

Visualizing Travel, Gendering the African Diaspora

Leigh Raiford (University of California at Berkeley), Cheryl Finley (Cornell University), Heike Raphael-Hernandez (University of Würzburg, Germany)

What are the ways in which the “African Diaspora” as a theoretical framework has been gendered male--in philosophical approaches and discourses and in practiced everyday-life experiences? How might we enrich scholarly understandings of the affective work of diaspora by focusing specifically on experiences and the resulting cultural productions of African-descended women? What is the relationship between subjectivity, authenticity, and objectivity? Who is doing the act of speaking, for whom? Where have these women’s cultural productions served as instruments for their own subordination, thus positioning them into hermeneutics that have been more attentive to the Black female as passive object than to her as actively engaged persona? Our project considers how African-descended women have been active participants and creators of the African Diaspora. By focusing on women’s experiences and their cultural productions, we hope to complicate several paradigms of the African Diaspora that currently dominate the field, while providing methodological innovation. Our goal with such an intervention is to propose a system of theoretical analysis that has not been in place regarding Black women artists as diasporic cultural producers. By addressing these aspects together, we are interested in the interplay between Black women’s bodies as visual objects and as subjects; as visual spectacles and visual spectators; as objects of visual culture and as visual producers in transatlantic contexts.

Resulting from our diverse fields of scholarship and expertise -- film studies (Raphael-Hernandez), art history (Finley), and visual studies (Raiford)--we will ask how visual media, including painting, photography, performance, global independent cinema, Hollywood films, and art installations, have shaped gendered diasporic imaginings of the individual and the collective self. Through our research at different sites such as archives, film festivals, and museums, as well as through our contacts and interviews with a diversity of curators, artists, and filmmakers, we envision a co-authored book that will offer an approach to the intersectional study of visual culture and the gendered African Diaspora as historically comparative (across different time periods), interdisciplinary (across multiple fields), and multi-sited (across different geographic locations).