

***Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World*, by A. Arabindan-Kesson [book review]**

By: [Suzanne Sawyer](#)

Sawyer, S.M. (2021, September). *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World*. [Review of the book *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World*, by A. Arabindan-Kesson]. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/99kx-9j56>



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**Abstract:**

*Black Bodies, White Gold* is a compelling study of the inextricably entangled histories of cotton production and slavery, as well as how those histories can be either represented or obscured in visual art.

**Keywords:** book reviews | art history | Black artists

**Article:**

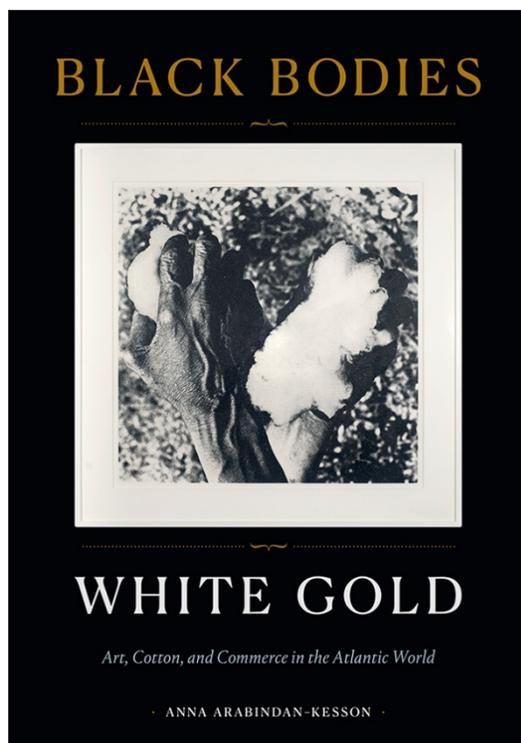
**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

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

by Anna Arabindan-Kesson. Duke University Press, May 2021. 320 p. Ill. ISBN 97801478014065 (pbk.), \$27.95.

Reviewed September 2021

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*Black Bodies, White Gold* is a compelling study of the inextricably entangled histories of cotton production and slavery, as well as how those histories can be either represented or obscured in visual art. Throughout the work, author Anna Arabindan-Kesson invites the reader to take a closer look specifically at the materiality of cotton portrayed in various media as evidence of the Black lives and forced labor often silenced in archival records and historical representations in art. As Arabindan-Kesson writes, “There is, then, an almost obvious reason why art provides us with such a powerful portal/mode of excavating this history. As a representational system, it engages in depicting history, but in its very structures and materiality that history remains embedded.”

With beautifully-printed images, Arabindan-Kesson’s well-researched text uses a variety of historical and contemporary examples to drill

down into the often-shrouded history of the Black lives behind the journey of cotton—from its cultivation in the American South to its manufacture into cloth, often in England. From the factory, cotton cloth traveled back across the Atlantic to cover the bodies of the enslaved as well as plantation owners, albeit with two very different qualities of cloth, and often sewn into garments by the very hands that cultivated the cotton. Arabindan-Kesson points to evidence, in the ledgers of commerce still held in various archives, as well as in visual depictions in art, and accentuates “the racial capitalism that underpins the aesthetic, institutional, and material pasts

of art history itself.” As the demand for cotton drove up the price of enslaved labor, contemporary visual representations obscured reality. Likewise, Arabindan-Kesson makes relevant connections with contemporary art and events as she describes the legacy of Black erasure and anti-Blackness, which continue to plague modern society and visual culture. Ultimately, she illustrates a paradigm shift of representation as Black artists have become more visible in the field and have likewise created a clarified vision of Black lives and labor historically and now.

Though this work presents timely subject matter and provides a fresh perspective of the history of “white gold,” Arabindan-Kesson’s writing style is at times wordy and repetitive, especially when she advises the reader just what she is about to tell them rather than simply diving into the fascinating history she is about to relay. Even so, *Black Bodies, White Gold* is highly relevant for studies in art history, African American art, African diaspora history, colonialism, and business and commerce. With an extensive bibliography and notes section, it would be an excellent addition to academic or art and design school libraries, particularly those with graduate and doctoral art history programs.