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TRANSNATIONAL / TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITIES The Black Atlantic and Pythagoras's Theorem

by Marsha Pearce

Ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected. Accordingly they need to be thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade.¹

Ship images and impressions of a three-sided polygon—that triangle spanning the Atlantic Ocean, with its vertices located in Africa, Europe, and the Americas—dominate Paul Gilroy's counterproposal to discourses that pin Black Diasporic identities to national borders and police the purity of the diaspora's cultural composition. Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is a formation built upon relationships, interdependencies, and affinities that nullify such categories as "British," "American," "African," or "Caribbean" ascribed to the Black Diaspora. It is in this accentuation of correspondences that a link can be made between Gilroy and Greek mathematician/philosopher Pythagoras. My mixed media artwork presented here is a visual nexus of two geometric frameworks:

1) Paul Gilroy's definition of the Black Atlantic;
2) Pythagoras's theorem, which states that the square of the hypotenuse (where c is the hypotenuse; see figure 1) is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. While one framework may be more recognizably connected to geometry, my artwork demonstrates that both theories are concerned with space, points, and lines.

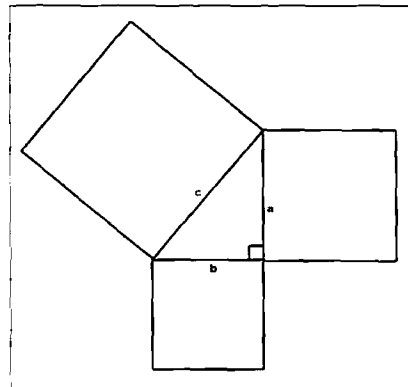


Figure 1. Pythagoras's Theorem
 $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$

The Square of the Hypotenuse and Black Atlantic Geometry

Space is given precedence over place in Gilroy's vision of the Black Atlantic. Gilroy argues for a transnational, transcultural understanding of the Black Diaspora, in op-



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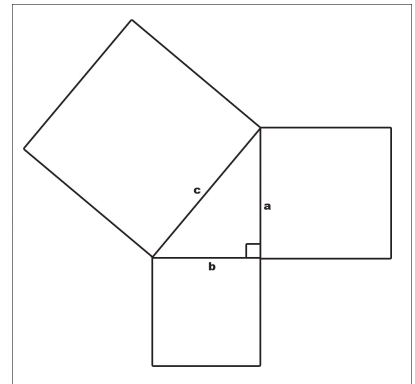
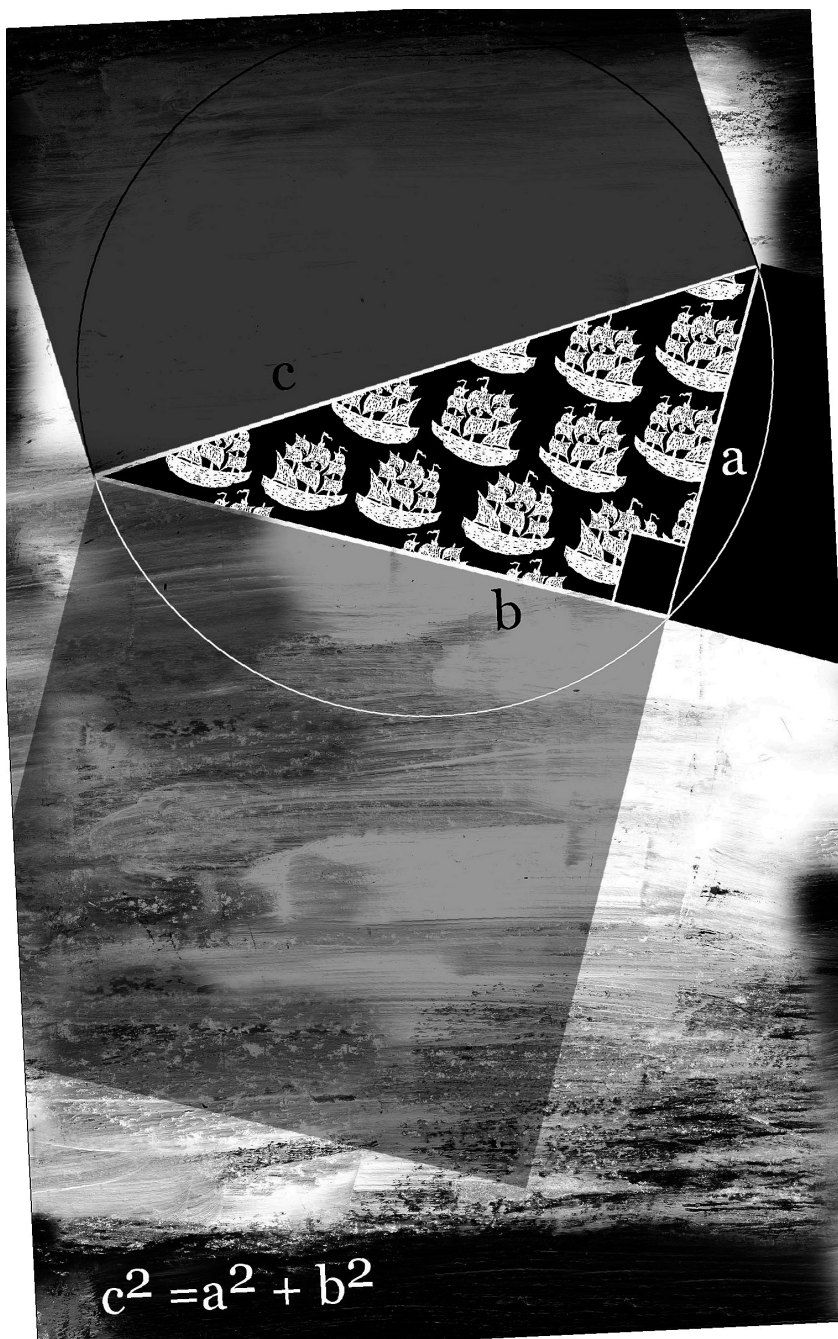


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The Square of the Hypotenuse and Black Atlantic Geometry

Space is given precedence over place in Gilroy's vision of the Black Atlantic. Gilroy argues for a transnational, transcultural understanding of the Black Diaspora, in op-



position to the fixities of ethnicity and the nation state. Through his consideration of the movements of black people, back and forth across the Atlantic, and their engagements with “others,” he underscores routes or lines that meet and pass through other routes. In doing so, Gilroy alludes to Michel de Certeau’s understanding of space, which “takes into consideration vectors of direction” and sees space as “composed of intersections of mobile elements. . . . In contradistinction to the place, [space] has thus none of the univocality or stability of a ‘proper’” (qtd. in Mitchell viii). What Gilroy sees—and challenges—as “proper” are essentialist perspectives of the Black Diaspora: absolutist views, which are in one sense what Gilroy observes as a “brute pan-Africanism” (31), or the promotion of a homogenous African ethnic culture, and, in another sense, a blackness that celebrates the internal varieties of the black community but does not acknowledge input and influence from outside (32).

It is exactly this “inside” versus “outside” that Gilroy complicates as he suggests that the relationships between European and black identities are not mutually exclusive. He dares to argue for an occupation of “the space between” a black and a white consciousness (1). He problematizes issues of identity, location, and nationality by proposing connections or continuities between black people and “others.” This kind of interrelationship can be described in Pythagoras’s terms: Those people who find themselves along the hypotenuse (the longest side) of the Black Atlantic triangle are the sum of cultural elements, political interests, and identities—both black and white—found on the other two sides of the triangle ($c^2 = a^2 + b^2$). All sides are related ($a^2 = c^2 - b^2$ or $b^2 = c^2 - a^2$) in an equation of histories, socio-cultural politics, mobile bodies and objects, displacement and hybridism.

The Artwork

The Triangle

In the artwork, the ninety-degree or right angle represents a powerful vantage point for examining modernity; it is a critical angle from which Black Diasporic relationships or interdependencies can be investigated. Each piece of art situates the right angle at different sites, points, or vertices. By shifting the position of this vantage point, the hypotenuse changes position on the globe, making it possible to scrutinize the relationships of the sides of the Black Atlantic triangle in different ways. In *Pythagoras’s Theorem I (The Black Atlantic)*, the ninety-degree angle is situated at the African vertex. The hypotenuse here becomes the line that stretches from the Americas (North America and the Caribbean) to Europe. The other sides of the triangle in this piece of art represent the line joining Africa and the Americas and the line that connects Africa and Europe. In *Pythagoras’s Theorem II (The Black Atlantic)*, the right angle is located in the Americas, making the hypotenuse the line from Europe to Africa. The other sides represent the Americas-Africa and Americas-Europe lines. Finally, in *Pythagoras’s Theorem III (The Black Atlantic)*, the vantage point is Europe, making the hypotenuse the Americas-Africa line. The other sides of the Black Atlantic triangle in this work represent the Europe-Africa and Europe-Americas lines. My use of the hyphen to connect one place to another here (as in “Europe-Africa”) is noteworthy. Antonio Benítez-Rojo observes, “identity is in the hyphen, that is, in neither

place” (60). The hyphen, therefore, represents that “space between.” Benítez-Rojo’s statement echoes Édouard Glissant’s notion of a *poetics of relations*, in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Glissant 11). Benítez-Rojo and Glissant help support a diasporic geometry.

The Ship

The image of the ship is repeated across the Atlantic in the artwork. These sailing vessels—charted for different directions—are essential to the equation of the Black Atlantic. Gilroy writes:

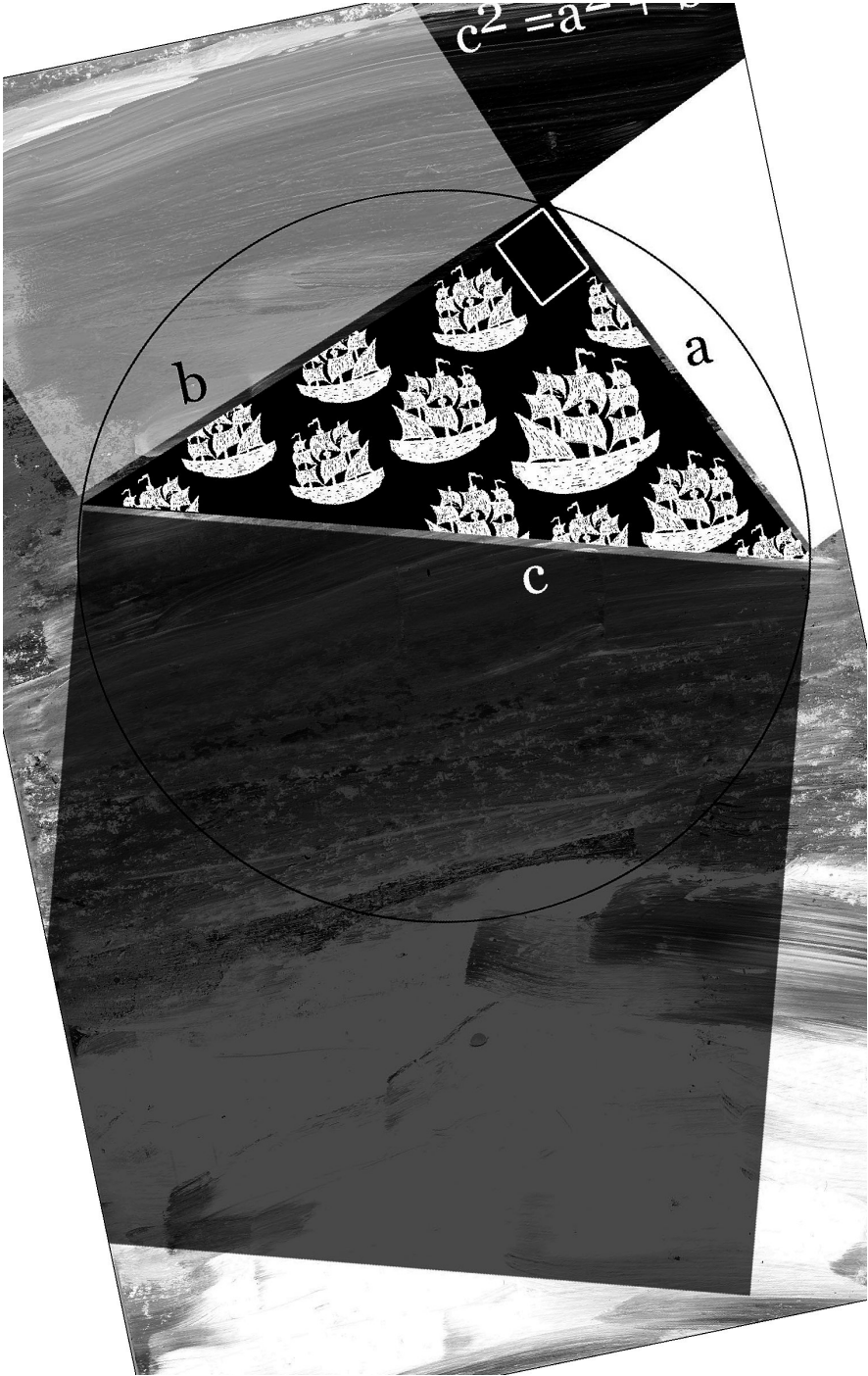
The ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [. . .]. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs. (4)

The ship then, represents a means of producing shared experiences, shared knowledge, shared things—a means through which people from all angles and sides can be “related” within a diaspora. Glissant appropriately describes the ship as “a womb” that “produces all the coming unanimity” (6). Although he is speaking about the middle passage here, his statement may also apply to the possibilities of the postslavery condition—to the way in which relations between a black and a white consciousness can give birth to agreement, flow, or continuity, rather than tension.

The Circumcircle

The artwork features a circumcircle, a circle that touches all the points or vertices of the triangle. The circumcircle reinforces the global impact of “the triangular trade” of peoples and things; it serves to place the Black Atlantic in a global frame.





Images in Black and White

The three pieces of art are purposefully rendered in black and white, to emphasize the two aforementioned forms of consciousness and to show the continuities (shades of gray) between them. The two colors are also applied and manipulated in ways that foreground the relationships of the hues and shapes in the creation of cohesive visual compositions. In doing so, the two colors work together to show the connections that make for a more whole Black Diaspora.

The colors black and white are surely tied to the topics of power, ethnicity, space / place, and diaspora. They represent, according to Gilroy,

two great cultural assemblages . . . [which] remain locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic—black and white. These colours support a special rhetoric that has grown to be associated with a language of [. . .] national belonging as well as the languages of “race” and ethnic identity. (1–2)

The mixed media works *Pythagoras’s Theorem I, II & III (The Black Atlantic)*—with their computer-assisted marks, acrylic gestures, and pastel and ink strokes—serve collectively as a pictorial polemic against this “special rhetoric.”

NOTE

1. Gilroy 16–17.

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