

On Rizbana Bradley's *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesia and the Critique of Form*

One of the problems of this international art world we share is that curators routinely do not read past page 35 of any given book they use to create their curatorial statements. I have been this curator and I could be again, so it's not a damning assessment. Still, if all curators and artists could labor to understand and embody even just the introductory chapter of Rizvana Bradley's *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesia and the Critique of Form* (Stanford University Press, 2023), we could be living in a more thriving art ecosystem that nourished artists, rather than what we have now, which is an art world in which artists are the primary source of value extraction.

Anteaesthetics is not easy reading; not for what it proposes, as in, the theory itself; nor for what syntactical structures and diction it uses to express those theories. I asked her why a book so important should be so densely woven. Bradley answered my question about this "difficult" read that she has crafted with a quote from Frantz Fanon, a quote after which the series "Black Philosophy, Politics and Aesthetics" is named, and in which her book is the latest release.

Fanon wrote:

"I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it."¹

Thus Bradley ties her densely thicketed diction to the necessary leap of invention required to create a discourse for the problem, that she sees, and that I also see, of how black art is made to work, made to create value that it does not reap, in service of an art world as we know it.

So yes, it might be hard for you to read but I think you need to clear the space in your head, heart, and agenda to read at least the opening arguments,

1. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Charles Lam Markmann, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 229.

which, as I understand it, is primarily concerned with "Black Art" as a subject of discourse. This is not a conversation about the joy of making as it pertains to black artists, it is a theory of what happens when that artwork then circulates within the world.

If you make it past the introduction, you will find that Bradley then sets out from her leaps of invention to land on the artworks of four artists who surely have been subjected to all types of well-meaning but misguided celebratory critique: Mickalene Thomas, Glenn Ligon, Sondra Perry, and Arthur Jafa. Bradley's theorizations of these works I will not get into here, but will instead back out to notice how the proliferation of black studies discourse has been co-created with the proliferation of this unstable category of "Black Art" as legitimated in a European institutional context. Bradley has been a part of shaping this entanglement long before now. I first came to know her in 2016 when she asked that I, in my position of insider privilege as an Assistant Curator of Public Programmes at a "forward thinking institution of contemporary art" in West London, give her a platform to host a symposium celebrating the 20th anniversary of Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*.

In this interdependency between the emergence of black studies as a legitimated form of discourse in the eyes of white Europeans and the same (re)emergence of black art in the galleries that white Europeans respect, black study is being put to work and also is reaping most of the benefits of that work. I don't know what black art has really gained from this, nor what this asymmetrical entanglement means for black art, wherein black studies describes very well the ideological battles being waged on the grounds of aesthetics, but has, to my mind, let the hegemonic art world off rather easily when it comes to the battle over the field of economic exchange of those artworks in circulation. For example, it seems to me that Mickalene Thomas' looping refusal to be included in a number of aesthetic regimes is cleaved and broken at the point of the sale of the artwork. And those pieces are expensive. As they should be, in a way. But I'm feeling through another loop now where I see black study, though it limns the art market's ideological mechanisms, has not protected our flesh *at* the market.

I see this ‘difficult book’ as a much needed expression of the issue that it names, which is, as Bradley proposes, and I think she’s right, that of how the entire field of aesthetics is constitutive of the same racial regimes that make blackness through making anti-blackness. Why? Because aesthetic regimes, along with any other regime, insist on anti-black structurations. What does that mean? It means that because aesthetics is everything, because—as Bradley read during her recent Amsterdam book launch—aesthetics are “what familiar lexicons permit us to articulate,” and no gallery, no theater, no painting, no book review (even this one), and no book, even the book I am trying to review, is outside of the aesthetic regimes that produce and are produced by an anti-black world. How do you know the world is anti-black? Well, if I have to take up my word count to explain this to you then I’m sorry to say you will likely need to read Bradley’s book at a very slow and methodical pace, perhaps with a dictionary and the will to not be distracted by your phone. I know the dictionary is probably in your phone.

The book, as I understand it, argues that when black art circulates in the world (to answer the question “what makes art black?” would be a different book, and I cannot help you with this question right now, if you have it) it necessarily circulates amongst a spectatorship which is always anti-black, because the act of spectatorship itself is anti-black. Why? Because spectatorship grew from all that Kantian taste, the Hegelian master who only knows he is human in the presence of that who he calls a slave, *Rückenfigur behold-the-landscape-wherein-I-am-separate-from-nature bullshit*, and we can see how that’s playing out right about now in Germany and the rest of Europe.

To think of oneself as an audience to an artwork and available to be moved by it rather than as someone or something which is deeply implicated in the

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conditions that produce that work, in other words a co-creator of the circulation of that work, well this is a comfortable and naive privilege predicated on you maintaining a social order whose very formation could not exist without the formulation of a feared other.

And the gallery is no different, even when you love this black artist’s work. Even when you identify as black or as 1/8 South Asian or some other thing, trying to change the institution from the inside. Because of this total aesthetic knot that we are in, whereby the whole world, especially including aesthetics, which is a lexicon of what is judged as good or tasteful, is built on anti-blackness—wait but how could this still be true, when recently there are so many amazing shows by black artists which are celebrated? there are so many more black curators than there were ten or twenty years ago? Great, glad you think so, this is the point—the manner in which black art is being celebrated is the problem that gives rise to the need for this book.

The inclusion of Black Art in the aesthetic framework of so-called important artworks is predatory. Bradley’s book argues that, repeatedly in both official and unofficial discourse around black artworks, interlocutors frame black artistry as if it is always in service to politics. (As if the two can be separated.) These critiques, even when they are celebratory, figure the aesthetic as secondary to the formation of the work, meaning: critique *that says, this work is important because it helps us understand why the president is terrible*. Or these critiques, even when they are celebratory, figure the work as having an emancipatory power on the realm of aesthetics, meaning: critique that erroneously claims, *this work takes on the legal system*.

And Bradley’s opening argument, which sets the framework for the balance of her book, is that it is first of all not possible for black art to emancipate itself from (European) aesthetics in the context of the world that we still live in, which was built by anti-black aesthetics. Secondly, to say that black art is somehow less concerned or secondarily concerned with aesthetics is frankly offensive. There is no realm of aesthetics without blackness. Without the concept of “Black,” which is formulated by the anti-black world (that’s you,

Europe and all your tentacles) in order for it to exist, there is no aesthetics. There is no good taste without bad taste for example. So in effect, blackness makes aesthetics just as much as aesthetics makes blackness, and so to say that aesthetics is secondary in black artwork ignores how blackness keeps aesthetics afloat. In other words blackness is always being put to work, made to do labor, to keep the realm of aesthetics stable in discourse. How can it be secondary to what it makes, other than as a mother whose name no one knows?

Blackness' real relationship to aesthetics, Bradley proffers, is such: "Black aesthetics is at once vestibular to the antiblack world—its metaphysical threshold and abyssal limit—and always already subject to the violence of that world, even if not reducible to or completely subsumed by it."²

At the same time, Bradley offers that blackness presents what she over and again calls "irresolvable problems for form." I think this means that we can't get out of the black aesthetic knot by including more works by black artists in gallery collections or reviewing shows by black artists in art magazines (and certainly not lazily, as is often done).

We're in a knot and I'm tired of talking about it, but it's really the only thing to say within this aforementioned lexicon of tools we now have to discourse with each other, so I will keep on saying what I see despite the fact that the need to say it is deeply offensive and a waste of my time. This statement is the best I can muster to describe a mechanism that Bradley described in the book's recent Amsterdam launch at San Serriffe as "a recursive loop."

Editorial Note: Rizvana Bradley will give a lecture entitled "Flesh Before Body, Earth Before World" on Monday April 22, 2024 at Utrecht University. See [here](#) for further information.

by Taylor LeMelle

^{2.} *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesia and the Critique of Form*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 2.