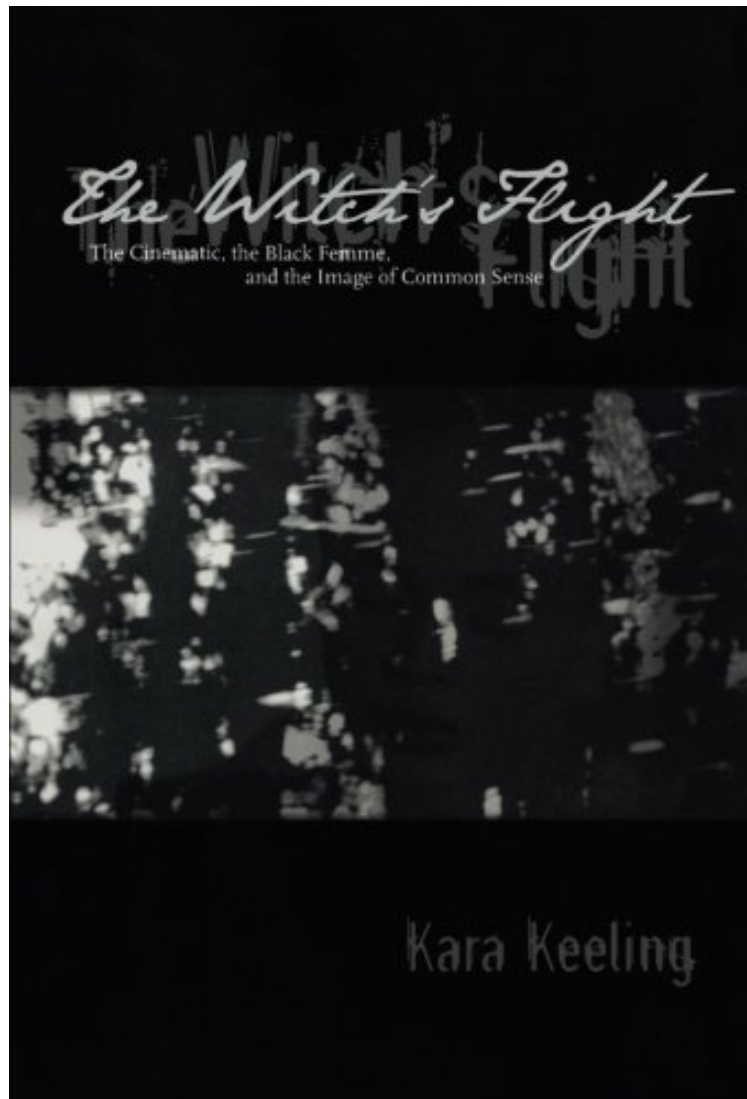


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## **The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense (Perverse Modernities: A Series Edited by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe)**

*Kara Keeling*

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**Kara Keeling : The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense (Perverse Modernities: A Series Edited by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense (Perverse Modernities: A Series Edited by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars  
By Stephen T Lambert  
This is so Good. Mandatory for White Cis Males like me!  
thanks Kara Keeling  
12 of 29 people found the following review helpful. Two Eyerolls, Not Two Snaps  
By Jeffery Mingo  
If someone said to me, "There's an academic book examining 'Set It Off', 'Sankofa', Pam Grier, and more.", then I would say, "Wow! I gotta peep that!" Well, this book has hot topics, but it's written in an unfriendly, obscurantist style. I did not enjoy this rough ride of a text at all. I feel fine saying that because the author writes in that inaccessible style that tenure boards just love, so I'm sure her future is set. She refers to Roderick Ferguson often and I shouldn't have been surprised as his book is has that same waterboarding style to it. When the title says, "Witch's Flight: Cinematic, Black Femme, and Common Sense," it literally means it will jump around those subjects and then onto to others so many times, that it will boggle your mind. The author makes it difficult to critique her ideas precisely because she's hopping all over the place and it's implied that you're stupid if you don't understand her. The most annoying thing about this book is that I don't recall a single place where "Black femme" is defined. My understanding was that a Black femme was a Black lesbian with stereotypically feminine traits. However, this book does not limit itself to that group. It never explains if a Black femme differs from a Black, heterosexual woman or a Black, butch lesbian. "Femme" seems to be a catchall for a Gender Studies 101 definition of "femininity." The term "common sense" is frustratingly employed here too. I am sure the author's use of "common sense" means "anything that the speaker feels does not have to be explained; anything that is taken as a given." Like almost all academics, the author is greatly interested in social constructionism. However, she often writes "Black nationalist common sense." I would say Black nationalism did not have a "common sense." It was not something given for all Blacks, but a specific set of ideas espoused by a group of activists circa the 1970s. If it were "common sense," then Black folk since before the Civil War would have supported such ideas. If it were "common sense," then Black activists of 40 years ago would not have had to put so much energy into explaining themselves to quotidian Black community members. But again, the author throws concepts around so haphazardly and it's assumed that you are to blame if you don't get it. Many of the chapters don't even speak of the cultural products until the author rambles on and on with the scholarly jargon. You may want to skip those pages if they grate on your nerves too much. In the "Eve's Bayou" chapter, the author is hypnotized by a comment at the beginning of the film that you could easily have missed and still understood the rest of the movie. When Angie from "All My Children" gets a boyfriend it seems to serve no purpose besides establishing her as straight. Thus, the "black femme function" of the book makes no sense. The most important chapter, and really the most interesting also, was the one on "Set It Off." The author mentions great things like the 70s party scene at the beginning is a salute to blaxploitation films. She does a great job in explaining how post-industrialism strongly intersects with female criminality here. Even how the author compares and contrasts the film with "New Jack" films is eye-opening. Still, in analyzing the butch-femme couple, she spends more time on Cleo (the aggressive), rather than Ursula (the femme) in this book with "Black Femme," and not "Black Lesbian" in its title. Like many, she points out that Cleo's role as a protagonist with these mostly straight, Black women is meant to be non-homophobic, if not clearly pro-gay. However, there is a way in which Jada Pinkett's goody-goody role still situates a straight, Black woman as being more worthy than a Black femme or any Black lesbian. (Remember when Jada gets off the phone with Blair Underwood and says to Cleo and Ursula, "Y'all are real rude!"?) The author never touches that. In a push for social constructionism and intersectionality, the author compares this butch-femme couple to the middle-class lesbians of the 1970s who condemned heterogenderal pairing. She tries to defend working-class, Black lesbians who pair up in such a way, even post-Stonewall. However, she goes into great lengths to speak of Ursula when I'm almost sure that the director or screenwriters were not giving Ursula much thought. In a way, the makers of "Set It Off" develop Cleo as a lesbian character and then don't do the same for Ursula, and thus make her selectively mute. Plus, Ursula is made quiet because since she is as feminine as the straight, female characters, the makers could worry that they could be conflated with her. This movie works hard to separate a Black femme from other Black women and yet the author consistently fudges these groups throughout her work. In no way do I want to say this book is without merit. However, I would never treasure it the way I do Lorde's "Sister Outsider" or Hill-Collins' "Black Sexual Politics" or Larson's "Passing." I just wasn't feeling this on so many levels and in so many aspects.  
4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.  
Take Flight with Keeling  
By Rhizomosexual  
I share many of the same sentiments as the other positive reviewer on here: this book IS brilliant and refreshing! I am just entering Deleuzian theory now, and have very little experience reading heavy film studies theoretical work, nor have I once opened Deleuze's Cinema Vol 1 or 2. Keeling's writing is eloquent, technical, and, more often than not, highly accessible, particularly for a Deleuzian. She also ties Fanon in a very interesting manner that is well worth the read in itself. I highly recommend this book as it both delves into the political significance of cinema as well as embodying an active form of queer of color scholarship that is very inspirational.

Kara Keeling contends that cinema and cinematic processes had a profound significance for twentieth-century anticapitalist Black Liberation movements based in the United States. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's notion of the cinematic not just as a phenomenon confined to moving-image media such as film and television but as a set of processes involved in the production and reproduction of social reality itself Keeling describes how the cinematic

structures racism, homophobia, and misogyny, and, in the process, denies viewers access to certain images and ways of knowing. She theorizes the black femme as a figure who, even when not explicitly represented within hegemonic cinematic formulations of raced and gendered subjectivities, nonetheless haunts those representations, threatening to disrupt them by making alternative social arrangements visible. Keeling draws on the thought of Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and others in addition to Deleuze. She pursues the elusive figure of the black femme through Haile Gerimas film *Sankofa*, images of women in the Black Panther Party, Pam Grier's roles in the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s, F. Gary Gray's film *Set It Off*, and Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou*.

Kara Keeling offers a tour de force extension of Deleuze's writings: she understands cinema as a form of thought, as well as a motor of a shared sensorium, capable of numbing repetition as well as provocative alternative visions. No Deleuze babble here, though, just sweet grooves and careful readings. With lucid and piercing argument, Keeling is a serious critic of black visual culture, following a line of powerful litanies for survival from Frantz Fanon to Angela Davis to Fred Moten. Amy Villarejo, author of *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire*