

Jennifer DeClue, **Visitation: The Conjure Work of Black Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 240 pp., \$25.95 (paperback).

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In **Visitation: The Conjure Work of Black Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema**, Jennifer DeClue approaches the critical intersections of cinema and archival records through a “methodology of tenderness—a practice that allows for an experience of engaging with visitations” (p. 3). As she examines archival narratives situated within avant-garde films (from Black feminist and Queer filmmakers), her attention to the ethics of tenderness provides an empathetic perspective in detailing historical horrors inflicted on African American women and their disembodied voices, without heedlessly reproducing traumatic experiences on screen. Instead, DeClue privileges an intersectional study of Black feminist avant-garde cinema, which employs archival visitations that conjure illuminations of minority perspectives, through a shrewd blend of archival inquiry and avant-garde aesthetic experimentation. In her coda for *Visitation*, she writes that “it is through tenderness that Black feminist avant-garde filmmakers enter their respective archives, tap into the void, and create the space for visitations to occur through their cinematic engagements” (p. 183).



In this text, DeClue calls readers to witness the harsh realities, veritable truths, and luminous artistry of the Black feminist avant-garde. Through her pithy yet poetic diction, DeClue unveils largely dismissed archival and artistic perspectives in this cinematic mode. In her own words, “*Visitation* fills a lacuna in cinema studies, as it relates to both avant-garde and Black film, and addresses a gap in African American analyses of the avant-garde” (p. 8). DeClue’s debut book signals an important contribution to film and media academia. Across four chapters, she raises necessary scrutiny on the fidelity of certain archival records and the cultural narratives that have overshadowed American women of color. In each of her chapters, she dedicates equal attention to the archival investigation and the textual analysis of avant-garde case studies. Her deeper focus on archives, missing gaps in records on minority women, and a bit of savvy conjecture furnish new understandings and perspectives on historical U.S. African American women and the experimental feminist filmmakers who have conjured their memories through both the documentation and imagination of cinema.

Chapter one analyzes Kara Walker’s (2009) short film/art instillation, *National Archives Microfilm Publication M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: Six Miles from Springfield*. DeClue’s opening chapter is also anecdotal, as she describes her visit to the National Archives in search of more archival evidence on the lynching incident that informs Walker’s *Bureau of Refugees*. She writes, “only through Walker’s imagery does she appear in the record” (p. 44). As Walker’s avant-garde film contends with

the archives of continuing sexual violence towards young Black women, she employs avant-garde cinematic aesthetics by using animated silhouettes and puppets to depict incidents of systemic violence. Through this artistic approach, she creates tender measures of remove that eschew direct reimaginations of historical horrors and yet also allow those testimonies to ring true.

Chapter two examines Kara Lynch's (2013) short film/video installation *SAVED :: video postcard*, which is part of a larger media series from Lynch titled *INVISIBLE*. Her film provides an intervention of archival lynching photography, regarding the documented murders of Laura and L. D. Nelson. Through a method of tenderness, Lynch renders this horrific incident from 1911 into a documented memorial that destabilizes damaging archival power structures. DeClue reckons with the visual violence manifested in the infamous photograph (listed as the only extant image of a female lynching in the United States), by inserting a cropped image of Laura into her experimental documentary as a raised spirit of remembrance and not merely a victim of violence. In *SAVED :: video postcard*, Lynch transmutes the image of archived violence and eschews potential voyeurism by freeing Laura from an archival purgatory through the compassionate spectral encounter of her isolated image as a tender memorial instead of being tethered to the cruel incident captured in the original photograph.

Another important criticism that she posits is that photographs and reports of lynching overdetermine the authentic memories of the people who they catalog. The intimacies and details of their true selves are lost in the register of archival violence and charge the filmmakers within these pages to attempt to conjure their memories in earnest. DeClue writes:

with *SAVED :: video postcard*, the artist enters that archival space with Laura and L.D. and is able to combat the horror of Laura and L.D.'s perpetual dying by offering them a reckoning through the live performances that were staged at the 145th Street Bridge and in the visual field of the video itself. (p. 94)

As the photograph resurrects the people it depicts visually, it also elicits new inquiries in the mystery and unknown of its participants—as Lynch and DeClue determine with the Nelson family.

In her third chapter, DeClue acknowledges archival violence through the erasure of trans activism surrounding the events and cultural impact of the Stonewall rebellion. Following Stonewall, she recognizes that a trans presence during the Queer civil rights movement was often diminished by many other Queer activist groups who disregarded intersectionality in favor of more centralized gay and/or lesbian issues in LGBTQ historical activism. Thus, DeClue foregrounds the importance of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera as trans activists whose voices have been given renewed attention through Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel's (2018) film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* Moreover, Tourmaline's notable archival work has brought renewed critical attention to Johnson and Rivera, and most importantly their S.T.A.R. Manifesto as a work of proto-trans theory. This document predates many current academic conceptions of Queer theory and calls for social awareness of trans rights and nonbinary cultural inclusion, which is now experiencing a wave of social activism.

In the final main chapter of *Visitation*, "Ecstasy and the Archive: Black Feminist Phenomenology," DeClue presents Ja'Tovia Gary's (2015) experimental short, *An Ecstatic Experience* as "a film that captures the sensation of Black resistance and the ecstatic release that wresting freedom brings" (p. 166). *An Ecstatic Experience* is composed of archival materials showcasing stuttering imagery and abrupt juxtapositions through editing, abstract animation, and celluloid etchings that overlay the original documentary footage, and distorted sound designs that are all emblematic of an avant-garde style. DeClue contends that her final case study uses avant-garde sensibilities and archival footage to produce what she determines to be "a Black feminist phenomenology of freedom," where experiences of creative ecstasy directly attribute to experiences of freedom (p. 170). This intervention of phenomenological freedom stems from Gary's revisitation of archival footage and her juxtaposition of imagery. Her avant-garde tendencies create an affective experience of liberation by disrupting and rendering the cinematic reality of archival materials anew through expressions of Black resistance and aesthetics of ecstatic release.

Through exploring this concise collection of case studies, DeClue spends much of the book attending to the ethics and salience of archival records as both damaging and crucial indexes for historical Black womanhood. She argues that the avant-garde filmmakers in *Visitation* use archives to reimagine issues of systemic violence against women, which can rewitness historical traumas endured without devolving into representation as pornotropy. Instead, Walker, Lynch, Tourmaline, Wortzel, and Gary each generate empathetic vantage points from experimental cinematic perspectives to tender a reckoning of archival specters and lament these histories as a process of artistic healing.

While ellipses do exist in the historical archives collection, DeClue relays an important resolve that challenges occlusion, discrepancies, and potential voids in archival records. She imparts that "the institution may hold the record, but the power lies with the historian, the archivist, the intrepid researcher, and the artist to call a particular record forward" (p. 45). Through a shrewd application of feminist and Queer theories, she triples down on detailing minority perspectives through blackness, feminism, and queerness as conjured by the mode of avant-garde media.

To conclude, the book foregrounds important scholarly contributions to the vanguard studies of cinema and experimental media installations. DeClue's attention to short films, which might otherwise be overlooked as ephemeral video installation projects, sets an important precedent in considering audio-visual media that stands outside of an exclusive discussion of feature films. These lesser-known case studies offer deeper considerations of media studies as an expanding field of consideration and revisitation. By privileging filmmakers outside of a heteronormative framework, she homes in on marginal perspectives from exceptional storytellers to conjure the enduring ethos of archival figures. DeClue's Black feminist critical perspective—rendering occluded Queer and feminine archival voices through an avant-garde mode—situates a critical charge to continue in this vanguard scholarship through a methodology of tenderness that bespeaks the closing pages of her book. Her work imparts that there is often more to be reckoned with in revisiting archives and revealing singular testimonies, cultural ethics, and marginal voices that continue to resound despite attempts of historical exclusion.

### References

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