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Ordinary People, Ordinary Lives: The Prospects of New Cinema History

Abstract
This article outlines the most recent methodological developments in new cinema history and relates them to existing scholarship on girlhood and feminist history. In charting my personal relationship with the field and my specific subjects, it gestures towards broader applications of "critical confabulation,"; the term coined by Saidyia Hartman in relation to the history of Black slavery. In doing so, it articulates some of the opportunities and limitations of re-centring historiographies of moviegoers towards groups that have been marginalised because of the overlapping factors of class, race and gender.

Keywords
social history, film history, archive, girlhood, feminist history

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What do we know about the people who went to the movies in the 1910s and the 1920s? What can we learn about the pleasures and constrictions they faced, in their specific milieus, now they are removed from us by over a century? Many film historians would answer by saying that we already know a lot about silent moviegoers. We have already made a sketch with compelling, clearly defined outlines. We have a very tangible sense of the spaces in which people of the 1920s encountered movies globally: from town halls, which doubled as screening venues, through small scale, local theatres, to large, urban picture palaces. Yet, some parts of this sketch remain rough, missing a more nuanced understanding of what "a night at the movies" could mean to specific individuals at the time. Analysis of film programming and demographic data can only ever tell us so much when it

comes to the most palpable aspects of historical entertainment. In this piece, I want to focus on the innovative ways of narrativising academic research and creative routes which, as African American scholars have shown, can cut through the terrain of the archival and the recorded. How far can we go, and where can history take us? Secondly, how can digital mapping aid us in that journey? This article is informed by my personal encounters with the new cinema history and its tools, particularly in reference to marginalised audiences that are far removed from our own historical timeframe and whose experiences are not documented in the archives. I want to illustrate the value of an interdisciplinary perspective in examining film engagement on the most granular scale; in other words, in interacting with individual moviegoers.

In the last two decades, film history made tremendous strides in deepening our understanding of spectatorship through a systematic investigation of "the relations between cinema locations, the socio-economic and demographic profile of their surroundings, and film programming."[1] Many of such studies are viable because of the availability of digital datasets: by combining geospatial information with precise records on film exhibition, they tackle the elusiveness of early movie fans. Approaching film exhibition as a locus of both local and nation-wide shifts produced a variety of fantastic studies, even if the majority of said studies focused on European and North American contexts.

But whether we are tracing the habits of American city-dwellers, multiethnic Polish citizens, the rural inhabitants of the Netherlands, or those of colonial subjects in British Malaya, we know that moviegoing was embedded in the fabric of sociability and weekly comings and goings of women, children, and men.[2] For some fans, moving pictures were a commercialised amusement and a form of escapism. The darkened auditorium of the theatre was a space that allowed them to forget the drudgery of the everyday; a site where the sublime replaced the mundane. For others, it was an endeavour inscribed with political meanings of civic uplift; cinema as a way of changing the bigotry of the racist society around them.[3]

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1) Vincent Baptist, Julia Noordegraaf, and Thunnis van Oort, "A Digital Toolkit to Detect Cinema Audiences of the Silent Era: Scalable Perspectives on Film Exhibition and Consumption in Amsterdam Neighbourhoods (1907–1928)," *Studies in European Cinema* 18, no. 3 (2021), 252.

2) On American moviegoing, see for example, Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: British Film Institute, 1999). Agata Frymus, "Black Moviegoing in Harlem: The Case of Alhambra Theatre, 1905–1931," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 62, no. 3 (Spring 2023), forthcoming. On the Polish context, see Karina Pryt, "Cinema and Cinema Audiences in Third Space in Warsaw, 1908–1939," in *Researching Historical Screen Audiences*, eds. Kate Egan, Martin Ian Smith, and Jamie Terill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). On moviegoing in the Netherlands, see André van der Velden and Judith Thissen, "Spectacles of Conspicuous Consumption: Picture Palaces, War Profiteers and the Social Dynamics of Moviegoing in the Netherlands," *Film History* 22, no. 4 (2010), 453–462. On British Malaya and the Straits Settlements, see Ai Lin Chua, "Singapore's 'Cinema-Age' of the 1930s: Hollywood and the Shaping of Singapore Modernity," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012), 592–604. Nadi Tofighian, "Mapping the 'Whirligig' of Amusements in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 49, no. 2 (2018), 277–296.

3) This is especially true of African American moviegoers. See Cara Caddo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Allyson Nadia Field, *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

We have a great sense of the productions that cinephiles watched, as well as the screen stars they admired and whose styles they often imitated with unwavering enthusiasm. Indeed, scholars investigating the 1950s and 1960s have used oral history to broaden their understanding of film cultures.[4] Popular film performers were not only part and parcel of the medium's appeal but also templates through which boys and girls realised their identities. Female stars in particular acted as potent symbols of modernity and barometers of cultural change around the globe. But it is one thing to untangle the threads of historical phenomena using cultural memories; to ask similar questions about a time period that can no longer be remembered by people alive today is yet another task. If we are somehow familiar with the people who patronised cinemas in the Jazz Age, then our relationship with them should be described as an acquaintance, not a friendship. In 1987, prominent feminist historian Jane Gaines argued that "we can always ask more" about the passionate fans of the yesteryear, as the most intimate aspects of their connection to the movies remain obscured by the distance of history.[5] Her statement remains as poignant as ever. To some extent, yesteryear's cinephiles are slippery subjects, perpetually escaping a firm grasp.

Fig. 1. Apollo cinema in Warsaw, Poland, 1922. Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe [National Digital Archive]

Ordinary Voices in the Archive

There is no denying that approaches pioneered by new cinema history revolutionised how we think of cinema studies. Interdisciplinarity lies at the core of this endeavour: in acknowledging the heterogenous, and necessarily multifaceted, nature of film consumption,

4) Daniela Treveri Gennari, Catherine O'Rawe, Danielle Hipkins, Silvia Dibeltulo, and Sarah Culhane, *Italian Cinema Audiences: Histories and Memories of Cinema-going in Post-war Italy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). Melvyn Stokes, Matthew Jones, and Emma Pett, *Cinema Memories: A People's History of Cinema-going in 1960s Britain* (London: British Film Institute, 2022).

5) Jane Gaines, "The Scar of Shame: Skin Color and Caste in Black Silent Melodrama," *Cinema Journal* 26, no. 4 (Summer 1987), 3.

the discipline builds on the methods used in social and economic history, geography, social anthropology, and urban studies, amongst other fields.[6] Socio-cultural turn in film historiography presents us, then, with an aesthetically pleasing, vibrant picture of public leisure, with all its appeals and dangers. It is an arresting picture of girls flocking to theatres so they can gaze at the newest adventures of serial heroines, flirting with other boys and girls, away from the watchful eyes of their guardians.[7] It is a picture that, although beautifully crafted, lacks the most intricate detail that would elevate it from a mere sketch to a completed drawing. Annie Fee follows these sentiments when she explains that, while researchers can gain great insight into the discourse of the silent film era by reading commentaries of film critics and editors, the preferences of "ordinary people" are shrouded in a thicker layer of mystery.[8]

But here is the conundrum: the musings and opinions of the working class are much less likely to leave a written trace in the first place. In rare instances where records exist, they occupy the margins: relegated to footnotes and not accorded with the privileges of institutional preservation. This very problem of scarce and uneven access is evidenced by the findings of scholars who, in their aim to shed light on regular moviegoers, had to rely on their own personal collections, either salvaged from family belongings or found by chance online, as primary sources.[9] Film criticism — written, more often than not, by the representatives of the cultural elite — is just one thread in the colourful tapestry of film history. It is hardly a clear guide to the inevitably varied ways in which fans connected to cinema.

Some captivating examples of historical fandom do exist, usually in the form of letters published by fan magazines or in the archival holdings of star correspondence. These are, beyond doubt, incredibly useful resources when it comes to unravelling the peculiarities of moviegoing at their most personal and most vulnerable.[10] Even so, the reader letters that furnished the monthly issues of *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture Magazine* — in reference to American mediascape — were only a fraction of the correspondence received by the magazine editors. The issue of selection and rejection needs to be accounted for. As Diana W. Anselmo indicates,

> Not only was star/fan letter-writing limited to viewers with the language skills, financial means, and free time to invest in correspondence but, according to pub-

6) Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, "Introduction: The Scope of New Cinema History," in *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, eds. Biltereyst et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 3.

7) For a discussion of women's participation in early film culture in the United States, see Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

8) Annie Fee, "'Les Midinettes Révolutionnaires': The Activist Cinema Girl in 1920s Montmartre," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 4 (Fall 2017), 163.

9) See Diana Anselmo, "Bound by Paper: Girl Fans, Movie Scrapbooks, and Hollywood Reception during World War I," *Film History* 31, no. 3 (2019), 141–172. Elana Levine, "Alternate Archives in US Daytime TV Soap Opera Historiography," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (Summer 2021), 174–180. Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, "Breaching Flowery Borders: Early Twentieth Century Girls Scrapbooking Their Lives," *Girlhood Studies* 14, no. 3 (2021), 124–139.

10) The establishment of Lantern Digital Media Library, with its thousands of searchable fan magazine titles, is undoubtedly related to the promulgation of academic writing on American film culture.

> lished letters submitted by minority moviegoers, both female stars and magazine editors favored a certain type of (i.e., white, literate) fan.[11)]

Here, again, the idea of curatorship and currency — of authoritative, usually systemic decisions on what is worth publishing, replicating, and finally preserving — comes to the fore. Beyond fan correspondence originating from the pages of the fan magazine, feminist film scholars have turned their attention to dispersed fragments of women's engagement with screen culture; the remains of inner lives scattered across scrapbooks and diaries. Anselmo unearthed a fascinating array of accounts that chronicle the complex, highly affective ways in which girls growing up in the 1910s envisioned their selfhood.[12)] They navigated through Hollywood lore to shape their own identities and cultivate a sense of empowerment amongst the female circles surrounding them. The voices that emerge from a variety of archival materials — scrapbooks, legal records, or diaries — can be regarded as inconsequential within the established modes of historical inquiry. Indeed, I encountered resistance towards including them in my scholarly writing. In the process of peer review, such narratives have been deemed too ephemeral and fleeting, not legitimate enough to merit the attention usually given to the popular press or to a more robust body of evidence found down other avenues. Notably, this tendency prioritises records produced and sanctioned by the Hollywood studio system — and thus by capitalism — often providing little insight into marginalised, alternative modes of film participation.

Firstly, if we focus solely on published works and film columns, we will be looking past the main component of moviegoing; the lively and stimulating film culture as experienced by ordinary members of the public from the bottom-up. In the case of mainstream American periodicals, they are largely representative of white, middle-class discourse. What about audiences who are neither of those things? What about ordinary people and ordinary lives? It is nearly impossible to answer the question of film consumption from the bottom up whilst drawing solely on promotional discourses circulated by production companies; to do so would mean to look *away* from the audience, not towards it. The gendered hierarchies of value, where, as Erin A. Meyers demonstrates, some aspects of screen engagement are easily labelled as "fluff and distraction" and "the province of frivolous feminine cultures" are also to blame.[13)]

Secondly, as I have discussed in "Researching Black Women and Film History," the very structure of the archive is dependent on overlapping forms of privilege because it strives to preserve documents relating to established, usually middle-class individuals.[14)] To not occupy the higher echelons of society meant to be glossed over, if not entirely dismissed, in the broader processes of reconstruction and history writing. It meant to reside

11) Anselmo, "Bound by Paper," 158.
12) Ibid. See also Diana Anselmo, "Screen-Struck: The Invention of the Movie Girl Fan," *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (Fall 2015), 1–28.
13) Erin A. Meyers, "Only in *Us!* Celebrity Gossip as Ephemeral Media," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (Summer 2021), 183.
14) Agata Frymus, "Researching Black Women and Film History," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 20, Archival Opportunities and Absences in Women's Film and Television Histories Dossier (Winter 2020/2021), 228–236.

elsewhere. Academics working across a variety of historical disciplines — and those grappling with the horrific legacies of slavery in particular — have criticised this paradigm, trying to forge new paths to a greater, more holistic understanding of the human past. These weedy paths might still be difficult to cross, but, as film historians, we should not be discouraged from taking them. Their scenic vistas make up for their challenges.

There is an abundance of stories on politicians, artists, and writers across museum collections and on the pages of the contemporary press. The first-hand accounts of ordinary girls who loved movies but did not achieve notoriety within their lifetime are much harder to come by. How can we bring them back to the historiographies of cinema, not as theoretical constructs but as specific individuals whose flesh and blood have since turned to dust? Here, I want to suggest how to construct narratives of working-class moviegoing from little more than fragments and how to fill in the blanks. We need to strive to elude the omissions and silences of the archive; otherwise, we risk reproducing the same issues — the oppression of exclusion — in our work.

Municipal records and other regional collections are commonly used by scholars working across a various time periods and disciplines yet are rarely deployed by film historians. However, they can offer occasional but unapparelled insight into the lives of common people. One illuminating example of this can be found in Cheryl D. Hicks's work on Black urban women at the beginning of the twentieth century.[15] The most fascinating aspects of her study relate to the testimonies of Black girls gathered by white officials as part of their duties at the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford. These adolescent Black women were victims of the wayward minor law, which criminalised disobedience against parents and guardians. The probation officers compiled cases on the inmates' family backgrounds and personal habits in the ultimate pursuit of controlling what they saw as potentially immoral behaviour.

There is no doubt that the authoritative and often patronising tone of many of the reports reveals much more about the people who wrote them than about those they described. Hicks is keenly aware of that. What makes the records particularly illuminating — at least from the vantage point of film history — is that the interviewees talked about their leisure time, of which cinemagoing often constituted a substantial part. Some girls equated cinemas with intimacy and courtship.[16] For others, movie patronage was a sign of disobedience because their parents saw theatres and dance halls as spaces of transgression and a threat to female respectability.[17] When framed within broader transformations of the era, statements emerging from such records have immense value. What they tell us is, after all, instructive in opening up the possibilities for histories that "restore the agency of ordinary people."[18]

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15) Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

16) Inmate #3711, History Blank, August 2, 1924; and letter from Amy M. Prevost to Superintendent Amos T. Baker, January 9, 1925, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

17) Inmate #2480, Statement of Girl, June 23, 1917, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, 14610-77B Inmate Case Files, ca. 1915–30, 1955–65, Records of the Department of Correctional Services, New York State Archives, State Education Department, Albany, New York. Cited in Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman*, 216.

18) Judith Thissen, "Cinema History as Social History: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Routledge Companion to New Cinema History,* ed. Richard Maltby et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), 123–133, 123.

Mapping and Social History

Now, let me go back to considering digital approaches and their affordances. Whether they are multi-layered, complex tools, such as Palladio and Neatline, or more basic and intuitive ones, including Google Maps, digitalisation goes hand in hand with the renewed interest in mapping. Film historians have been using geo-mapping to great effects, uncovering detailed information on the localities in which moviegoing took place. This process has been going on for a while: Jeffrey Klenotic's Geographic Information System (GIS) project on cinemas in North Hampshire, *Mapping Movies,* commenced in 2003.[19] In 2009, Deb Verhoeven, Kate Bowles, and Colin Arrowsmith emphasised the potential of GIS in recognising material landscape of moviegoing "as one element in a place-based cultural performance whose hallmark is not similarity, but specificity."[20] Baptist, Noordegraaf, and van Oort used a georeferenced, vectorised outline of historical Amsterdam to tease out the relationships between class, urban leisure, and film patronage both on the city-wide level and in reference to two venues in De Pijp neighbourhood.[21] In piecing together the lives of Harlemites of the 1920s and 1930s, historian Stephen Robertson underlines the symbiotic relationship between digital and spatial methods, suggesting that one does not simply enhance the other, but actually makes it possible:

> Real estate maps are so small in scale that they cannot be reproduced in print publications, with those covering Harlem amounting to almost an entire atlas volume. However, digitized and overlaid on Google Maps, real estate maps become scalable, making it possible to zoom out from individual buildings to the neighborhood view favored in historical maps of Harlem and to an even larger scale that situates Upper Manhattan in the larger city.[22]

It is, then, the level of detail and scalability provided by digital maps that makes them so indispensable. "The increasing availability and granularity of digital datasets," Baptist and his team postulates, will lead film researchers to a more nuanced, empirical understanding of moviegoers of the past.[23] While it is difficult not to agree with such statements, it is also important to point out that these endeavours share their investment in the general, as opposed to the personal. What I mean by it is that they deploy cartographic methods as means to profile large groups of audiences and to debate their class, race, or national background. They pose questions about the typology of screening venues and, subsequently, their clientele. They treat the spatial turn in scholarship as an opportunity to zoom in on the interconnectedness of cinemas, communities, and market economies.

19) See *Mapping Movies*, accessed May 11, 2022, https://www.mappingmovies.com/.
20) Deb Verhoeven, Kate Bowles, and Colin Arrowsmith, "Mapping the Movies: Reflections on the Use of Geospatial Technologies for Historical Cinema Audience Research," in *Digital Tools in Media Studies: Analysis and Research: An Overview*, ed. Michael Ross et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 69–82, 70.
21) Baptist et al., "A Digital Toolkit to Detect Cinema Audiences of the Silent Era."
22) Stephen Garton, "Putting Harlem on the Map," in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, eds. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013), 168–197, 188.
23) Baptist et al., "A Digital Toolkit to Detect Cinema Audiences of the Silent Era," 268.

They focus on the moviegoer as an amalgam and a representative of their environment. Yet, it is much rarer to see the same set of tools applied to named individuals who toiled and dreamed across the street from the movies. The only example of such affective mapping in film studies — in other words, a concern with the impact of geographical environment on human emotion — I am aware of is a wonderful micro-study by Pierluigi Ercole, Daniela Treveri Gennari, and Catherine O'Rawe. Their account ties the memories of Teresa Gervasi Rabitti, an avid moviegoer who lived in Rome during the 1950s, to her surroundings. It uses geovisualisation to unpack individual habits and behaviours, revealing deeper truths about the patterns of Italian urban life.[24] What we can gain from these experts is a lesson about crafting a historical narrative that is both insightful and, due to its personal nature, very engaging.

Fig. 2. Teresa Gervasi Rabitti in 1950.
Reprinted with Gervasi Rabitti permission, from the research article by Pierluici Ercole, Daniela Treveri Gennari and Catherine O'Rawe (2017)

In my own research, I encountered a statement of Naomi Washington, née Waller, who reflected on the cinemagoing experience in her youth.[25] Born in 1902 — and interviewed when she was 86 years old — Washington claimed that she only started attending theatre houses in her late teens due to her parents' moral opposition to commercial leisure. Once her cinephilia commenced, she was forced to keep her moviegoing a secret to avoid punishment. While the comment itself is relatively brief, I had a lot of information on the concrete geographies surrounding Washington's comings and goings: her former address was

24) Pierluigi Ercole, Daniela Treveri Gennari, and Catherine O'Rawe, "Mapping Cinema Memories: Emotional Geographies of Cinemagoing in Rome in the 1950s," *Memory Studies* 10, no. 1 (2017), 63–77.

25) Jeff Kisseloff, *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1989).

featured in a biography of her brother, prominent jazz musician Fats Waller.[26] Mapping her existence onto the swiftly-changing landscape of Harlem, America's foremost Black neighbourhood, made me realise she lived across the street from two picture houses, Lincoln and Crescent (later replaced by another film venue, Gem). The Lafayette theatre, which she mentioned as her particular favourite, was only two blocks away from her family's apartment.[27] Notably, established histories of Harlem do not treat locations with precision; "events and buildings are not given an address or are given only a partial or incorrect address, and little attention is paid to how that location is related to other places (…)."[28] I was interested in the small scale, in the issues of proximity and practicality, measured easily by distances overlaid in Google Maps. Walking to Lafayette theatre from home would take Washington five minutes at a leisurely pace; Lincoln was three minutes closer. In this, I am reminded of Verhoeven, Bowles, and Arrowsmith's piece once more, specifically their suggestion that

> for mapping to be a productive development for film studies, it needs to work by engaging our imagination, and challenging our assumptions… [Mapping] offers most when it raises new questions about spatial and temporal connectivity, rather than promising closure on the question of what was going on in the past.[29]

Sketching Washington's surroundings and the routes she might have crossed does not answer the questions of her fandom but generates a series of scenes; speculative snapshots of lives intertwined with movies.

Fig. 3. The immediate environment of Natalie Washington, nee Waller. Adapted from New York City maps by the author

26) Alyn Shipton, *Fats Waller: The Cheerful Little Earful* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 9.
27) For more information on re-tracing Harlem's film exhibition, see Agata Frymus, "Mapping Black Moviegoing in Harlem, New York City, 1909–14," in *New Perspectives on Early Cinema History: Concepts, Approaches, Audiences*, eds. Mario Slugan and Daniel Biltereyst (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 193–212.
28) Garton, "Putting Harlem on the Map," 188.
29) Verhoeven et al., "Mapping the Movies," 79.

Fragmentary Evidence and Critical Confabulation

In reconstructing the programming of Harlem's movie venues, I often imagined what Washington, or other teenage Black girls like herself, *could have* watched, *could have* disliked, and *could have* enjoyed. I like to construct my narrative of film exhibition around her temporal presence: what promoted her initial interest in the medium, and what was the first film she saw projected onto the screen? Did she ever frequent Lincoln, cheering loudly at the exploits of silent comedians? Did she imitate the fashion styles of popular film icons? In the interview, Washington remembered being disciplined once her passion for cinemagoing came to light. Has she ever used cinemas as convenient locations for romantic encounters, as her mother feared? Or was she simply interested in the glamourous universe that unravelled onscreen in front of her eyes? In speculating what could have transpired, I am not providing definite answers; rather, I am pointing towards some likely scenarios, posing further questions about the probabilities — and necessary restrictions — inherent to historical research.

It is true that, on the face of it, the terms such as "conjecture" and "speculation" seem at odds with the very principles of historical inquiry, which prides itself in the careful and calculated evaluation of facts. History writing, we have been told, is a careful system guided by logic and precision, where creativity plays no role. Such framing conceals the fact that all historical studies rely, in the words of Paul E. Bolin, on "the historian's ability to choreograph a dance of compatibility between the fragments of a known past, and a world constructed through reasoned imagination and grounded speculation (…)."[30] The word "grounded" deserves an emphasis here. Digital micro-mapping offers one of many opportunities through which this "grounding" can be achieved. What I suggest is not fiction writing but a practice that can support us in unearthing audiences that have long stayed on the margins and whose agency has been diminished because of their class, gender, or race. Imagination not as a contradiction but as an aid to historiography.

This approach draws on the methods found in African American history, championed more specifically by Saidyia Hartman's work on Black girlhood. Thus far, however, it has found no direct application in the realm of new cinema history. The concept of reading *against* the archive is perhaps the easiest to articulate in reference to African American and colonial pasts, where the record of injustice and bias is so inescapable and omnipresent — marring every page of existing documentation — that the scholar investigating them can never take them at anything close to face value. In cases where information on Black girls exists, it is both generated and preserved by a white establishment that saw African American women as essentially inferior beings, thus creating an account abounding with pain, racism and bias. Sam Huber articulates this question poignantly when he asks, "how to listen for the dominated in the archives of the dominant?"[31] As film historians, we

30) Paul E. Bolin, "Imagination and Speculation as Historical Impulse: Engaging Uncertainties within Art Education History and Historiography," *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research* 50, no. 2 (2009), 110.

31) Sam Huber, "Saidyia Hartman Unravels the Archive," *The Nation*, May 1, 2019, accessed March 28, 2022, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/saidiya-hartmans-astounding-history-of-the-forgotten-sexual-modernists-in-20th-century-black-life/.

too should search for productive ways of wrestling with this paradox. Hartman proposes to move beyond what the primary source can tell us about Black girlhood — those who produce it, she reminds us, were driven by deeply harmful conceptualisations of race — and to imagine what "might have been said or might have been done."[32]

In her book-length study, *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments,* Hartman puts this assumption into practice by envisioning the inner lives of Black girls, whose stories are preserved poorly in the archive. In the series of "critical confabulations," as she terms them, the author skilfully navigates between the parameters of historical research and unretainable elements of the past. The lack of a broad array of evidence does not discourage her from exploring the possibilities. She depicts one of her subjects, Esther Brown:

> Esther's only luxury was idleness and she was fond of saying to her friends, "If you get up in the morning and feel tired, go back to sleep and then go to the theatre at night." (…) On the avenues, the possibilities were glimmering and evanescent, even if fleeting and most often unrealized. The map of the might could or what might be was not restricted to the literal trail of Esther's footsteps or anyone else's. Hers was an errant path cut through the heart of Harlem in search of the open city, *l'ouverture*, inside the ghetto. Wandering and drifting was how she engaged the world and how she perceived it.[33]

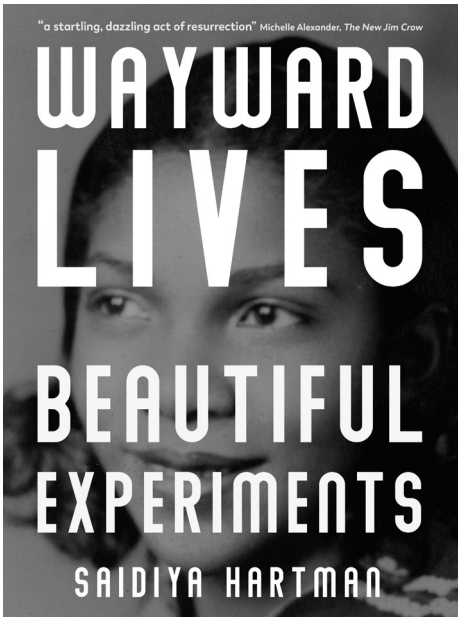

Fig. 4. The cover of Saidyia Hartman's book, Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments

32) Saidyia Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008), 1–14, 11.

33) Saidyia Harman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 229.

By infusing her writing with evocative imagery of Harlem's hustle and bustle, Hartman makes her study much more persuasive and relatable. More importantly, though, she uses her method — of filling the empty spaces of the material record by responding emotionally to her subjects — to articulate the pasts that have long been overlooked. She crafts a formidable narrative that, whilst grounded in research, brims with metaphor and colour and reads like fiction. Its evocative power lies in the tangibility of the lives resurrected through the power of creativity: what could the young African American woman described here have done and thought, given what we know about the mores of her era, and — even more importantly — what we can never know with certainty. One's inner life is, of course, not traceable beyond what one wants to project outwards and what one is willing to commit to paper. The mechanics of conjecture, as employed here, are constantly delimited by the cultural affordances of Black lives.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to underline the lessons that film historians can learn from trailblazing histories of the ordinary, marginalised, and dispossessed. Along this, we should keep exploring the creative uses of digital mapping and not lose sight of the individual moviegoer. Still, mapping should not be treated as the final answer, but rather, a procedure that "offers most when it raises new questions about spatial and temporal connectivity, rather than promising closure on the question of what was going on in the past."[34] The process of researching and drafting historical accounts is framed by academic discourse as one removed from emotion, filled with careful calibration and rhetoric. Yet, such dichotomy overlooks the simple fact that historians are telling stories: stories that draw on the archival record and ultimately shape our understanding of the collective past. "Silence," Anselmo argues, "constitutes an invisible form of violence since it is difficult to mount a historical argument in the void of material evidence."[35] It is also, I might add, the most persuasive. In moving away from omissions — and focusing purely on the overrepresented and the traceable — we are enabling the systemic erasure of ordinary voices by the archives. The traces of ordinary peoples and ordinary lives are dispersed across a wide variety of artefacts: diaries, maps, probation documents, and court files. Aided by critical confabulation and sociohistorical knowledge, we can make sense of these traces. We can leverage them to become narratives. Film history, too, has the capacity to ponder what *could have happened* and what *could have been.*

34) Verhoeven, Bowles, and Arrowsmith, "Mapping the Movies."

35) Diana W. Anselmo, "Introduction, or The Things We Did Not Lose in the Fire," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 4 (2021), 162.

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Biography

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