

In/definite Blackness: A Reader's Guide and Decolonized Glossary



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By
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"[Michael] Washington teases out interpretive forms of reading and fiction as heterogeneous entities, tracking Black succession in order to shift registers between academic researcher and first-person time-traveller. In the process, he places himself in these stories, too."

I. READER'S GUIDE

It was 2014 and you couldn't go a day without seeing a #grunge 'fit on your timeline. Lanky teens dressed in oversized black Arctic Monkey band tees, pleated schoolgirl skirts, and thrifted flannels dominated the internet scene—a look made complete with suspiciously pale skin. By the early-to-mid 2000s, the term aesthetic had been launched face-first from philosophical shelter into the cultural zeitgeist and adopted a definition synonymous with living a bloggable lifestyle.

Over the past decade, these different pockets of aesthetics have fulfilled various niches. Some of them are fairly self-explanatory, like Dark Academia or Cottagecore—but what the hell is a “Clean Girl?” And who gets to be one?

This question of “who gets to” came up a lot in heated Twitter threads sleuthing cases of cultural appropriation versus appreciation around the mid-2010s. Although these discussions were gaining traction and media attention by the latter half of the decade, academic discourse surrounding cultural appropriation within Western colonialism emerged around the '70s. But while Kenneth Coutts-Smith's “Some General Observations on the Problem of Cultural Colonialism” (1976) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) went widely recognized, Black feminist voices like Sylvia Wynter were not granted the same acclaim until more recent years.

It's no surprise that a colonized world built on chattel slavery has deep wounds in racism and patriarchal dominance. At this intersection of misogynoir¹ we can recognize the brutality of Eurocentric aesthetic standards of beauty and being. Usurping protective hairstyles like dreadlocks and ‘Blackfishing’ while simultaneously condemning and ridiculing Black features, music, food, culture, worship, fashion, labor, vernacular, literature, art, contributions to science—the message is obvious. It's only vogue to be Black when you're not Black. Herein lies the biggest distinction between subculture and subaltern² within the framework of the racial regimes of aesthetics:³ one is built from Black bodies, the other is built for them. The function of aesthetics remains violent.

When we trace back the oppressive roots of aesthetic regimes, some uncomfortable similarities emerge. Beneath the surface of innocuous aesthetics lurk the contours of colorism, classism, and ableism. Yet, to place

blame on the individual offers no justice. Systems of oppression operate on exploiting our dreams, our desires, and our fears. Our sensibilities are inseparable from Western conditioning precisely because it is designed to produce metrics such as intelligence, beauty, worth, and culture from the vantage point of Eurocentric hegemony. With Whiteness jettisoned to the forefront of desirability, coinciding oppression applies pressure to Black women who are situated in the impossible position of internalized and externalized violence.

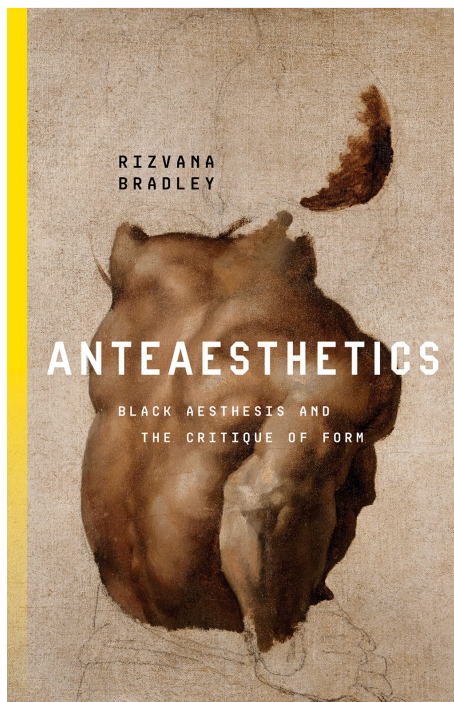
Still, there's a hesitation surrounding this impossible position. Michael Washington asks, “How do you write about Black life while evading capture?” To insist on defining a ‘space’ in which Black women are situated is to reiterate categorical definition as a colonialist desire. Even this very article remains complacent within the containment of what Washington calls “the space of violation” that exists before interpretation. The history of systemic violence informs Black feminist critique, rendering it necessary to understand, but it also perpetuates the narrative that seems to always preface Blackness. “The schema of narrative is bound with coloniality,” Washington says solemnly.

¹Activist Moya Bailey coined the term ‘misogynoir’ in 2008 to “describe the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (from *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, 2021).

²The tricky discernment here between subcultural and subaltern aesthetics is intended to emphasize how much has been stolen from Black life and remains uncredited and exploited (particularly under capitalism) while the subaltern exists to fulfill the needs of its marginalized communities.

³*Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2018) by David Lloyd explores how the beginnings of aesthetic philosophy supported the creation of the Western racial hierarchy we see today.

In Rizvana Bradley's *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (2023), Bradley proposes a relationship that predates aesthetics. "Anteaesthetics contends that, if we can indeed speak of Black existence or the existence of Blackness, it is clear that neither ontology nor phenomenology can provide the conceptual tools for tending to the inhabitations of this existence which emerges before, but not within, the aesthetic," she writes. "We might say that these forms emerge from an existence that is neither inside nor outside the racial regime through which representation coheres, but rather an existence which is made to 'cut the border,' as [Hortense] Spillers might say." But Washington's question then quickly becomes, "how do you escape anteaesthetics?" Must Black life be perpetually outskirted from aesthetic consensus, doomed to repeat the fate of its Black women predecessors? Escape is not possible for as long as Blackness is dependent on being defined by its relationship to Whiteness as the witness.



Rizvana Bradley,
*Anteaesthetics: Black
Aesthetics and the Critique
of Form* (2023)

Washington advocates for symptomatic interpretations instead, expressing how criticism has been historically constrictive and jeopardizes interpretation through dispassionate dissection. He proposes two major incarnations of interpretation: fiction and reading. It's important to interject here that while we may be used to these two modes as concurrent, Washington isn't necessarily talking about the literature genre of fiction—

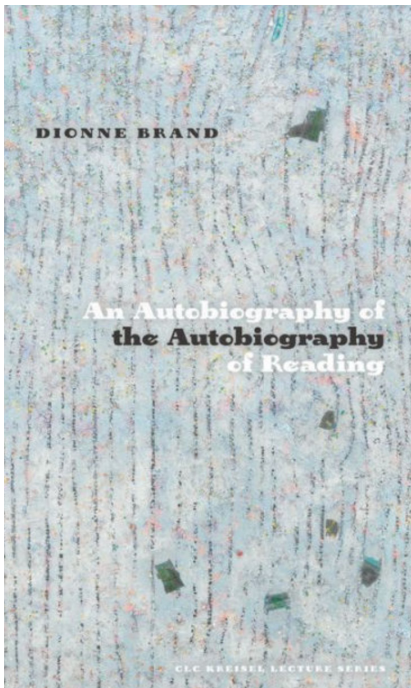
at least not all the time (certainly, there were instances where he cited works by Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and Saidiya Hartman where this is the case).

Fiction is the oily substance coating reality, and in its slipperiness, it offers opportunities for protrusion in its fidelity to history when shaken. It is the temporary exit; to rinse with fiction is to remain in suspension and thus, to enter fantasy is to negotiate.⁴ It both traps and releases. For Washington, two artists who navigate this ephemerality are Kara Walker and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Walker and Yiadom-Boakye both use fiction as a vehicle for Black feminist critique by redirecting narrative exposition. Walker's practice has engendered controversy for her depictions of the sexual violence between slaves and their masters through cut-paper silhouettes. Washington uses her works, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) and her typographical wall installation, *Letter From A Black Girl* (1998), as examples of how fiction behaves as a heavy critical analysis of the afterlife of slavery—what scholar Arlene R. Keizer refers to as a part of "African American Postmemory."⁵

Conversely, Yiadom-Boakye risks impenetrability by using fiction quite opaquely. Her paintings of Black portraiture don't immediately arouse critical suspicion. Yiadom-Boakye side-steps canon by painting Black people who do not exist. The works become fictitious character studies, and these "nameless recipients," as Washington says, resist containment by remaining in anonymity through her titling process. This two-fold process of artwork and title eludes the violence of historical memory while still eyeing the racial regime of aesthetics in her peripheral vision.

⁴"To use an image is to enter fiction." -Trinh T. Minh-ha. Minh-ha is a Vietnamese filmmaker, composer and distinguished Professor of Gender & Women's Studies and Rhetoric at UC Berkeley. She also participated in a year-long research program at our very own Wattis from 2019-2020.

⁵ From Keizer's "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory" (2008)



Dionne Brand, *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading* (2020)

Parallel to this fictive method is the reading process. Washington suggests that part of the intervention of our coloniality includes how we have been taught how to read. He revisits the reading process, referencing Dionne Brand's struggle to maneuver out of anteaesthetics in her book, *An Autobiography of the Autobiography of Reading* (2020). Brand points out that the way we currently read cannot be extracted from the decades of English testing, schooling, and literature we have been disciplined to. Washington also references Sofia Samatar's prose in "Opacities: On Writing and the Writing Life" (2024), explaining how her aimlessness attempts to avoid being defined by outside systems.

Washington teases out interpretive forms of reading and fiction as heterogeneous entities, tracking Black succession in order to shift registers between academic researcher and first-person time-traveller. In the process, he places himself in these stories, too. Perhaps part of the "incurable grief," as Michael puts it, is the impersonality of reading. The reader is the witness and has limited agency. We cannot serve as testimonials to figures of the past, or to figures of fiction. The grief is our inability to prove change. This same feeling echoes the inability to "escape capture" despite the ambiguity conjured in jumping to and from different worlds. The work set out for us to intervene, to repair, to time-travel — this is the necessary work for all

the unnecessary violence.

For each confrontation between worlds, we may feel its vibrations. Invisible, thrumming, pulsing, shocking, numbing, warm, cool vibrations that ripple in/definitely. The intervention of aesthetics continues to dislocate and relocate into consensus, re-placing its Black forms that were once banished to the borderlands⁶ and back into public participation. The violence of classification separates, but fiction and reading repairs. It is still the so-called objective and unquestionable logos of the White man that renders the mythos of Black women ineligible. To conquer, then, is to define. We call this race.

II. DECOLONIZED GLOSSARY

I have one more suggestion to add.

The obligation of any decent reader's guide is to offer a glossary of terms at the end. In alignment with Washington's musement of prose as a way of breaking form, the Decolonized Glossary⁷ acts as an epistemic thought experiment. What makes a glossary useful? Its definition. We believe its categorization, accuracy, and presumed faithfulness to the archive. The archive, however, remains vitiated through the canonical bias of Eurocentrism.

Thus, in the spirit of restoring these records — and in evading the capture of being defined — the Decolonized Glossary forgoes a 'correct' order to remain skeptical of alphabetical and chronological configurations: Whose alphabet? Whose memory of events do we rely on? What determines information to be important, what are the qualifications to be put first in line? Even a randomized list is still subject to its own verticality. So how do you explain Black feminist criticism while evading definition? You use the gestalt.

⁶ Circa Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)

⁷ Unfortunately, it was only after the Decolonized Glossary materialized that I was introduced to RaMell Ross' "Black Dictionary (aka RaMell's Dictionary)," a brilliant collection of photographic works dedicated to abstracting Black forms in an effort to resist capture.

Decolonized Glossary

By Marcus Masaki

Led in, then denied exit.

Rizvana Bradley says Black aesthetics emerges “between existence and non-being.”

In this liminality the timelapse is transfixed by a **White gaze**

Only **breaking form** to go

sideways.

Working through the limitations of the archive with **Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation**

in

“The Terrible Beauty of the Slum”

While **James Baldwin** leans on the mezzanine.

A Decolonized Glossary, a gallery, with your words, her portraits.

And **Amy Serald** paints them in grey.

But what does it mean to st

rip away your Blackness?

Reclothed in make-believe like **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**

Do like kids do.

In the case for **Hermeneutics**, there was the ante-secular, which was religious, and this religiousness prepared a code of conduct.

What is good, what is true, who is me and you’s is you’s.

Dionne Brand reconciles the script and **Sofia Samatar** wanders for a new one.

Kara Walker and the **afterlife of slavery**

The owners are still the same.

Your scars, just reflections in the water. Fleeting yet everlasting, transient like plastic pearls.

On the ocean floor is a sign on the gate to heaven. It reads:

WE ARE NOT HERE TO BE CREATED.

WE ARE HERE TO

PRO CREATE.

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