

Cite this article: C.C McKee, review of *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World*, by Anna Arabindan-Kesson, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12884>.

Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World

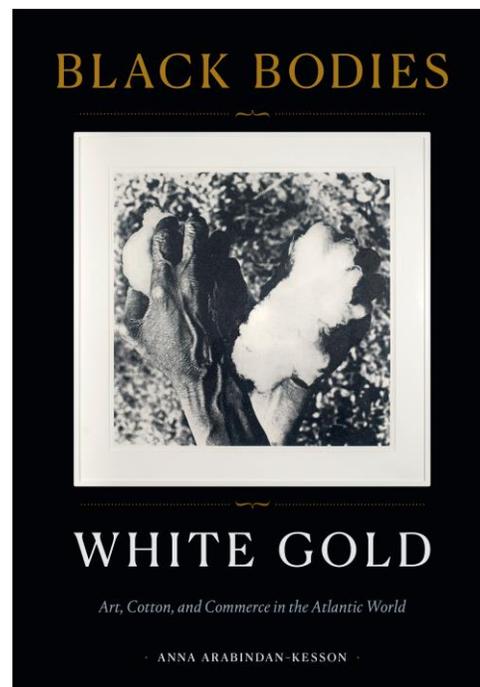
by Anna Arabindan-Kesson

Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021.
320 pp. 88 color illustrations. Paperback: \$27.95.
(ISBN: 9781478011927)

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In her recently published book, Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Assistant Professor of Black Diaspora Art at Princeton University, dwells on the global relationships between cotton, its refinement into textile, and Blackness in the long nineteenth century. Arabindan-Kesson builds her art-historical investigation into cotton (“white gold”) on interdisciplinary Black Studies scholarship to develop an innovative method that analyzes artworks, visual culture, and material objects from the nineteenth century against contemporary artworks with the intention to “dissemble their optics” and make “space for another kind of speculative vision . . . in the tension between what can be seen and what might be felt” (20). Forming one methodological node of the book are contemporary artworks by Hank Willis Thomas, Lubaina Himid, Yinka Shonibare, and Leonardo Drew that “engage with the material and social meanings of cotton” in the context of transnational exchange networks. For Arabindan-Kesson, this is a way to call attention to “both what is present and what is absent from historical archives while calling attention to what is deeply embedded in, and can be gleaned, viewed, and remembered from, the discarded and disregarded materials of the past” (5–6). Throughout the study, these contemporary artworks function as a sort of mapping by which Arabindan-Kesson traces cotton’s global exchange network between enslaved Black labor on American plantations, the market for Indian textiles in Europe and Africa, and the use of cotton and cloth by Black people in the diaspora to engender new modes of selfhood through sartorial choice, emancipated relationships between cotton and place, and numerous other strategies traced in the analyses.

Arabindan-Kesson turns to the concept of relationality to connect the historical movement of cotton with the Black bodies upon which its production as a raw material and refined cloth depended. Through relationality, she furnishes “the outline of a visual framework through which Blackness could be constructed, speculatively, as indivisible from



productivity and profits” (18). With an eye on the economics that underpinned all of the representations of cotton in the long nineteenth century, *Black Bodies, White Gold* elucidates the codependence of a speculative market and visual culture, which allows the author to follow the histories of Blackness and its claims to personhood and place that have been muffled beneath an archive that overflows with bales of blood-stained cotton. It is an ambitious study that brings transnational threads of Blackness to the fore in a successful reorientation of the landscape of nineteenth-century art history.

The first chapter, “Circuits of Cotton,” traces cotton “as a representational model for global connection” and its relation to “the framing of Blackness that hinges on the market equivalence of white cotton and Black bodies” (34–35). Arabindan-Kesson places contemporary artworks in intimate relation with historical narratives and archival sources to connect the nineteenth century with the present. For example, in Lubaina Himid’s 2002 multimedia installation *Cotton.com*, eighty-five small canvases dwell in a sea of Orientalizing textile swatches sourced from nineteenth-century British pattern books next to a brass plaque engraved with a citation the artist found in a Southern American plantation overseer’s diary that compared an enslaved Black woman to a Baroque Murillo painting. This confluence of cotton’s art-historical contexts “assembles,” according to Arabindan-Kesson, “the networks of the [cotton] trade not as a supply chain of moving commodities, but as a site of connectedness in which cotton itself becomes the material of communication between enslaved plantation workers and factory laborers” (33). Citing James Richard Barfoot’s mid-nineteenth century lithographic series *Progress of Cotton*, Arabindan-Kesson argues that the visual elision of forced Black labor detached raw cotton from the production of refined textiles by white workers in English factories. This significant claim importantly builds upon previous art-historical scholarship that underscores the role of picturesque landscape aesthetics in promulgating a vision of colonial control.¹ “The equivalency between cotton and Blackness,” she states, “was not simply market driven but hinged on a particular set of optics” (39).

How might art historians intervene in this visual and material economy of cotton so as to glimpse the bodies whose production it sought to elide? For Arabindan-Kesson, one way is to employ a haptic approach to textile archives in search of “the embodied memories contained by cotton,” that “encompass the gestures of the body, its position and movements, its affective expressions as they have been accumulated on and about cotton itself” (40). The author turned to the archives of the Pace Dale Manufacturing Company, which produced “negro cloth”—a broad category of cheap cotton or cotton-blend textiles produced to clothe the enslaved. Her engagement with this archive reveals two innovative contributions that *Black Bodies, White Gold* makes to the field of global nineteenth-century art history. First, Arabindan-Kesson skillfully weaves the textile swatches and correspondences with white Southern-American Planters contained in this archive into a broader circum-Atlantic haptic and optical discourse of textiles where “negro cloth” transformed “flesh into the form of fungible bodies” and “turned [its wearers] into tools, animated objects whose presence on the plantation was spatialized by their labor” (45, 53). This approach to the archive draws readers’ attention to slavery’s insidious sensorium of oppression by drawing touch and texture into established discourses on the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of enslaved Blackness. The second major contribution opens up alternative interpretations that read the weft of this textile archive alongside its warp. Extrapolating from letters that indicate planters occasionally bought dyed and patterned “negro cloth” “according to the preference of their slaves,” Arabindan-Kesson shifts focus to the circumscribed sartorial choice exercised by the enslaved themselves: “this assertion of their bodies is also in itself a radical act that refuses objectification. . . . In telling how it feels to work in these clothes

Black women and men use the corporeality of cloth—its relationship to their bodies—to also explain, and analyze, their bodily alienation within the system of slavery” (55). The chapter closes with a comparison of two Impressionistic treatments of Rhode Island—one a factory, the other Black laborers in a hayfield—which, when read together, attest “to the power of landscape to bear witness” in a manner reminiscent of W. J. T. Mitchell’s influential *Landscape and Power*.²

The second chapter, “Market Aesthetics,” opens with a discussion of the complex circuits of taste in patterned cotton cloth that emerged in the eighteenth century as British weaving factories attempted to replicate Indian textiles for export to African slaving markets. These patterned textiles, however, were not only desired in an African market; they also “mediated the relationship between consumption, self-fashioning, and the culture of sensibility” for broad swaths of the British public (75). Arabindan-Kesson returns to Himid’s *Cotton.com* in order “to foreground [patterned cloth’s] uses in framing and visualizing the commodification of Blackness” in the nineteenth century, as the work visualizes the racial dynamics of market networks elided by the myopia of British industrial progress made manifest in the global trade of patterned cotton cloth (67). With an emphasis on the economic knots that structured such trade, this chapter contributes to a body of commodity histories that trace the distinct economic modernity of cotton’s exchange.³ Rather than exclusively focus on the fact of cotton’s global market, Arabindan-Kesson investigates a number of aesthetic instances in which the market for cotton fabric intersected with refined taste and the commodification of Black lives in the Atlantic World.

Cotton textiles, the author argues, mediate and reveal the aestheticization coterminous with transaction that rendered enslaved Africans “desired commodities” (85). The multifaceted forms of economic and racial transactions that adhered to cotton cloth in the metropole also played themselves out in the colonies, evidenced by the eighteenth-century Caribbean linen market scenes painted by Agostino Brunias that present a “set of linkages between commercial visual registers in the dynamic circuits of exchange that compose Brunias’s market scenes” (84).⁴ As visualized in a 1842 print by William Henry Brooke depicting a sale of “pictures and slaves,” the aesthetic determination of value in a speculative market abstracts Black people as desired commodities akin to cotton cloth or paintings. Arabindan-Kesson’s optical attunement to the dehumanizing, objectifying transactional logic that chains slavery, cotton, and cloth is expanded and clarified in her analysis of the British painter Eyre Crowe’s paintings of slave markets in the American South in the years preceding abolition. Paying close attention to the role textiles played in these paintings, she argues for a set of relations between cloth and Black bodies that elucidates two crucial facts of Blackness in mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic networks of exchange. First, the “fancy clothes” worn by the enslaved doubly transformed them into the promise of future value in the form of labor, but, more insidiously, they “became surfaces on which white buyers and owners could see their own value reflected” (100). Second, when the insular gazes of the group of enslaved women in Crowe’s *Slave Auction, Virginia* (1861) are read alongside the texture and color of the fabrics they wear, the painting produces an inscrutable form that provides for a fleeting glimpse “of the forms of kinship and connection that enslaved people could create and deploy” despite their status as aestheticized, laboring property (110).

Returning these localized representations to their broader, global networks of transit via cotton cloth, Arabindan-Kesson impressively traverses Africa, South Asia, Britain, the Caribbean, the United States, and the imagined geographies that emerged between them via the concatenated networks of cotton cloth and Black bodies. Within the broader narrative of

Black Bodies, White Gold, this chapter does some of the most conceptual heavy lifting. Arabindan-Kesson's innovative methodology juxtaposes contemporary artistic production against historical artworks to underscore the role materiality plays "to wrestle with absent histories and their implications; it literally fills the gaps" (116). With its attentive history of the conjoined market aesthetics of Blackness and cotton cloth, Chapter Two offers a powerful and convincing addition to a global historical methodology that does not sacrifice local specificity, as developed by scholars like Lisa Lowe in *The Intimacies of the Four Continents*.⁵ I wonder, however, if this chapter's ambitious flight with cotton and the objectifying aestheticization of Black bodies across the nineteenth-century colonial Anglophone world would have been more precisely delineated if this argument were expanded across two closely related investigations. The clarion call of Arabindan-Kesson's politically urgent argument and the study's crucial intervention into a range of interdisciplinary fields might be even more potent, with more ink devoted to the connections and disjunctions that formed the contours of these aesthetic and material processes across social and geographic terrains.⁶

In the third chapter, "Of Vision and Value: Landscape and Labor After Slavery," Arabindan-Kesson returns to the contemporary artwork by Hank Willis Thomas with which the book began for an extended meditation on the figure of the sharecropper in the postbellum United States. Homing in on the American South, Arabindan-Kesson in many ways addresses the critique I posed of her second chapter by investigating both American and foreign representations of the Black sharecropper to "trace both how cotton framed speculative conceptions of Black freedom and the ways Black Americans used these projections to assert their value as subjects, not as objects of speculation" (123). Her analysis centers on photographs of a Union-occupied plantation by Henry P. Moore and Timothy O'Sullivan that feature Black southerners alongside cotton in the liminal period between enslavement and emancipation during the Civil War. Racialized labor and freedom are entwined in these photographs that overwhelm the frame with seemingly inextricable connection between Blackness and cotton. Here "Blackness is ontologized by white cotton to make legible and circumscribe meanings of Black freedom in the social imaginary"; that is to say, the indexicality of photography evidences how Black freedom could signal for white viewers a productive future in which labor conditions only nominally differed from slavery (132).

Arabindan-Kesson extends her analysis of Moore and O'Sullivan's photographs into the market for pictures that centered "white viewers as benevolent agents . . . and simultaneously divest[ed] them of their role in this parasitic relationship" (140). Reading the invisible Black labor in Edgar Degas's *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* (1873) and the hypervisibility of the sharecropper in Winslow Homer's *The Cotton Pickers* (1876), Arabindan-Kesson argues that the realism of these works visualizes "an anxiety about the changing social relations of industrialization that belies a deeper ambivalence about the implications of Black freedom" (147). For scholars of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world, this comparison between the photographs of Moore and O'Sullivan and the paintings of Degas and Homer will be familiar, as Nicholas Mirzoeff also drew many of these artworks together in his conceptualization of abolition realism, defined by its capacity to "forge a refusal of slavery, such that abolition was observable and capable of being represented and sustained."⁷ To Mirzoeff's abolition realism, Arabindan-Kesson's speculative realism reintegrates the politics of the art market as it materialized the security of white masculinity after slavery's abolition in the United States.

The final chapter, “Material Histories and Speculative Conditions,” returns to the African continent in the late nineteenth century as a hub from which the mutually implicated spokes of textile trade and colonial displacement can be productively traced, an approach that echoes the second chapter in its global scope. Extending the argument of the previous chapter, this set of brief vignettes—perhaps too brief—centers on a variety of cotton textiles to braid together a range of ostensibly disconnected routes of commercial, ideological, and political exchange that converge in late-nineteenth-century Africa. Arabindan-Kesson lays out white American imaginings of a new cotton plantation system in resettlement colonies for American freedwomen and men in Sierra Leone and Liberia that highlights the abolitionist faith in a market that was inherently predicated on colonialism and capitalist exploitation.⁸ This emphasis on Africa as a market for objects devoid of either autochthonous peoples or diasporic populations seeking return is reinforced by the imagined presentation of “Africa” as a site for resource extraction at turn-of-the-century industrial expositions. Arabindan-Kesson then turns the tables on these markets centered on Euro-American colonial exploitation by analyzing the new meanings given to the imitation Indian textiles imported from Britain and the replica “merikani” cloth imported from America to Zanzibar. While these textile trades certainly benefitted Euro-American merchants, “the historical circuits of referentiality embedded in them shows us that Blackness could never wholly be construed by colonial market relations on the continent or in the Americas, but was constructed, lived, expressed, and fabricated always beyond its limits” (192). The chapter closes with another brief examination of African American perceptions of Africa around the turn of the century through the quilts of Martha Ricks, a Black American who emigrated to Liberia, and the freedwoman Harriet Powers. Their quilts, the author argues, “interrupt, reformat, and unravel the conceptions of vision and value” that otherwise drew Blackness and cotton together into speculative colonial markets.

Holding in tension the economic and imaginative speculation engendered by the proximity between cotton and Black bodies, Arabindan-Kesson’s book expands the analytic potential of previous art-historical studies that trace the representation of Blackness across the threshold after emancipation. Moreover, her focus on the co-commodification of Blackness and cotton unveils that “central to—even propelling—these constructions of movement, mobility, and space is the speculative vision that emerged from the association of cotton, commerce, and colonialism, which had specific implications for meanings and representations of Blackness” (208). *Black Bodies, White Gold* achieves more than reading artworks and objects “against the grain”; one of its most valuable contributions to the field of art history—and the intersecting subfields of African diaspora and nineteenth-century art history—is its inventive recourse across time, folding contemporary art into a methodology that illuminates subaltern historical conditions otherwise excluded or redacted from the archive.

Notes

¹ Tim Barringer, “Picturesque Prospects and the Labor of the Enslaved,” in *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 41–64; Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008).

² W. J. T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed., ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–34.

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- ³ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015). Arabindan-Kesson engages Beckert's important study throughout the book, but Beckert's history of cotton as a global commodity is most pointedly addressed here.
- ⁴ Mia Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean: Race and the art of Agostino Brunias* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Anne Lafont, "Fabric, Skin, Color: Picturing Antilles' Markets as an Inventory of Human Diversity," *ACHSC* 43, no. 2 (2016): 121–54.
- ⁵ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of the Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
- ⁶ For instance, how might we read the objectifying aestheticization of Blackness differently if Brunias's mixed-race women of color in Dominica were analyzed alongside the "fancy dress" of the enslaved women for sale in Crowe's Southern American pictures? How do these differential cultural deployments of cloth against racialized flesh both displace a white optics in favor of Black and mixed-race women as material actants and reify the gaze that rendered Blackness labor and property?
- ⁷ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counter History of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 155.
- ⁸ David Kazanjian, *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).