# How does Toni Morrison present the ‘Black Atlantic’?

## Definition: What is the ‘Black Atlantic’?

The term was first used by Robert Farris Thompson in his 1983 book ‘Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy’ and was developed further by Paul Gilroy in ‘The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,’ published in 1993. Gilroy used the term to describe the transmission of black cultures around the Atlantic, and how cultural hybridity occurred as a result of transatlantic slavery and its legacy.

Explore this idea in the world of art: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/b/black-atlantic>

**Task: which of the artworks linked here do you find interesting in the context of *Beloved*? Why?**

## In more Depth: Read these quotations. Why is the image of the ship used again and again? What can you infer about the kinds of ideas, concepts, experiences or identities which scholars linked to this idea are interested in exploring?

*Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains… Navigating the green splendour of the sea…still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls… the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, makes one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green… Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.*

*(Édouard Glissant)*

*Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the ‘present’, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism…*

*(Homi K. Bhabha)*

*I don’t like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer that they were dismissed or embraced on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write. I don’t regard Black literature as simply books written by Black people, or simply as literature written about Black people, or simply as literature that uses a certain mode of language in which you sort of drop g’s. There is something very special and very identifiable about it and it is my struggle to find that elusive but identifiable style.*

*(Toni Morrison, ‘‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’’)*

*This chapter also proposes some new chronotopes that might fit with a theory that was less intimidated by and respectful of the boundaries and integrity of modem nation states than either English or African-American cultural studies have so far been. I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship-a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion-is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons that I hope will become clearer below. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.*

*(Paul Gilroy)*

## Interrogate British culture using this idea:

This idea is not just relevant to the US, but affects the identity of the UK, too.

Explore William Turner’s painting ‘The Slave Ship’ to gauge how ‘The Black Atlantic’ is relevant to British identity:

* Use this link for a personal impression: <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-50-autumn-2020/winsome-pinnock-jmw-turner-slave-ship>
* Click here for a more detailed contextual exploration: <https://www.williamturner.org/slave-ship/>

## The Black Atlantic in *Beloved*

Task: Create a mind-map linking the character of Beloved to ideas relating to the ‘Black Atlantic’