it in every way, this book is in some ways for Black women. It’s to say, “We exist.” There’s this great quote by Walter Mosley: “If you do not exist in the literature of a nation, you don’t exist in their history.” My book is saying, “Black women exist. We are here! We have stories. We have purpose. You cannot continue to ignore us.” So I think in some ways, that’s the “you”; but at the same time, it’s the exact opposite because anyone who is the voyeur of the Black woman’s experience is also the “you.” My work is also meant as an invitation to these readers to keep reading, with the promise that the story will get less difficult at some point. I also think my daughter actually, as audience, appears more times than I probably would like to admit in this piece, as do my mother, my grandmothers, my aunts. They appear as the “you” as well. Ultimately, the “you” is anyone who is willing to sit with us for the journey, willing to take the journey of the book. Readers are the “you,” and I hope that they find something really challenging and beautiful and thought-worthy within the pages.

Ciftci: Your book also does something interesting with names of the places. For instance, you invoke nicknames for cities in which you have lived: “the City of Angels” for Los Angeles; for Houston you have “Space City”; and “Motor City” for Detroit. Then there are family names as well as mythological names. This makes me wonder about the autobiographical demands of truth: How do you reconcile the genre conventions of the memoir with mythological worldmaking? How do the autobiographical elements of the stories coexist with the mythological elements that are more creative and fantastical? You write, “a lie is a story, a story is a lie” (33). Where does truth stand in your myth-making, and how do you think about this during the writing process?

Mouton: I have this great anecdote a friend once told me. On her mantle, there was a photo of her dad holding a giant fish above his head. And for her whole life, she thought “My dad is a beast! He is this giant fisherman. He goes out and catches things.” For her, this photo spoke volumes about the way her dad provided for and protected them. To her, her father was a “He-wrestled-a-fish-with-his-bare-hands” kind of guy. Only when she was an adult did her mother tell her when she caught her in the pride-glow of her father: “You know your dad didn’t catch

that fish, right? The neighbor caught that fish, gave it to your dad, he took a picture, and then he gave it back to the neighbor and the neighbor cut it up. We ate it for dinner! Your dad didn't do nothing!" So the reality of it did not match the truth because the truth is that my friend loved her father a certain way, based on the years of believing he was this special person because of this photo. To her, that was the truth of her father, and it didn't matter really if he caught the fish or not. There's this really fine line between truth and reality. Does it really matter if my mom had a red dress on, or whether she was in Alabama or in L.A.? Does that really change the truth of who she becomes in my eyes? Does it change the truth of who I become in reaction to who I know her as? I even checked in with my mom to see whether she wanted to give any notes on my process of remembering details, and she didn't. She said: "It is *your* truth, and I don't want what I have to say to affect how you have perceived the world. I want to just enjoy your truth. I want to get to know you through your truth."

It made me wonder whether the most factual is also the most honest, and whether there is a truth that provides us a deeper, richer understanding of who we are as humans, if we can abandon what reality offers, if even just for a little bit.

Schultermandl: Reading *Black Chameleon* involves dipping into the lyrical quality of your writing. Hearing you read from it brings to the fore its quality as spoken-word poetry. Could you talk about how your writing process brings these different qualities together?

Mouton: I've had multiple people in my life who warned me about the struggles of an artist's life: "As a poet, you will never make enough money to live." And I was like, "Okay!" And they were like, "As a playwright, you will never make enough money to live." And I was like, "Okay"; they're like, "As an author, NEVER gonna make enough money!" And I was like, "alright, cool! Good to know!" They're like, "Librettos, not gonna eat off that." And I'm like, "Cool. So, how about I do ALL of them?" and turned that into my ideology.

I want to show you how limitless poetry can be. I speak in poems, even when I get into arguments, because everything turns into a poem. I actually think that I don't know another mode, it's just how I process the world.

Instead of trying to fight that, that's like my superpower. I can tap into it and show how absolutely accessible poetry is and how absolutely transformational having a good description can be. Poetry does not have to be this high, lofty format that people can't understand and then just say that it's amazing because they're lost and confused. There are pieces in *Black Chameleon* that I have per-

formed as performance poetry pieces for years, prior to writing this book. When writing the book, I wondered how I should re-format them for the page and how to give my reader the same meter, beat, feeling. How should I punctuate them so that they move my reader the way I would move with the spoken-word piece? I also think that the other forms that I give myself over to have linked very well to poetry. I think opera specifically is wildly poetic, if done right, despite some people telling me that that's not what it's supposed to do.

Spoken word poetry is often still considered simplistic and unacademic. There is a great deal of unlearning that has to happen for people to realize that just because a piece was created in a pedestrian setting doesn't mean that it can't be as beautiful and as brilliant. Opera started with people on lyres singing in the streets. And now what it's become is this thing that you feel like you have to wear furs to! No, I'm wearing jeans and I'm going to the MET! Part of my motivation as an artist is to call attention to the cracks in the dominant understanding of how literature and how poetry work.

Ciftci: Is there an audiobook version of your memoir?

Mouton: There is, and I narrate it! Sixteen hours of me. I wanted to do that because, as a performer, I feel like I do carry a certain skill-set of knowing how this book wants to sound.

Ciftci: As a follow-up to your comments about the lyrical mode and the spoken word: Why, in *Black Chameleon*, are the poems rendered *as* poems, that is, why are they lineated and structured in stanzas, especially given that the overall tone of your prose is lyrical? What does the lineated poem do that your lyrical prose does not?

Mouton: I've seen a lot of novels in verse, specifically coming into literature lately, in poetic form but not as a poem. I appreciate what this is doing, but I think that natural speech has so much poetry to it. One of my greatest inspirations has been listening to somebody when they are agitated; there's a cadence and a rhythm to their speech. There's expression to it and passion to it. To me, it becomes a poem when I think of it as a poem while I am writing it. At the same time, I experiment with form because if it looks like a poem on the page, I assume that readers will approach it differently than they would a story.

Schultermandl: Returning to the questions of names, there are some very semantically rich but also challenging names, such as Queen Karen, signaling contemporary phenomena of “Karen” used in slang for a middle-class white woman with a sense of privilege, and Queen Ebon. And the god Enilder, whose name, when read backwards, spells *redline* and references that practice of racial segregation in urban areas. These names are part of your mythmaking, but don’t they also rely on the reader’s ability to understand them?

Mouton: I hope that readers read Queen Karen, who rules with a scepter of tears, and laugh! I wanted to play into modern-day colloquialisms to show that mythology is not just something that lives in the past but something that we’re still creating right now as we’re living. And the only way to do that is to tap into slang and the language of text messages. However, in giving into today, I needed the historical connection. So, Enilder, the god of division, who sits on a mountain and divides parcels up, puts the dark people to one side and the light people to another, is “red-lining” because in America red-lining is terrible! And especially living in a city like Houston that’s still under the “ward system” where someone literally divided it up: “All the Latin people, you’re here! All the white people, you’re here! All the Black people, you’re here!” And though we’re the most diverse city in the nation, people work together but then go back to their respective wards. This form of segregation has largely become normalized. In thinking about how systems that have existed for so long in their own god-like ways continue to perpetuate their power, it makes sense that the gods of American mythology be named after them.

Ciftci: While you have been writing and promoting this book, the United States has been facing another wave of book bannings. Has your work been subjected to book banning or censorship yet? What do you think banning means for literature generally and for African American literature specifically?

Mouton: My work has yet to be banned, but I see it less of an “if” question and more of a “when” question. I would love to say that book bannings would be conquered in some way, but as censorship gains momentum among conservative and becomes central to various right-wing agendas, literature and journalism will always be in jeopardy. But that doesn’t mean we stop fighting against them. We know that these efforts are fueled by xenophobia and hatred. If they can silence our stories, they can reframe our narratives. So as a writer and as a

member of a community of writers, I think we must push back at every chance we get. We have to work with public organizations, community centers, and libraries. We have to get the work to the people who need it by any means necessary.

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About the Authors

Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton is an internationally-known writer, librettist, educator, activist, performer, and Poet Laureate Emerita of Houston, Texas. Formerly ranked the #2 Best Female Performance Poet in the World by Poetry Slam Inc., her recent poetry collection, *Newsworthy*, garnered her a Pushcart nomination and was named a finalist for the 2019 Writer's League of Texas Book Award and received an honorable mention for the Summerlee Book Prize. Her most recent choreopoem, *PLUMSHUGA: The rise of Lauren Anderson*, debuted at Stages Houston Oct 13, 2023 and was recently mentioned in the *New York Times* Fall preview. A forthcoming opera, *She Who Dared*, composed by Jasmine Barnes, was recently workshopped by the American Lyric theater in May 2023.

Gulsin Ciftci is a research associate and doctoral candidate at the University of Münster, Germany, where she teaches American studies. She serves as an associate editor for *New American Studies Journal: A Forum*, and she is the co-editor of *Current Objectives of Post-graduate American Studies* and *Textpraxis: Digital Journal for Philology*. She holds an M.A. in North American Studies and English Philology from the University of Göttingen, where she previously taught literary and cultural studies and worked as a research assistant. Her research interests include theories of reading, theory of the novel, literary criticism, affect and public feeling, continental philosophy, as well as contemporary poetry and digital literatures.

Silvia Schultermandl is Chair of American Studies at the University of Münster. She is the author of *Transnational Matrilineage: Mother-Daughter Conflicts in Asian American Literature* (2009) and *Ambivalent Transnational Belonging in American Literature* (2021) and co-editor of eight collections of essays which explore various themes in transnational studies, American literature and culture, as well as family and kinship studies. Her articles have appeared in various journals including *Meridians*, *Atlantic Studies*, *Interactions*, *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, and *Journal of American Culture*. Her areas of interest include affect theory, literary theory, critical race theory, queer theory, aesthetics, and transnational feminism. She is currently developing the *Palgrave Series in Kinship, Representation, and Difference* and is embarking on a new project on kinship and archives.



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