

**Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*
(London: Verso, 1993).**

Introduction

The first critical analysis will examine *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, by Paul Gilroy. Gilroy's definition of 'Black Atlantic' will be analysed, as well as his ideas as to why ships were so important to those of colour and how the Black Atlantic helped 'transcend... national particularity'.

Defining Characteristics

There is a huge difference between Roots and Routes. Roots means an individual's beginning, their heritage and embedded home. Routes means where someone is going, their path and future. This is what Gilroy focuses on in this book and is interested in how Black people are connected through history, heritage, culture, ethnicity, language, religion, and dual nationality.

Gilroy defines Black Atlantic characteristics as a form of double consciousness. This is the idea that there is a fractured identity within African Americans. They are black, but also American, and have an inner struggle where they are torn between two cultures, personalities, and ideas, thus presenting code switching. This is where black individuals change their ideas, mindset, language, and the way they act in order to please or make white people feel more comfortable. This is a form of suppression that has derived from slavery. This is shown through Frantz Fanon's 1952 poem, *Black Skin, White Masks* in which it is presented that in order to survive, black slaves had to be over conscious of European white people watching them and use a theoretical mask to protect themselves.

Importance of ships

Gilroy discusses the importance of ships for many reasons, the first being that they transported slaves across to the New World. Martin Robinson Delany was a free-born man of colour that spent most of his time between the Caribbean, Africa, and North America.¹ Gilroy describes him as a "powerful and important figure"² due to his life presenting the issues "within the histories of black culture and political by travel".³ Delany recorded his trips, giving readers an understanding of what life was like sailing to these other countries and communicating with other black communities.

Peter Linebaugh's 1982 *All the Atlantic Mountains Shook* is quoted by Gilroy: "the ship remained perhaps the most important conduit of Pan-African communication before the appearance of the long-played record".⁴ This strengthens the theories of how ships and being in the Navy gave black individuals the feeling of freedom to a certain extent, experiencing other countries and cultures and communication with others. However, sailors were treated poorly with terrible conditions on board and disease being very common. This

¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, pg. 21

² Gilroy, pg. 19

³ Gilroy, pg. 19

⁴ Gilroy, pg. 13

was something that connected black communities to other sailors like the Irish, thus creating relationships.

Black Atlantic helping 'transcend... national particularity'?

Gilroy believes that the Black Atlantic has helped create and transcend national particularity of black culture through all types of expressive art. For example, a predominant figure within poetry was Paul Dunbar. His poem *Black Face, White Mask* (1952) presents how the black community have survived and developed throughout their history of being enslaved by white Europeans.

The front cover of Gilroy's book is a piece created by Aaron Douglas. This piece was made to represent the Black Atlantic culture and life. Utopian buildings are seen in the background with faceless dark figures in the front, which represents the building of America on the backs of unidentified and non-credited black slaves. In the far distance is a symbol representing Ancient Egypt, suggesting the link to slaves creating the tombs and pyramids that have always been marvelled at but not been credited to them. Douglas has also created circles extending out across the piece with a sphere at its centre. This can be interpreted as the centre of the New World that has been built by black people, but it is not something they can be included in, and they are treated like second class citizens. This shows that Gilroy feels that this art represents the way Black Atlantic history has helped depict their cultural identity.

Gilroy expresses that music is a huge part of transcending Black Atlantic culture, citing Soul II Soul for example as having "projected distinct culture and rhythm of life of black Britain outwards into the world".⁵ Their song *Keep On Moving* (1989), was produced in England by those deriving from the Caribbean and then remixed with a Jamaican dub format by African-Americans, and Gilroy claims that this song represents the cultural elements that "encapsulated the playful diasporic intimacy that has been a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity".⁶

Gilroy also mentions Eurocentric modernity which describes the ways that ideas about nationality and identity were formed in Europe, and then introduced to the Americas and the Caribbean through the African slave trade. Thus, African Americans adopted these ideas of their own identity, culture, and history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* defines the key characteristics of the Atlantic Black culture as a mix of African American, the Caribbean and Jamaican roots that has been influenced by Eurocentric ideas. They are all connected through the slave trade, second class treatment, and heritage. Gilroy emphasises the importance of ships, as they were an effective communication for the Pan-African communities.

⁵ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, pg. 16

⁶ Gilroy, pg. 16

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