



## ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

### Video Transcript

#### What is “Afro-Atlantic”?

ZAINABU JALLO: A hyphen connects – and separates at the same time. Hyphenated identities connect two aspects: a sense of belonging and a sense of distinctiveness. This tension is crucial for grasping the concept of *Afro-Atlantic*, which reimagines the ideas of mobility, cultural fusion, and identification.

Welcome to this chapter which explores the evolving idea of the *Afro-Atlantic*. It builds on the foundational concept of the *Black Atlantic*.

The concept of the *Black Atlantic* was first coined by African art historian Robert Farris Thompson. In his groundbreaking 1983 publication «Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy», he investigated the impact of African art on American culture. This work reveals the influences of Africa across multiple domains, including design, philosophy, and language.

Paul Gilroy prominently expanded the idea ten years later. In «The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness», Gilroy examines how black cultures were disseminated across the Atlantic. He highlights the cultural hybridity and describes it as the result of the history of transatlantic slavery. According to Gilroy the effects of slavery and the slave trade have left a strong mark on the Atlantic world.

Between 1492 and 1820, two-thirds of all people crossing the Atlantic were of African origin. The brutal sea journey they endured became known as the *Middle Passage*. This name reflects the second leg of a three-part trade system. First, European goods were sent to Africa and exchanged for enslaved people. Then came the *Middle Passage* – the forced transport of those people across the Atlantic. Finally, goods produced in the Americas were shipped back to Europe. This history deeply shaped Black identities across the Americas and Europe.

So, why do we need a new perspective? Why should we discuss the concept of *Afro-Atlantic* instead of the *Black Atlantic*? As we've seen, the concept of the *Black Atlantic* rests on two main assumptions. First, that African mobility is primarily defined by the Middle Passage. And second, that being African is directly linked to being Black.



But that's not the full picture. African people didn't always migrate because they were forced. And not all Black people identify as African – just as not all Africans are Black. That's why we need to approach the *Black Atlantic* theory with care. It doesn't apply to every aspect of the African diaspora.

The concept of the *Afro-Atlantic* builds on ideas behind the *Black Atlantic* – but it goes a little further. It tries to describe the cultural dynamics of the Atlantic world beyond slavery. It includes both forced and voluntary movements, as well as interactions and formations of identities across continents.

This chapter looks at the impact of centuries of movement from Africa – a continent almost entirely surrounded by water: Bordered in the north by the Mediterranean Sea, in the northeast by the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, in the east by the Indian Ocean, and in the west by the Atlantic Ocean. These movements have led to a rich intermixture of people, ideas, cultures, and ways of life. They've given rise to so-called hyphenated identities – expressions that suggest individuals may move between two worlds. You've probably come across terms like Afro-European, Afropean, Afro-Swiss, or Afro-German. These labels are often used as self-descriptions. They signal ancestral ties to Sub-Saharan Africa – whether full or partial – while also marking a connection to a different place, often in Europe or the Americas.

But using hyphens to describe heritage is not without controversy. Some see it as a form of exclusion – as if a person can never fully belong. Others argue the opposite: that hyphenated identities can help bridge divides. They reflect a sense of in-betweenness – something that resonates with ideas of *Creolization*, *Métissage*, or *Hybridity*. Paul Gilroy speaks of a «messy ensemble» – cultural mixtures that come with what W.E.B. Du Bois called *Double Consciousness*. He defined it as the feeling of always seeing yourself through someone else's eyes. It's the struggle of living with two souls in one body: one striving to belong, the other shaped by a world that looks on with contempt. A constant balancing act between how you see yourself – and how others define you. In short – the struggle of being both Black and American. In this view, a hyphen is more than a dash – it's a space of tension, but also of connection.

A hyphenated identity implies a dual belonging. It invites questions: Where do I stand? With whom do I identify? But if we understand identity as something fluid – not fixed – then the hyphen becomes a symbol of that very fluidity. It is not a crack – it's a bridge.

In my research on Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian religions, I found that adopting hyphenated identities doesn't reflect discrimination. Instead, it reflects pride – pride in the deep historical roots of African communities in these regions. These communities emphasize the importance of honouring their ancestors and keeping their legacies alive.

Donna Edithe is a member of the *Irmandade da Boa Morte*, a religious confraternity of black women in the Recôncavo region of Bahia, Brazil. She says with pride: «Africa is eternal in our veins».



At the same time, we should recognize that labels like *Afro-Brazilian art*, *Afro-Cuban religion*, or *Afro-Swiss music* can sometimes oversimplify. But these hyphenated terms also serve as thoughtful markers – they acknowledge the rich, living mosaic of cultures shaped by people of African descent: in language, in music, in religion.

In short, the term *Afro-Atlantic* captures the deep cultural, historical, and social ties that link Africa to the Atlantic world – a world shaped by centuries of movement, and by powerful exchanges between African and other cultures across the Americas and Europe.