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Negative Space: Towards A Black Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema

In her essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” Audre Lorde observed that “within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible.” ^[1] In this paper I will contend with the paradox of visibility that Lorde brings our attention to, and the distortion of vision that it engenders for black women, by offering a discussion of black feminist avant-garde cinema and a theory of negative space. This talk will address the relationship between epistemology, the archive, and the cinematic visuality of black womanhood in order to set the stage for analysis of what I am calling black feminist avant-garde cinema. My analysis will explore the ways that black feminist avant-garde films break narrative conventions as they use cinematic landscapes to respond to the archival obfuscation and epistemological torsion of black womanhood. Through this talk I will forward a theory of negative space that attends to both the distortion of vision and epistemological subjugation of black womanhood, a confounding coupling with which black feminist avant-garde films contend. In my reading of scenes from a selection of films, I will discuss the ways that black feminist avant-garde filmmakers reframe historic events of violence carried out against black women, events that have lain dormant or have been obscured in the archive as well as those occurrences that have escaped the archival record entirely, or left black women horrifically overexposed. Rather than merely arguing for inclusion, I am asserting that through visual composition, archival inquiry, and aesthetics of resistance black feminist avant-garde cinema transforms the genre and our ways of seeing black womanhood.

^[1] Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” In *Sister/Outsider*. New York: Crossing Press, 2007.