

The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness Study Guide

The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness by Paul Gilroy

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Contents

The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1, The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity.....	4
Chapter 2, Masters, Mistresses, Slaves and the Antinomies of Modernity.....	6
Chapter 3, Jewels Brought from Bondage, Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity.....	8
Chapter 4, Cheer the Weary Traveller, W.E.B. Du Bois, Germany and the Politics of (Dis)placement.....	11
Chapter 5, Without the Consolation of Tears, Richard Wright, France and the Ambivalence of Community.....	13
Chapter 6, Not a Story to Pass On, Living Memory and the Slave Sublime.....	15
Characters.....	17
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	22
Style.....	24
Quotes.....	26
Topics for Discussion.....	28

Plot Summary

Paul Gilroy is a Professor of Social Theory at the London School of Economics. His book, *The Black Atlantic*, is one of the pioneering works in the study of black diasporas, the spread of African blacks across the Atlantic coastline in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Caribbean, South Africa and many other nations. Gilroy focuses in particular on cultural aspects of black Atlantic identity, looking at the history of African intellectuals and the cultural construction of the idea of blackness. Gilroy is particularly focused on a critique of ethnic nationalism as excessively "essentialist" and as having the deleterious effect of defining black and European experiences against one another. Instead, the idea of race and blackness in particular is more dynamic, differentiated and hybrid and that cultural and race theorists should look more to diversity within races than at the boundary between them.

Gilroy points out that many see the black cultures of each of these areas as defined entirely by their national experiences, like that of Africa-Americans, but he argues throughout the book that at least since the mid-19th century that black intellectuals have thought transnationally, looking elsewhere in the black Atlantic for ideas and inspiration. The book aims to demonstrate this thesis in the work of major black intellectuals like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright.

Gilroy also argues that Du Bois's idea of the "double consciousness" of blacks is crucial to understanding the transnational experiences of the peoples of the black diaspora, as blacks were both expected to conform to their national worlds but were also simultaneously alienated from them through their common experience of the terror of slavery. Gilroy wants those who study black peoples and cultures to not only think about the marginal positions of slaves but about the more experiential aspects of their lives, such as the great psychological terror of enslavement. He repeatedly argues that the terror of slavery should be understood as an inherent part of the idea of modernity, a practice integral to the development of modern life, not merely a contingent feature of it.

One of the most unique aspects of *The Black Atlantic* is Gilroy's focus on analyzing the music of black cultures in the black Atlantic. Gilroy argues that music is for black people a psychological method of expressing the pain, terror and rage caused by past and continued oppression and fear that cannot easily be put into words. For people denied the ability to read and write, music was often the only way to express one's self. Further, Gilroy advances his thesis through the music of black cultures, showing the deep dynamism in the evolution of black music, how it defies categorization and illustrates the hybrid ideal of race that he hopes to use to replace an older and in his view destructive "traditional" or "roots-based" conception of what it means to be black.



Chapter 1, The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity

Chapter 1, The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1 lays the conceptual background for the rest of the book. Its focus is on the racial consciousness of Anglo-Africans, the black peoples brought mostly through slavery around the Anglo-American colonies and nations around the Atlantic Ocean. Paul Gilroy believes that modern racial and ethnic concepts are too homogeneous and oppositional, meaning that these social concepts tend to obscure and confuse that true racial realities that do not neatly fit into categories. We should no longer look at the history of race and ethnicity in the West as one of 'white' versus 'black' but focus instead on the conjunction of the two, the boundary, the bilingual and bifocal cultural forms. Ethnic absolutism has an allure that has captured both blacks and whites in cultural studies, and this is true even on the left and among Marxists. Gilroy is focused on black Britons and black Americans primarily and is interested in using cultural sources to bring out his themes. He will use the image of the ship crossing the Atlantic as a symbol of a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system.

The first section of the chapter takes on conceptual challenges that English and African-American cultural studies face. They are too nationalistic and their views are exploded by the black Atlantic. The fact of racial and ethnic life is that there are no clear boundaries among peoples and that the opposition of cultures totally obscures all the peoples and experiences that do not fit neatly into either category. The language of ethnic opposition is often important to empower an oppressed minority by giving them their own political consciousness and produce solidarity. And this was, in part, one of the points of New Left cultural studies in the first place.

But modern historical conditions require a development of concepts. First, the nation-state is becoming increasingly superseded by economic, social and cultural forces. Thus it is important to avoid nationalistic social concepts in order not to hide these changes from plain view. Second, the ideals of integrity and purity of cultures are in their way tragic because they miss diversity and trap individuals in predefined modes of life. Gilroy gives brief discussions of a number of different individuals to illustrate his points but his general argument is that the black Atlantic should be understood as a single, complex unit of cultural analysis because it helps to explode ethnic nationalism. It helps to produce a transnational and intercultural perspective that avoids the trappings of oppositional ethnic ideologies.

The second section employs the work and life of Martin Robison Delany, a father of Black Nationalism, to extend and enliven the ideals of the black Atlantic. Delany was a famous journalist, doctor, scientist, judge, politician, and writer who helped to develop the black racial search for roots. Blacks are always concerned with roots as a source of



identity but in fact identity is better understood as a process of movement and mediation, identity as an achievement that changes with time. The life of Delany shows the conflict between his nationalism and his more varied life experience. Delany was born in 1812, the son of a slave father and free mother but also had royal blood. He became drawn into abolitionism and thought hard about racial issues and criticized the American Colonisation Society and its plans for a Liberian settlement. He had a vision of a dynamic alliance, both commercial and cultural, between English capital, black American intellect and African labor to export African cotton to England.

Delany is seen as the father of Black Nationalism and has both radical and conservative elements. He had both pro and anti-Africa sentiments and had both nationalist and internationalist beliefs, along with both sexist and egalitarian attitudes towards women. Delany was a man focused on the relations between blacks and whites on both sides of the Atlantic and in many ways his internal contradictions are the result of his sense of the complex whole of the black Atlantic. The impulse must be challenged, whether it comes from the oppressed or the oppressor.

The final section analyzes the counterculture of modernity that black intellectuals have produced which helps to initiate the criticism of ethnic absolutism that dominates black culture. Black culture contains forms of resistance and accommodation but it isn't clear whether nationalist perspectives are sufficient to understand these social currents. Black political discourse has understood black identity as based in rootedness, as in search of authenticity in a unified ethnic concept. But this search masks the real sources of black political choices and cannot make sense of how black political ideologies and political cultures have changed and evolved. Some have looked for what is 'essentially' African, by searching for, say, a pan-African culture.

Gilroy prefers a pluralistic conception of blackness, seeing it as an 'open signifier' or as representing an identity that ebbs and flows and that has its own internal divisions between, say, classes, generations and gender. The ideas of nationality, exile and cultural affiliation all help to fragment and differentiate the black subject. Gilroy thinks that black vernacular cultures and black musical expression has a distinct counter-cultural element to modern racial concepts. Black music has always been committed to a better future and thereby supplies the courage needed to keep living in the presence. It is a way that blacks evaluate their values and to achieve its ideals. It also refuses to separate ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics and so avoids the monotone discourse of other parts of black culture.



Chapter 2, Masters, Mistresses, Slaves and the Antinomies of Modernity

Chapter 2, Masters, Mistresses, Slaves and the Antinomies of Modernity Summary and Analysis

Chapter 2 argues that the idea of race has been left out of the idea of modernity. In fact, racial slavery is a key part of the history of western civilization. And so Gilroy analyzes the master and slave relationship that many black theorists see as foundational to both their criticisms and affirmations of the modern world. The modernist ideas of the black Atlantic organized in the idea of the complicity of racialized reasoning and the terror of white supremacy. The modern theorists who think about modernity often focus on the cognitive and technological bases of social life in the post-war world. Postmodernism is introduced to emphasize the catastrophic break of modernity from previous periods. Gilroy thinks that much of modernism was foreshadowed because defenders of modernity are not concerned about the history of the African Diaspora and slavery.

The Enlightenment claims of universality have been particularized, as the idea of universality is shown to be confused. However, the unique postmodernism claims for itself often disappears when it is examined in light of the European treatment of the weaker parts of the world. The unique experiences of the black Atlantic have their own reflections on modernity, which shows that the idea of modernity is not holistic and that the idea of the margin and center of modernity should be recast because its current conception is understood in terms of the master race.

What is distinctive about the modern self is that it is necessarily fractured and compound. Modernity does not affect everyone in the same way. Modern subjectivity is decentralized and plural. Black intellectuals often outside of the academy have been better in touch with these diverse elements, such as the ghetto. Master race intellectuals often subsume the narrative of the black Atlantic into that of the working class but race has its own uniqueness. Modern black politics is both inside and outside of western culture which has functioned as its step-parent. The history of slavery, however, is not just the history of blacks but should be understood as central to the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West. For after all, the idea of the master is dependent on that of the slave and so the narrative of the white European rests upon the narrative of the black Atlantic.

Here Gilroy appeals to Hegel's idea of the interdependency of the master-slave relationship. And so we must reconstruct the history of modernity as containing the slave's point of view. This perspective is steeped in the idea of revolutionary apocalypse or the Jubilee. In this way the modern West has a double consciousness. Next Gilroy proceeds to analyze this idea in black culture, including in the identification with pre-slavery African civilization. Hegel also rightly saw that slavery is at the 'natal core' of modern society. The consciousness of the slave is an extended act of mourning.



Black slaves started to initiate a dialogue that recognized this interdependency. They often spoke of a repeated choice of death rather than bondage that denied the tradition ideal of the preference for bondage over life. Thinking autobiographically became a way to self-create and self-liberate. Figures like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois followed this idea by wanting to create a history of blacks in the new world, discussing the experience of the slave trade and the plantation. These facts of history must be seen as a core part of the moral history of the West. We must continue to probe the existence of racism and the relationships of racial terror and subordination. To do this, we should employ a hermeneutic or interpretive device for understanding history, the hermeneutic that makes sense of the aesthetic of the black Atlantic. It has two dimensions that are tied together: a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutics of memory. Together they create a redemptive enterprise. The memory of slave experience is recalled to reinterpret modernity and to reconceive modern rationality.



Chapter 3, Jewels Brought from Bondage, Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity

Chapter 3, Jewels Brought from Bondage, Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity Summary and Analysis

Debates over modernity and its end have largely ignored music, which is odd because the public use of culture has increasingly been comprised of musical expression. Music has helped to keep the terrors of slavery alive and cultivated in social forms. The terrors were unspeakable but not inexpressible and painful expression of such oppression still expresses the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation. These forms are western and modern but are also something more because they contain a double quality and are unsteadily located inside and outside conventions and aesthetic rules. Music should enjoy a higher status due to its ability to express the idea of the will of the slave. Slaves often used music to express their pain as they were denied literacy on pain of death and had few cultural opportunities. These traditions of musical expression have also helped to study diaspora blacks and modernity because they have supported the formation of what is almost a priestly caste of lay intellectuals.

Black music helps to break the genteel image that many moderns have of themselves. It reaches into a spiritual source of pain and often times can break down conceptual barriers as a result. Debates within black music movements and art movements generally help to display a democratic, communitarian element within the community and helps to create non-dominating social relations. Group collaboration helps to blur the lines between selves. Many have seen all of this particularity and become rabid anti-essentialists, refusing to acknowledge value in pursuing a unifying dynamic. The chapter tries to rebuke this orthodoxy; there are still commonalities.

Blacks have lived in the U.K. for centuries but the vast majority of the black population immigrated after World War II. The populations seem divided and seem to have no common memory save that of migration. Racial subcultures formed and drew on the culture of subgroups outside of Britain. Black music helped them to invent a collective identity, a process which has been repeated elsewhere. The creation of a single black culture cannot come from the history of slavery alone. Music helps. Sometimes the language of sexuality, however, has come to dominate the language of racial emancipation. Many black artists have declined to accept the deep values that their music and language represents. Instead, they often focus on an amplified and exaggerated masculinity which represents a culture that feels disempowered and subordinated. The idea of an open blackness has been rejected by particularistic ideas



of different. Retreating from the idea of racial solidarity has helped preserve local cultures but has had some costs.

Next Gilroy reviews a number of almost randomly assembled black musical groups, starting with the Fisk University Jubilee Singers in the 1870s, the first group to perform spirituals on a public platform, offering black music as popular culture. Their prominence was complicated by the popularity of 'minstrelsy'. The Jubilee Singers was prefigured by the use of music and song within the abolitionist movement. But many were skeptical, as whites sometimes insisted on the superiority of white 'minstrels' and blacks were uneasy with making such spiritual movement public. However, other black companies arose and spread. Blacks singing slave songs for entertainment helped blacks to set a public standard for expressing black culture.

Gilroy then fast forwards one hundred years to Jimi Hendrix who helped to elevate black popular music. His European triumph helped him to be successful in the United States. The English audience thought that a black American performer should be wild, sexual, hedonistic, and dangerous and that was partly what he became in the eyes of his fans. In reality, he had a complex relationship with black cultural forms and political movements. Similarly, reggae became a widely acknowledged form of black cultural expression starting with the Impressions in the mid-1960s. A version of the Impressions 1990 hit "I'm So Proud" was renamed "Proud of Mandela" which helped to bring together black consciousness from Africa, American, Europe and the Caribbean.

Black music in recent decades has fragmented and subdivided into many genres. This fragmentation refutes the opposition of progress and dilution in black culture. But nonetheless, blacks search only for integrity, for core blackness. And this is a result of racism's legacy because the black self is still insecure, unable to feel authentic without the search for roots. It also perpetuates the identification of the black soul with the body and the white with the mind. Black Atlantic cultures have a totally hybrid character and always have and this confounds any attempt to give a simple portrait of the relationship between authenticity and betrayal.

Black artistic debate centers around two perspectives. There is the exceptionalist claim and the pluralistic stance. Exceptionalists want to show how black music is unified and unique whereas the pluralistic view is skeptical of the attempt to give a single characterization of black culture. The first sees music as a tradition and looks for continuity. It has an elitist cast and looks down on black popular culture. The second group sees the first as racially essentialist and tries to deconstruct blackness. However, within the critical world, neither pole really takes music seriously. No single idea of pristine Africanity can be represented by black music. Instead, it is a constantly changing idea. But there is continuity through these changes, interruptions and evolutions.

Gilroy continues by analyzing various features of black music to look for difference and similarity. He believes that black diaspora styles of music often emphasize performance which brings out their unfinished quality. But this marks the music as a product of slavery. Multinational corporations cut off the creative act to market a product, freezing



the form. Blacks responded with the remix which recomposes the same song many times and suggests how to continue the form as a creative work. The relationship of the listener to the text changes as the versions proliferate. There is no true 'original' and there is no one essence to many remixes. Thus black music evinces another sort of hybridity.

The various differences among generations of blacks are represented by the rhythm of the youth. When Gilroy was a child growing up in London, black music helped him to be close to the feeling of blackness. But when he came to the United States decades later, the desolation, poverty and misery he saw among blacks forced him to realize that black musical culture in American did not exist as he understood it. He found that black music resists reduction to a fixed dialogue between one racial self and a stable racial community. There is only revolution, change and development.



Chapter 4, Cheer the Weary Traveller, W.E.B. Du Bois, Germany and the Politics of (Dis)placement

Chapter 4, Cheer the Weary Traveller, W.E.B. Du Bois, Germany and the Politics of (Dis)placement Summary and Analysis

The cultures of the black Atlantic have a restless mood. Blacks take their feeling of the curse of homelessness and forced exile and repossess and affirm it. This unusual perspective is rooted in racial subordination. The issue of roots only became important when diaspora blacks wanted a political agenda, as they needed a concept of cultural integrity to define themselves as a group. Blacks actively sought self-emancipation from slavery, they moved towards acquiring the citizenship denied by slavery and finally sought an autonomous place in formal politics. Each was a stage in a progression. It created a tension between a politics of fulfillment and a politics of transformation, leading to a double consciousness.

This double consciousness is best represented in Du Bois's theory of the phenomenon. Du Bois critiqued the ideal of progress in the 19th century by trying to integrate the perspective of Africa into the European self-confidence of the period. Du Bois's work exhibits a general complex attitude towards modernity which combines tones and modes of affecting the reader no one of which individually can communicate how intense Du Bois though writing black history was and living the black experience. Du Bois's conception of being black was also multifaceted, as he was born in the north and was often seen as being inauthentically black because he was separate from slavery. Du Bois had to construct a black identity that could empathize with slavery. When he first heard the Fisk Jubilee singers he felt himself affirm his racial community and found himself a Negro for the first time. He is an appealing figure because he had no roots and took many routes to his identity.

Du Bois argued that the cultures of diaspora blacks should be interpreted as expressions of ambivalence about modernity. He emphasizes that terror is a defining feature of a slaver regime that is sanctified by both God and reason. Modern, civilized life in the South was brutal and the only way to deal with it is to face its hidden history and take nothing for granted. Du Bois saw black music as representative of the pre-discursive and anti-discursive elements in black suffering and experience.

Du Bois used the diaspora concept as well. Its usefulness arises in locating the differentiation within black cultures and helping one to think beyond binary frameworks that oppose essentialism and pluralism and see racial identity as something more



complex. Du Bois understood that the struggle for black autonomy involved an element of dynamism and social construction.

Du Bois's most important book is arguably *The Souls of Black Folk*, which supports the periodization of the black struggle as consisting in liberation from slavery, the struggle for citizenship and then recognition of political autonomy within public life. *The Souls of Black Folk* also speaks to whites, challenging their sense of color-coded civilization. Gilroy thinks that Du Bois was giving an analysis of post-slavery peoples generally. Double consciousness arises from the combination of three modes of thinking, being and seeing. The first is particularistic to blacks, the second is nationalistic but represents the slave as without a nation and the third is diasporic and often globalist. Thus, the black experience is highly individualized, alienated and cosmopolitan. Du Bois often reminded blacks the black slavery was not the worst form of domination that there was, for instance, both bringing about the particularity of the black experience and pointing to a wider global experience.

James Weldon Johnson helped to develop the idea of double consciousness in his 1912 novel *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man* which he called "dual personality" and accentuated its internal contradictions which are involved in being both black and white, containing both African and European elements. The double consciousness idea has continued to pervade black thought, such as Cornel West's use of Du Bois' work as a response to the crisis in American pragmatism. The racial self of the black person, the enslaved, is inherently fragmented and lacks integrity. These themes are also explored in *Dark Princess*, Du Bois's 1928 novel which Du Bois thought of as his favorite book. Many critics hate the book, however. Gilroy sees it as a further development of the idea of double consciousness and racial heterogeneity.



Chapter 5, Without the Consolation of Tears, Richard Wright, France and the Ambivalence of Community

Chapter 5, Without the Consolation of Tears, Richard Wright, France and the Ambivalence of Community Summary and Analysis

Richard Wright was the first black writer that the world literature establishment promoted as one of their own. His prominence opened the door to many young black writers to build their own careers. Wright's initial interest in the liberation of African-Americans was broadened into a larger anti-colonialism. He fought for an anti-imperialist, anti-racist politics. Wright, unlike Du Bois, did not believe in social perfection. He saw the Negro as "America's metaphor," or a socially constructed symbol of racial slavery, but this symbol did not represent any fixed cultural or biological feature of blacks. This view represents anti-essentialism which often confuses Wright's critics as he distinguished between the social and the racial.

Wright's ideas developed as he traveled the world beyond the United States. He is important to the argument of the book as a whole because his life is another fragment of the history of the international social movement often called Pan-Africanism. This movement undermines the confining idea of the nation-state. Wright also helps to understand black responses to modernity because he criticized Marxism and communism. Much of Wright's cultural authority derived from his placed in the white world as an authentic Mississippian author. He was taken to represent his race. Wright criticized the idea of an inclusive Americanism and exposed the great gulf between the experiences of white and black America. However, Wright thought this gulf was due to racism, which ultimately creates divides between people by repressing differences within the divided groups.

Wright, though, was horrified at the thought that whites could read his works, cry and receive pleasure in the image of the black person as the victim of racial discrimination and oppression, swearing that he would not write another book that people would weep over, that the next book would deprive every white person of the "consolation of tears." Thus he wanted to present blacks as something other than victims which was aided by his move out of the United States. Gilroy disagrees with the literary consensus that the quality of Wright's writing declined after he left the United States, as he dabbled too much in philosophy. He was now too remote from the African-American vernacular that made him so profound. But Gilroy thinks that Wright had just broken outside of the categories that allowed the white establishment to understand him. He had also spoken a 'heresy' for claiming that blacks have some responsibility for the evils they perpetrate upon on another. Racism is no alibi for the anti-social aspects of the black community.



In Wright's mature thought, the Negro is not merely America's metaphor but a central symbol in the psychological, cultural and political systems of the West as a whole. Wright began to think that western consciousness broke down when the religious understanding of the world collapsed. This was his consistent view. The black subject becomes divided by cultural affiliation, citizenship and the demands of his national and racial identities. But this double consciousness was common to all oppressed peoples. Racial subordination, Wright thought, was core to the process of development known as modernization. Gilroy goes on to analyze various characters in Wright's books, showing how they illustrate his theories and, in many cases, illustrate the elements of Marxist economic thought remaining in his mind. Wright increasingly saw capitalism as a general destructive war on oppressed people's across the world.

In Gilroy's view, contemporary critical writing about African-American literature is overwhelmed by the overpolarized approach to representing conflict between men and women. Many have criticized Wright for a hatred of women that is found in the violence and hatred of Wright's male characters. But Gilroy thinks that this violence is not a simple product of being male. Instead, violence is part of black social life as a whole because it was internalized into the most intimate relationships. Black women can be violent too.

Wright saw the violence found in private as connected to the public brutality common in the South. Both types of brutality were shaped by the slave experience. Wright understood significance of violence and it represented his foundational ambivalence towards the idea of a closed racial community and the "ideology of family" that generated it. Gilroy finishes the chapter continuing to develop this theme, defending Gilroy against charges of sexism by pointing out that Gilroy's focus on violence was actually due to high insight into the nature of the black condition. He also argues that Wright's ambivalence about black community derives from his concern that black community only exists due to common extreme private and stress. Racial identity does not promote solidarity or fraternity but simply continues to internalize the mindset of the oppressed. Thus analysis of Wright's legacy has been impoverished as a result of misinterpreting the role of violence in his work.



Chapter 6, Not a Story to Pass On, Living Memory and the Slave Sublime

Chapter 6, Not a Story to Pass On, Living Memory and the Slave Sublime Summary and Analysis

The idea of tradition has great power in black political discourse. It helps to assert the kinship of cultural forms that are produced from diverse black experiences. Modernity threatens the racial self so a source of stability is required. The aim of the chapter therefore tries to rethink the idea of tradition so that it is not modernity's opposite. Tradition helps to avoid the memory of slavery as slavery tried to erase tradition. The desire to remember slavery thus becomes more difficult. Blacks are urged to forget being slaves as it is an exception of the story of a great African history. Blacks ask one another to replace the image of slavery with a positive notion of Africa which is frozen as a single idea, but they do not think about modern slavery but about black civilization prior to modernity. However, the idea of racism cannot be projected into a pre-modern past so easily, such as seeing the Egyptians as black. Instead, understanding roots and routes undermines the purified idea of Afrocentrism. The Afrocentric movement relies on a linear idea of time briefly interrupted by slavery. In reality, Afrocentrism is "Americentricity" as American blacks try to place their history into that of the larger diaspora history despite claiming that their version of African culture is special.

The journal *Presence Africaine*, created in 1947, was an important part of forming a black Atlantic consciousness that goes beyond African-American perspectives. It focused on the unity of Negro Culture.

The ideas of modernization and modernity bring up the issue of time-consciousness because the idea of drawing a line between the present and the past is a deep part of the idea of modernity with its ideas of progress and social development. Black intellectuals continued this linearity in trying to reorient the story of modernity. Arguments about where the line is drawn are still a source of tension with black culture. Tradition now often denotes not an opposition to modernity but a dynamic development of black culture and black experience. These traditions tell the stories of escape from slavery, the power of redemption that comes through suffering and the triumph of weakness over strength in the 19th century; yet, they evolve into a different story later on.

Next Gilroy turns from analyzing recognizable political discourse to the fact that the stories that dominate black popular culture are often ones of love and loss. He reads this development as a cultural decision not to openly discuss slavery. These narratives are code for yearning and mourning associated with exile and terror. In the love story, black language preserves and cultivates the identification with the presence of death associated with slavery and the "ontological" state Gilroy identifies as a condition of

being in pain. The number of conditions of being in pain in black music are too numerous to count.

The vocabulary of black culture also draws heavily on Jewish thought often found in the Bible. It includes the themes of escape, suffering, tradition and social organization of memory. These debts should be openly acknowledged in part to aid the political relationship between Jews and blacks. But we must also avoid drawing simplistic connections between the two traditions. Gilroy discusses some of the differences. However, in many ways modern Zionism provides a model for twentieth-century Pan-Africanism. In contrast to Jews, though, blacks in the West do not have the idea of a common ancestor. Nonetheless the issues of tradition help to bring them together.

Gilroy also wants to discuss the Holocaust in general terms. Despite admitting its uniqueness, he argues that it should help us to understand the fault of rationality and ethnocidal terror that the book has analyzed as a general phenomenon. We should have a discussion about the common themes that the Holocaust brings out for murder and oppression generally as the culmination of the history of scientific racism and eugenics. Blacks and Jews both resist the identification. Both fear that their particularity is threatened by the presence of such a complex dialogue. The book ends with an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* which helps to continue the break from premodern and "traditional Africanisms."

Gilroy concludes that we cannot recover or truly construct sealed and absolute racial traditions and invoke them as premodern and anti-modern. Instead, we have to accept that mutation and hybrids are inescapable and the recognition of these phenomena should help to understand race theory and black political culture. Thus the lessons of black struggles can sometimes apply to the struggles of other oppressed groups. This is important as the fault lines of the twenty-first century will probably not be the color line but over the challenge of sustainable development and the line between the developed and undeveloped world.



Characters

Paul Gilroy

Paul Gilroy is the author of *The Black Atlantic* and at the time of the composition of the guide was a professor at the London School of Economics. Gilroy was born in London and received his bachelor's degree at Sussex University in 1978. In 1986 he finished his Ph.D. at Birmingham University. During his career, he has been a professor of cultural studies and black Atlantic diaspora culture, the overarching culture of the formerly-enslaved black peoples taken from Africa into the Anglo-American and Spanish colonial worlds. Gilroy has written a number of books other than *The Black Atlantic*, including a path breaking study of race and racism in 1970s Britain. Gilroy has taught at South Bank University, Essex University and Goldsmith's College and later took a tenured professorship at Yale where he chaired the Department of African American Studies. He now holds the Anthony Giddens Professorship in Social Theory at the London School of Economics.

Gilroy is best known for his work on the Black Atlantic diaspora and as a commenter on the political of race in the United Kingdom. He is also known as a scholar of the literature and culture of blacks in the Western Hemisphere, along with being a world-class expert in black musics. He remains one of the most cited African-American scholars in the world.

Gilroy's particular perspective is discussed elsewhere in the guide but it is important to note here that Gilroy sometimes inserts his own experiences into the book, particularly his experience of expecting to find a unified black musical culture when he came to the United States and instead only finding a fractured set of distinct communities often in conflict with one another.

W.E.B. Du Bois

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois is one of the most important black scholars and activists in American history. He was well-known as a civil rights activist, sociologist, author and a Pan-Africanist. He fought his entire life against racism, advocating any number of solutions to the problem. Du Bois was the first black to graduate from Harvard, where he received his Ph.D. in History and was a professor of history and economics at Atlanta University. He was the leader of the NAACP in 1910 and founded their journal, *The Crisis*. He is also responsible for fighting to increase black political representation to achieve civil rights and to form a black intellectual elite that would fight an institutional war for African-American progress.

Gilroy's interest in Du Bois comes both from Du Bois's life and his concept of Double Consciousness. The idea of double consciousness holds that black slaves and oppressed black peoples in the West have been forced to conceive of themselves both



as Black and as European while being simultaneously told that the two concepts were incompatible. This sense of alienation from one's society caused great psychological trauma and is often a key motivating factor in both social pathology and social change. Further, Du Bois's life shows his self-construction of his concept of race and thus demonstrates Gilroy's major thesis that race is best understood as a dynamic, evolving and hybrid concept rather than a static one.

Frederick Douglass

The mid-19th century social reformer, writer and statesman whose writings and life were an inspiration to nearly all later black scholars, including Gilroy. Douglass was also one of those whose life represented a constructed identity.

Richard Wright

An African-American writer who was often controversial for his writings on race relations whose legacy Gilroy defends.

G.W.F. Hegel

The great 19th century German philosopher whose ideas pervade The Black Atlantic and whose conception of the master-slave relation is a core part of Gilroy's conceptual tool kit.

Karl Marx

Many of the black intellectuals that Gilroy discusses were heavily influenced by Marx but Gilroy rejects Marxist race analysis and emphasizes the rejection of Marxism found, in particular, in Richard Wright's work.

Jurgen Habermas

The contemporary European political philosopher whose work on the idea of modernity needs modification to include the idea of slavery as an essential part, according to Gilroy.

White Europeans

The white European concept of modernity and race must be modified to include the black experience, in Gilroy's opinion.

Black Musical Critics

Black musical critics are too often focused on 'tradition' and 'rootedness' in black music; it prevents them from appreciating the dynamic, expressive nature of black culture in its music expression.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers

An African-American a cappella group, organized in 1871, who were one of the first black musical groups to perform in front of white audiences.



Objects/Places

England

Gilroy is British and an expert on British race relations.

The United States

The Black Atlantic is often seen as African-American centered but this is a mistake in Gilroy's view.

The Black Atlantic

The group of blacks united by their transport across the Atlantic Ocean as slaves.

The Ship Motif

The idea of the ship is used by Gilroy to represent the dynamic and microcosmic cultures of the peoples of the black diaspora.

Slavery

The practice of involuntary servitude to which vast numbers of Africans were subjugated for centuries by Western Imperial powers.

Black Music

In Gilroy's opinion, black music is used to express black emotions that are either too emotionally or linguistically difficult to express.

Rootedness

Gilroy criticizes black culture for being too obsessed with the search for roots and authenticity. Gilroy sees it as a manifestation of racial insecurity.

Concepts of Race

Gilroy prefers a more fluid and dynamic conception of race.



The Souls of Black Folk

Du Bois's famous book that includes the idea of double consciousness. Gilroy discusses it at length.

Dark Princess

A lesser-known work of Du Bois's that Gilroy thinks is under-appreciated.

The Outsider

One of Richard Wright's most important novels that Gilroy discusses in detail.

Eight Men

A widely criticized Wright novel that is, in Gilroy's opinion, massively misinterpreted as misogynistic.

Double Consciousness

Du Bois's conception of the black experience as divided between the consciousness of a black person and as a non-member of European society. The book is somewhat built around the concept.

Modernity

Gilroy believes that slavery and subjugation are an intrinsic part of the idea of modernity and should be recognized as such by theorists of modernity.



Themes

The Black Atlantic

The Black Atlantic is perhaps the major theme of the book. The image of the Black Atlantic represents all of the black peoples that were enslaved across the Atlantic after being taken from Africa by force. These communities include the black peoples of the United Kingdom, the United States and the Caribbean. Gilroy spends much of the book fighting against the idea that the black subcultures of these nations are determined largely by the nations of which they are members. Instead, Gilroy argues that there is a common Black Atlantic transnationalism that runs at least through the thought of many black intellectuals in the 19th and 20th centuries, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright

Gilroy chooses the image of a sailing ship to represent the Black Atlantic. It is meant to represent both what is particular about a black subculture that derives from the Black Atlantic but also what is common among these cultures, i.e. that they were taken across an ocean to foreign nations that would deny them membership and systematically oppress them.

A further point of the Black Atlantic idea is that the concept of blackness is not best sought in "roots" or "tradition" but instead should be seen as a dynamic category with many internal differences. Transnational black culture helps to make sense of the dynamism and social construction involved in the idea of a black race, black culture and even specifically black cultural forms like music.

Slavery as Part of Modernity

One of the elements common among members of the Black Atlantic is the joint experience of slavery and especially the experience of the "terror" of slavery. This terror ties together transnational racial identity. However, it is important to understand this common terror as an essential feature of modernity as the slave trade was perhaps the first case of international trade that enabled the West to achieve economic and cultural power over the entire world. Gilroy sees the very philosophical idea of modernity as rooted in the real, brutal practice of the enslavement of African peoples. Black intellectuals in the last one hundred and fifty years have often used the idea of slavery to understand the idea of modernity and criticize it for excluding the experiences of the oppressed and marginalized.

Many of Gilroy's points on this matter are illustrated by various black intellectuals and their works, such as the writing of Frederick Douglass and his interaction with the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel and Hegel's idea of the mutual interdependence of master and slave. The Hegelian narrative can be transformed into a narrative of the liberation of the enslaved and this ideal of liberation informs much black literature. Gilroy ends the



book by discussing a number of different authors whose works continue the theme, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The general idea, though, is that the immense pain of the slave experience helps to represent the black identity as the first truly modern identity.

Black Music

Gilroy is widely renowned as a musical critic with an immense knowledge of black musics in particular. However, Gilroy goes beyond his knowledge of black music and connects it to his analysis of black race and black culture generally. The main chapter of *The Black Atlantic* to focus on music is Chapter 3, "Jewels Brought from Bondage: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity." The chapter argues that black music is a method that blacks used to express the terror, pain and sorrow, when they were denied literary outlets for expression, as they were not even allowed to learn to read. Further, much of black music expresses sentiment that might be too painful to express in words and often deals with the collective memory of slavery in these terms.

Black music has also come to represent black peoples to the rest of the world and has come to express a broader human consciousness beyond the black experience. One way in which this occurred was in the performances of the Fisk University Singers who, in 1871, travelled to England to perform for popular audiences. Jazz, the music of Jimi Hendrix, Reggae and Hip-Hop performed the same roles.

Music also helps to understand the idea of the black race not as a static category but as a dynamic and hybrid identity. Many blacks look for "roots" and "tradition" in black music to show that it is authentically black, but Gilroy thinks the search for authenticity is a sign of racial insecurity. Instead, looking at black music as a fragmented set of sub-groups helps to affirm the true and liberating conception of Black Atlantic racial identity.

Style

Perspective

Paul Gilroy was the Anthony Giddens Professor of in Social Theory at the London School of Economics at the time this guide was composed in 2010. Gilroy is a citizen of the United Kingdom and was born in London, receiving his undergraduate degree from Sussex University in 1975 and his Ph.D from Birmingham University in 1986. He is a scholar of Cultural Studies, with a specialty in the cultures of the Black Atlantic diaspora and had written a large number of books in addition to *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy has taught at a number of universities and was the Chair of the African American Studies Department at Yale until he moved to the London School of Economics. Gilroy has also participated in a number of different political posts along with being associated with a number of magazines. He is widely regarded as a path-breaking scholar within the music of the Black Atlantic and is one of the most cited scholars in the humanities.

Gilroy's ideological orientation leans towards postmodernism. Postmodernists strongly resist the idea of essential features of social categories, arguing that all social categories are the subject of deliberate human construction and that pathologies in such constructions are the result of oppression and unequal power relationships. The general project is to deconstruct oppressive social categories and reorient them so as to empower the marginalized. Gilroy pursues precisely this project with respect to black subcultures within the nations of the black diasporas. He strongly criticizes any essentialization of black culture and uses the idea of the Black Atlantic to demonstrate the internal fluidity and "hybridity" of the concept of blackness.

Tone

The tone of *The Black Atlantic* combines the literary and the scholarly. *The Black Atlantic* is primarily a work of racial and cultural theory. The core ideas are to deconstruct the concept of an essential "core" black culture that is indexed to a particular nation in which blacks were enslaved and oppressed. To demonstrate his thesis, Gilroy utilizes a wide range of terms that give his tone the feel of that of a social theorist and specialist. For instance, the tone often becomes dry and difficult when Gilroy talks about concepts like "double consciousness", "essentialism" and "hybridity" and remains somewhat dull and hard to understand when he analyzes the thought of some of history's great philosophers.

When Gilroy turns to illustrate his abstract points, however, the tone shifts into one more appropriate for a work of fiction literature. For instance, Gilroy often analyzes pieces of text from books and brings out their key ideas through careful interpretation. These areas of the book have a much more engaging side to them.



Some of the most powerful moments in the book, however, come when Gilroy draws general, forceful conclusions about black culture from the combination of theory and illustrate. For instance, Gilroy displays his most engaging and energetic tone when discussing how black music taps into the soul of the pain of the cultures of the Black Atlantic, especially when he is describing the music of particular figures.

Structure

The Black Atlantic is divided into six chapters, all around forty or so pages a piece. Gilroy talks about different subjects in the chapters but is able to connect them through the handful of common themes that the book develops as a whole. Chapter 1 is largely a theoretical chapter where Gilroy outlines his general arguments that he will develop in future paragraphs. His main argument is that nationalist methods of analyzing cultural history are faulty, which becomes clear in light of the black Atlantic. Chapter 2 aims to show that the idea of race and ethnicity or core features of the concept of modernity despite the Eurocentric analyses of modernity that have been given so far. The literary origins of the black Atlantic can be located in the attempt to develop a particular concept of modernity for formerly enslaved peoples.

Chapter 3 continues these themes but in the context of an analysis of black music. The chapter comments on the concept of ethnic authenticity and the expressive power of music. It also shows that music helps highlight the middle ground between essentialist and non-essential conceptions of black identity. Chapter 4 focuses specifically on W.E.B. Du Bois and his theory of double consciousness. It also focuses on how his work fits into African-American cultural history. Chapter 5 develops the same themes in the works of Richard Wright, who Gilroy defends against a number of his contemporary detractors. Finally, Chapter 6 criticizes the concept of Africentrism and how it understands tradition. Gilroy critiques the idea of tradition in black cultures as blocking innovation and change.

Quotes

"These ideas about nationality, ethnicity, authenticity, and cultural integrity are characteristically modern phenomena that have profound implications for cultural criticism and cultural history. They crystallized with the revolutionary transformations of the West at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and involved novel typologies and modes of identification" (Chapter 1, pg. 2.)

"I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (Chapter 1, pg. 15.)

"The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through [a] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organizing and cultural criticism. They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national and political cultures and nation-states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe" (Chapter 1, pg. 19.)

"The suggestive way that it locates the black Atlantic world in a webbed network, between the local and the global, challenges the coherence of all narrow nationalist perspectives and points to the spurious invocation of ethnic particularity to enforce them and to ensure the tidy flow of cultural output into neat, symmetrical units" (Chapter 1, pg. 29.)

"I intend not only to question the credibility of a tidy, holistic conception of modernity but also to argue for the inversion of the relationship between margin and center as it has appeared within the master discourses of the master race" (Chapter 2, pg. 45.)

"These modern black political formations stand simultaneously both inside and outside the western culture which has been their peculiar step-parent" (Chapter 2, pg. 48-49.)

"The contemporary debates over modernity and its possible eclipse...have largely ignored music" (Chapter 3, pg. 72.)

"The syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures alone supplies powerful reasons for resisting the idea that an untouched, pristine Africinity resides inside these forms" (Chapter 3, pg. 101.)

"The desolation, poverty, and misery encountered on that fruitless quest forced me to confront the fact that I had come to America in pursuit of a musical culture that no longer exists" (Chapter 3, pg. 109.)

"The expressive cultures of the black Atlantic world have been dominated by a special mood of restlessness" (Chapter 4, pg. 111.)



"The worth of the diaspora concept is in its attempt to specify differentiation and identity in a way which enables one to think about the issue of racial commonality outside of constricting binary frameworks—especially those that counterpose essentialism and pluralism" (Chapter 4, pg. 120.)

"Double consciousness emerges from the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being and seeing. The first is racially particularistic, the second nationalistic...the third is diasporic or hemispheric" (Chapter 4, pg. 127.)

"Truly, you must know that the word Negro in American means something not racial or biological, but something purely social, something made in the United States" (Chapter 5, pg. 149.)

"Differences between the groups we know as races are associated with the repression of differences within those races" (Chapter 5, pg.153.)

"I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears." (Chapter 5, 154)

"The idea of tradition has a strange, mesmeric power in black political discourse" (Chapter 6, pg. 187.)

"The stories which dominate black popular culture are usually love stories or more appropriately love and loss stories...The new genre seems to express a cultural decision not to transmit details of the ordeal of slavery openly in story and song" (Chapter 6, pg. 201.)

"The history of blacks in the West and the social movements that have affirmed and rewritten that history can provide a lesson which is not restricted to blacks. ... There is, for example, a potentially important contribution here towards the politics of a new century in which the central axis of conflict will no longer be the color line but the challenge of just, sustainable development and the frontiers which will separate the overdeveloped parts of the world (at home and abroad) from the intractable poverty that already surrounds them" (Chapter 6, pg. 223.)

Topics for Discussion

What is The Black Atlantic? How does it relate to Gilroy's main thesis?

What are the concepts of race that Gilroy wants to reject? What is his preferred concept of race? What is his argument for the latter over the former?

Discuss two of the major intellectuals that Gilroy analyzes in the Black Atlantic and explain how Gilroy uses these figures to argue for his main thesis.

What is Du Bois's concept of double consciousness? How does Gilroy develop the idea in the book? Explain in detail.

What is modernity, for Gilroy? What is his critique of the European ideal of modernity? How should the experience of slavery be integrated into the concept of modernity?

How does the analysis of black music fit into Gilroy's main argument?

Is Gilroy a post-modernist and in what sense? Explain in detail.