

Glossary of Key Terms in ‘The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity’

Below is a list of specialist terminology and references included in chapter one (‘The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity’) in one of the module’s key texts: Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). Students should read this document as an aide to the assigned chapter. To make the most of the guide, students should follow the hyperlinks to relevant materials, largely drawn from the Oxford Reference collection (available via UWTSD online library).

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Counterculture – this phrase refers generally to cultural practices that stand in opposition to the socio-political mainstream. Gilroy’s notion of a ‘counterculture of modernity’ derives from an essay by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1986) and has additional resonance because of its relationship to the correlate sociological concept of [subcultures](#). Subcultures were an important area of enquiry within British [cultural studies](#) as practiced by the [Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies](#) (CCCS), where Gilroy worked and studies. Fellow CCCS alumnus Dick Hebdige’s [Subculture: The Meaning of Style](#) (1979) and [Cut’n’Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music](#) (1987) notably each focused extensively on African Caribbean culture, particularly in relation to the socio-political climate of late 20th-century Britain.

Nietzsche - i.e. [Friedrich Nietzsche](#)

Edouard Glissant – Martiniquais writer and theorist associated with the concept of [créolité \(creoleness\)](#) in opposition to the alternative position of [négritude \(blackness\)](#) articulated by compatriot [Aimé Césaire](#). The importance of this for Gilroy is that *créolité* emphasises the hybridity of black Caribbean cultures and identities, viewing them as syncretic rather than purely African in their heritage. See *ethnic absolutism, essentialism*.

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Cultural Insiderism – Gilroy borrows terminology from Werner Sollors’ *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1987) which (like *The Black Atlantic*) argues against an essentialist view of race and culture. The idea is that notions of nationalism, national identities and nations (and/or race, ethnicities, cultures and subcultures) are delineated in part by demarcating between in-groups and outsiders. For Gilroy, this is pertinent in respect to the extent to which black

Britons are admitted into 'dominant' notions of Britishness and Englishness – as per his book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987)

Syncretic – a belief or practice that blends and mixes elements of other faiths; tantamount to a hybrid.

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English Cultural Studies – see [cultural studies](#) and the [Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies](#). One of its key exponents was *Stuart Hall* (see below).

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Ethnic Absolutism – (in extremis) a presumption that race, ethnicities and cultures exist hermetically sealed from, or in parallel to, one another. For Gilroy, such a view presupposes that the 'white' and 'black' cultures (or 'Europe' and 'Africa') are autonomous realms, rather than being interlinked and co-constitutive. [Elsewhere](#), Gilroy refers to ethnic absolutism as “a reductive, essentialist understanding of ethnic and national difference which operates through an absolute sense of culture so powerful that it is capable of separating people off from each other and diverting them into social and historical locations that are understood to be mutually impermeable and incommensurable.”

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[bell hooks](#) – African American theorist. One of the key influences on third wave feminism through works such as *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981).

[CLR James](#) – Trinidadian writer and historian, particularly known for his studies of the Haitian Revolution (*Black Jacobins*, 1938) and of the racial/colonial politics of cricket (*Beyond a Boundary*, 1963). Key influence on Gilroy and Stuart Hall.

Cornell West – renowned African American public intellectual. Noted for his insistence on the United States being an immanently racist, sexist society. His radical positions, for instance, led him to be highly critical of the presidency of Barack Obama.

[Contact Zones](#): a concept derived from Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). Refers to spaces in which people from divergent cultural traditions and disparate geographical locations are brought into

proximity and ‘co-presence’ with one another. Examples include the waterfront areas of port cities, although the concept has also been applied to interpreting museums by the anthropologist James Clifford (see below).

Stuart Hall – British Jamaican writer and theorist. Leading figure in [cultural studies](#) and the [Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies](#), and associated with theorising multiculturalism and Thatcherism. Gilroy was one of Hall’s doctoral students and, later, his co-author of several books.

Henry Louis Gates jr – key African American literary theorist and historian. Particularly known for *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), which emphasises the importance of “signifyin’” as a distinctive characteristic of African American culture – and one derived from [Yoruba](#) folk traditions

Positionality – recognition and declaration of one’s own position in a piece of academic work. An insistence of the veracity of subjectivity over objectivity.

Diaspora – originally a term specifically referring to the Jewish population living outside of Israel, but more broadly denotes dispersion or spread of any people from their ancestral homelands.

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Scientific Racism – pseudoscientific movement of the 19th and 20th century, which sought to provide academic legitimacy for racism and colonialism. Created ethnic hierarchies which placed white Europeans in a position of ‘natural’ supremacy over other ethnicities, especially black Africans and their descendants. Victorian and Edwardian academics mobilised evolutionary thought and [Social Darwinism](#) to suggest white Europeans were the most developed and ‘fittest’ of the different human races. Scientific racism is associated with the development of anthropology, and its ideas were disseminated both through academic theories (e.g. [eugenics](#)) and public exhibitions (World’s Fairs, museums, ‘human zoos’).

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‘Debates about the canon’ – here Gilroy refers to a backlash against revisions to Stanford University’s Western Culture programme in 1987, which aimed to include a less Eurocentric, white history and literature undergraduate syllabus. Parallels can be identified today in relation to the Rhodes Must Fall movement, and calls to decolonise the university.

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Morant Bay rebellion – an 1865 uprising against British colonial rule in Jamaica.

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Olaudah Equiano – 18th-century author, best-known for his *Interest Narrative* (1789) which recounts Equiano's life in slavery and subsequent freedom. A key abolitionist text, the *Narrative* is noted for its detailed descriptions of an African society before contact with Europeans, and of the Middle Passage.

Robert Wedderburn, William Cuffay, William Davidson – see entries in *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*

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Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker – historians noted for their studies of maritime economy and culture of the 18th/19th-century Atlantic, especially *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000)

Crispus Attucks – believed to have been either an escaped or freed slave, he was one of five colonists killed by British soldiers in the Boston Massacre in 1770 – a key event which led to outbreak of the American Revolution.

Denmark Vesey – leader of 1822 slave revolt in South Carolina

Frederick Douglass – 19th-century abolitionist and author. One of the key literary and political figures to emerge in the United States during the Victorian era.

Marcus Garvey – social activist, businessman and journalist. Born in Jamaica, Garvey became a prominent public figure in Britain and the United States. He was a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s and a leading proponent of Pan-Africanism. Garvey is regarded as a national hero in Jamaica, especially amongst Rastafarians.

George Padmore – Trinidadian author and advocated of Pan-Africanism.

Claude McKay – Jamaican poet of the Harlem Renaissance, and outspoken critic of British colonialism

Langston Hughes – key figure of the [Harlem Renaissance](#), noted for applying musical idioms (jazz, blues) to his literary works

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JMW Turner slave ship painting – depiction of the notorious [Zong massacre](#), the 1781 sinking of a slave ship. The event and its legal proceedings created an outcry which were influential in garnering support for abolition. Turner painted [Slave Ship](#) in 1840.

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New Left – political and intellectual movement which emerged in the 1960s. While retaining adherence to elements Marxist thought, the New Left distanced itself from the communist regimes of the Soviet bloc, while also embracing causes such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the anti-war movement. Associated with Cultural Studies through the involvement of figures such as the historians EP Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, associates of Stuart Hall.

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‘Capitalism with its clothes off’ – this hints towards a historiographical argument that rejects that slavery was an aberration in the development of the modern industrial economy. Rather than seeing slavery as an historical anachronism, scholars have drawn attention to how the development of capitalism in Europe and North America was deeply bound up with the slave trade and the plantation system. Recently, these arguments have coalesced into an historiographical ‘movement’ sometimes referred to as [‘the new history of capitalism.’](#)

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William Wells Brown – ex-slave, author and abolitionist. In addition to his celebrated memoir (1847), Brown is noted for histories such as *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863) and for writing *Clotel* (1853), often referred to as the first novel published by an African American author.

James Clifford – anthropologist and historian known for the books *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988) and *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century* (1997). Clifford’s work places emphasis on travel and mobility (‘routes’) as key characteristics of human cultures.

Alexander Crummell – African American preacher who studied at the University of Cambridge. Later undertook missionary work in Liberia, a colony established for relocating slaves from the United States.

Phyllis Wheatley – 18th-century poet and ex-slave. Regarded as the first published African American woman to publish a book of poetry (*Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, 1773).

Ida B Wells – 19th-century US activist.

Richard Wright – 20th-century US novelist. Known for *Native Son* (1940), and for time living in exile from the United States.

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Quincy Jones – African American musician and music producer; famed for collaborations with Michael Jackson.

Donald Byrd – American jazz/funk trumpeter and vocalist

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Rhizomorphic – a reference to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which draws significance from the botanical phenomenon of **rhizome**. Rhizomorphic connections link together organisms in a non-hierarchical manner, in a subterranean fashion which is not always outwardly discernible to the naked eye. For Gilroy, the concept of rhizome seems an apt way of explaining the continuities and discontinuities of black Atlantic culture. It helps to create links between persons and phenomena seemingly separated by spatial and temporal boundaries, and conversely can account for continuities which exist between diasporic cultures despite their different historical trajectories. Deleuze and Guattari were a key theoretical influence on Edouard Glissant (see above).

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Antinomy – a contradiction or paradox between two different viewpoints or propositions

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Essentialist – a belief that persons or phenomena have innate, immanent and inviolable characteristics (an ‘essence’), as if derived from nature. Gilroy positions himself against essentialist conceptions of race and nationality, arguing that both are sociocultural constructs. In rejecting exclusionary conceptions of national identities or ‘Britishness,’ Gilroy also rejects the view that there is one, pure ‘black’ or ‘African’ identity – something which puts him at odds with some pan-Africanists.

Ontological – ontology is, broadly speaking, the philosophical study of being in general, and derives from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Ontological enquiries seek to identify the nature of things – or sometimes the ‘essence’ of things.

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Polyphonic – comprised of multiple voices.

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Transnational – spanning and transcending national boundaries. The concept of transnationalism also denotes how individuals and communities retain social, economic and cultural ties with other parts of the world, and is characteristic of diaspora cultures. For Gilroy, the concept of transnationalism is important as it breaks down distinctions of ‘American,’ ‘British’ and ‘Caribbean’ cultures, and allows him to theorise ‘the black Atlantic’ as a phenomenon which is not limited to or contained within one specific nation.

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WEB Du Bois – one of the key African American thinkers of the late 19th/early 20th centuries. Known for his intellectual and political rivalry with [Booker T Washington](#). In *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois coined the concept of ‘[double consciousness](#)’ – the historic ‘twoness’ felt by African Americans as ‘an American [and] a Negro’ – from which Gilroy derives part of *The Black Atlantic*’s subtitle.

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Performance – a key idea in black Atlantic studies. Not only does is performance important because of the centrality of practices such as music to African diasporic culture, Gilroy uses performance as a means of showing how cultural identities are improvised and played out rather than being inherent or natural. Commensurate to this point, Gilroy tries to analyse the political, intellectual and ethical ideas and concepts which are encoded and embedded in performative acts (e.g. the singing of

a song). Similar ideas are present in Joseph Roach's book [*Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* \(1996\)](#).

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Mimetic – something that mimics, or is imitative of, something

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Poiesis – an act of bringing something into existing that has never previously existed