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The Invisibility of the Black Working Class in Early Films (1890s-1930s): The Case of Pennsylvania

L'invisibilité de la classe ouvrière noire dans le cinéma des années 1890-1930 : le cas de la Pennsylvanie

11 February 2026.

Julie Assouly

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Introduction

1 In *Black Folk: The Roots of the Black Working Class* (2023), historian Blair Kelley underscores the significance of the Black working class in US history through archives and personal narratives designed to humanize and individualize these workers' experience, one of exploitation and discrimination but also one of resilience and community building. The book reveals the paradox of this important category of workers who played a crucial role in the nation's economic and cul-

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tural development yet remained invisible. Most importantly, Kelley seeks to dismantle the notion that the term "working class" in the US has always referred largely to white workers, concluding that the invisibility of Black workers erases their contributions to the US economy, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. Over two decades earlier, David Roediger, in his seminal work *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), examined how whiteness functioned as a social construct that offered non-material compensation to white workers from the Antebellum period onward[1]. This racial distinction, he argued, provided white laborers with a sense of social status despite economic hardship, positioning them above Black workers and weakening the potential for cross-racial solidarity. As Roediger demonstrated throughout his career, this racial divide within the working class has persisted into the present. The idea that "racial and ethnic tensions have plagued the workers' movement for centuries" (Pearson 2022: 269) is not new; despite a tendency "to focus on race and racism while marginalizing—or overlooking altogether—working-class struggles and class divisions within Black communities" (271), a substantial body of scholarship has documented this phenomenon as referenced by Pearson (269-291). Focusing on Pennsylvania before the Second World War and the subsequent desegregation of the army, and prior to the civil rights movement, this article considers how cinema participated in normalizing the racial divide within the working class by invisibilizing Black workers.

2 The concepts of visibility and invisibility, central to visual culture and critical race theory, provide a productive lens for analyzing early US cinema. As Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), visibility is a mechanism of power—what is made visible is regulated, classified and ultimately disciplined. In cinema, this dynamic determines which bodies and narratives are legitimized on screen. Black audiences have long faced an "absence of recognition" (hooks 2015 [1992]: 167), a systemic denial of identification rooted in racist structures of representation. During the silent and early sound era (1890s-1930s), Black working-class characters were either rendered invisible or hyper-visible through dehumanizing stereotypes, as exemplified by D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—a notoriously racist and extensively studied film (Bogle 2001 [1973]: 10-18; Cripps 1993 [1977]:

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41-69; Stewart 2005). While the dominant industry privileged white middle-class protagonists, Black filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux sought to reclaim visibility through race films that challenged these exclusions (Gaines 2001). Jacqueline Najuma Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (2005) further demonstrates how Black spectatorship and urban modernity created parallel cinematic experiences, revealing a racialized spatial politics of film distribution and reception (37). Meanwhile, Richard Dyer's *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997), like Roediger, showed how whiteness functioned as an invisible default, reinforcing normative dominance. Tom Gunning has shown how early "cinema of attractions" (Gunning 1986: 63-70) celebrated spectacle to the expanse of complex representation, especially that of marginalized groups. Indeed, decades of scholarship have demonstrated that invisibility in early cinema was not a matter of omission, but an active process of cultural erasure shaped by intersecting structures of power (Denzin 1995: 58-59).

3 Building on this body of work, the article argues that cinema has played a central part in perpetuating Black workers' invisibility, shaping and normalizing the enduring image of a predominantly white working class. Even as white and brown immigrants—from Eastern and Southern Europe and then Latin America—were increasingly incorporated into on-screen representations, Black workers remained largely sidelined, particularly in depictions of the industrial North in the first half of the twentieth century. Regionalist efforts such as the Maurice Film Company in Detroit and the Colored Film Players Corporation in Philadelphia during the 1920s attempted to counteract this erasure. They were significant but remained short-lived endeavors. This study focuses on Pennsylvania—a place of rapid industrialization, a key destination during the Great Migration of African Americans (that happened to be Du Bois's first case study with *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, 1899), and an early center of the emerging film industry—to examine the unequal visibility of Black labor and its exclusion from both historical and fictional narratives. Dwelling on working-class films rooted in Pennsylvania, it begins with a discussion of the intersection of class and race in a selection of Siegmund Lubin's silent shorts. It then revisits debates around class divisions in the Pennsylvania-produced race film *The Scar of Shame*

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(Frank Peregini, 1929) and concludes with a case study of the pre-Code film *Baby Face* (Alfred E. Green, 1933), also set in Pennsylvania. This regional lens highlights the value of decentralizing film studies, not only in terms of production sites but also in representational politics during the pre-Code period—films made before the Hollywood censorship code was enforced in 1934. Ultimately, the article contends that early cinematic portrayals never really allowed class solidarity to transcend racial boundaries, although pre-Code cinema tended to reverse established patterns, a tendency curtailed by Hollywood's later centralization and ideological homogenization.

1. Race and class on the silent screen: The rise and fall of Pennsylvania's Lubin studio

4 From its inception, cinema has had a complex and evolving relationship with the working class. In the silent era, film emerged both as a technological innovation and a form of mass entertainment that was particularly accessible to urban working-class audiences. Nickelodeons, with their low admission prices and central urban locations, quickly became popular gathering spaces for immigrant and working-class communities (Musser 1994). However, while the working class constituted the core of cinema's audience base, their lives and experiences were rarely represented with nuance on screen. As Miriam Hansen argues in her work on vernacular modernism (1991), early cinema offered spectators a way of navigating the dislocations of modern industrial life, yet these portrayals often filtered working-class existence through melodrama, comedy, or stereotypes rather than through realistic engagement. Despite its democratic reach, early film production was quickly centralized and shaped by commercial imperatives, often sidelining marginalized voices. Early cinema was also an employer, which means that it did not only make movie stars but hired labor and thus became a capitalist industry with qualified and unqualified workers who soon started to ask for work equality. But before that, in the pre-Hollywood era, a handful of movie pioneers launched successful film studios in spite of Edison's monopoly.

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5 In *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (1998), a landmark publication in the field of working-class studies, historian Steven Ross criticizes the tendency of film scholars to restrict working-class film to industry-based "labor films", which "ignores the vast majority of wage earners who did not belong to unions or go out on strike: most women, children, immigrants, blacks, and unskilled male workers." (41) To him "working-class films are an expansive category that includes any movie whose plot revolves around working-class protagonists." (42) These films are not confined to a single genre but, in the silent era, largely fell into three broad categories: "innocuous romances, melodramas, comedies, and adventures;" "social-problem films;" and "highly politicized labor-capital films" (Ross 1998: 45), with the latter being least likely to include women and Black characters. Bearing this in mind, I would simply define a working-class film as one that focuses on the experience of the working classes as its main subject.

6 Pennsylvania is a state with both a strong film culture and a deeply rooted working-class tradition. Little known to Europeans, the Lubin studios played a pivotal role in the rise of early cinema, both locally and nationally. In the early 20th century, these studios positioned Pennsylvania as a competitor to New York in film production, well before the advent of Hollywood. Siegmund Lubin produced silent short films, the 'Betzwood Silents,' with a strong regional identity, such as his 'Eastern Westerns,' featuring cowboys from the East against an industrial and mining backdrop. Pennsylvania's cinematic identity was forged during the silent era, also with the 'Black Diamond comedies' shot in Wilkes-Barre (1916-1919), and reinforced during the Great Depression with studio films that quickly highlighted two strong markers of this state: its revolutionary past with *The Allegheny Uprising* (William A. Seiter, 1939), and its mining heritage in *Black Fury* (Michael Curtiz, 1935), bringing to life the archetypal working-class hero. In its American version, he became the embodiment of a strong, resilient, and patriotic laborer. A figure shaped by cinema, he endured hardship, achieved glory, and made sacrifices—as seen in more recent features *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976). However, despite Philadelphia's growing Black population over the decades, Black workers have remained largely under-

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represented in such portrayals—which is not so obviously the case in other Northern industrial cities such as Chicago or Detroit [2].

7 A Polish-Jewish ophthalmologist from Silesia, Siegmund Lubin immigrated to the United States in 1876 and, after years of peddling from city to city, eventually settled in Philadelphia. Twenty years later, he invested his money in the emerging technology of cinema. He became a pioneer—and arguably the first movie *mogul*—as his small film company expanded into the nation's first chain of movie theaters. In 1910, he established the Lubinville Studio north of Philadelphia, which led to the creation of the Lubin Manufacturing Company (1912-1916), a firm that produced cameras, projectors, and films. Lubin's largest studio, Betzwood, was built in 1913 in the suburbs of Montgomery County, Pa. and spanned approximately 4,000 acres. In fact, he established the first vertically integrated film studio. However, after a devastating fire in 1914 destroyed most of his films, his company finally collapsed in 1916. Today, only a few (around 30) of the 4,000 to 5,000 films produced by Lubin Studios have survived, which helps explain why Lubin is not always mentioned in books on silent film. There are few labor films of the Labor-Capital type in the Lubin Archives, but at least six have been identified through Kay Sloan's thorough archival research in *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (1988). Among them, *The Right to Labor* (1909) fits into the anti-union film trend that continued to develop during World War I. It portrays strikes and union leaders in a negative light, implying that their radicalism and defiance of management were the cause of escalating social conflict and overlooking their *raison d'être*: advocating against the precariousness of the workforce [3]. By the 1910s, Lubin was known as the 'King of the Movies,' and his most significant contribution to the lives of working people was not his political activism, but his willingness to lower production and exhibition costs to make movies accessible to a mass audience. His studio was also a major employer in the Philadelphia area (more than 100 workers at the height of its success). Although there is no trace of Black worker characters in the film stills archived at the Free Library of Philadelphia and the Library of Congress, Lubin did produce films about African Americans, whose parts were played either by actors in blackface or by Black actors. According to employees' accounts, they were paid and treated decently—but this is difficult to verify.

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8 In the only existing biography of Lubin, Joseph Eckhardt mentions an 1898 film project in which Lubin gathered 300 African American extras in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park to portray a company of 'Buffalo Soldiers,' an all-black US Army regiment created in 1866 as part of the Army Organization Act. This regiment took an active part in the controversial Indian Wars and in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the latter being the focus of Lubin's reenactment. As his daughter explained in an interview, after scaring off the entire neighborhood, the crew had to move to the countryside to resume filming (Eckhardt 1997: 28). The resulting film was seen as "a thrilling celebration of racial progress and black martial manhood as it toured black churches and halls throughout the South" (Caddoo 2014: 27). Lubin was a pioneer, but he was primarily a businessman, not an activist. Although one of his goals, early in his entertainment career, was to fight anti-Semitic stereotypes with films like *The Yiddisher Boy* (1908), he had no problem exploiting racial prejudice against Black people. For example, in *Fun on the Farm* (1905), while white characters are depicted engaging in various farming activities, Black characters are shown stealing and eating pumpkins. Scholars, including Eckhardt (1997: 51), have interpreted this scene as the winter equivalent of the infamous watermelon-eating racial imagery. Pennsylvania's Dutch Country may not have been the most suitable location for producing these 'exotic' films. Given their commercial success, Lubin dispatched one of his teams—known as the Hotaling Troop, named after his close associate and notorious racist Arthur Hotaling—to Jacksonville, Florida. By the 1910s, Jacksonville had become a burgeoning film production hub, attracting major companies due to its "good weather, low production and labor costs, and established transportation routes to both the Northeast and the Midwest" (Lupack 2016: 124). Hotaling established a Southern Division of Lubin Films there, which produced approximately thirty 'colored comedies' between 1913 and 1915, a development that contributed to a form of segregation of Black actors who were separated from the main studio (Eckhardt 1997: 139). These comedies were not race films created specifically for Black audiences (like Richard E. Norman's films) although they developed at the same period (Lupack 2016: 123). They "reached for both markets by striving for a tone of harmless innocence rather than keen-edged racism" (Cripps 1993 [1977]: 181). Presented as comedies, however, these films remain examples of the racist stereotypes conveyed in their titles. A

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notable example, *Coontown Suffragettes* (1914) is a parody of the suffragette movement, in which Black laundresses go on strike to force their supposedly lazy husbands to return to work. Not only did the film further normalize the 'lazy coon' stereotype—already widely disseminated in 19th century minstrel shows (Lott 2013: 92-93) and popular culture (Butters 2002: 21)—but it also mocked existing networks of Black suffragists who risked their lives for social justice in the South, reducing them to mere, archetypal 'mammies.' Black characters appeared in comedies that ridiculed them for the amusement of white audiences, a trend inherited from the minstrel shows and clearly not one exclusive to Lubin's films. Throughout the 1910s, racial tensions were widespread in the industrial North, driven by the First Great Migration (1916-1940), which saw approximately 1.6 million Black workers and their families relocate from the segregated South. In the North, they were often perceived as economic competitors to the white working class. This resentment contributed to race riots in major industrial cities, including Philadelphia in 1919 as part of the Red Summer Riots. In 1917, Black workers were hired in the shipyards to replace white laborers who had been mobilized in Europe. When they returned from the war, riots broke out in response to this change. This chapter of working-class history is not recounted in the films of the period, but a film like *The Birth of a Nation*—whose ideology can be seen as the cinematic precursor to the racist theories of the Great Replacement—implicitly refers to the perceived danger of integrating Black people into a white society that Griffith famously portrayed as victimized [4].

9 Competing with rival film pioneer Thomas Edison, Lubin was quick to invest in racist films that degraded the image of African Americans. In his comprehensive study, *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen* (2002), Gerald Butters Jr. mentions several such racist comedies, starting with the infamous *Cake Walk* produced by Lubin in 1898, the same year he made his vibrant tribute to the Buffalo Soldiers—which was in fact an exception. This is further evidence that he was above all an opportunist, not an idealist. His biography portrays him as a tolerant man who treated Black people fairly, but his early promotion of racist stereotypes had consequences. Butters contends that the two primary racist stereotypes targeting African Americans in the silent era were Sambo, the rural, idiotic, poor but happy Southern planta-

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tion figure, and his Northern counterpart, Zip Coon, the urban dandy, struggling and failing to assimilate. Both, he argues, represent "the flip sides of the racial coin" (Butters 2002: 12), adding that these two characters had conspicuously dominated minstrel entertainment and thus became a staple of many early comedies produced by white studio owners (like Edison or Lubin) to please white working-class audiences (Butters 2002: 24). While Sambo was a benign figure, Zip Coon, by attempting to fit into a white-dominated modern urban society, "placed the Coon figure on the same economic plane as the working-class white man. Therefore, whites had to ridicule the dreams and ambitions of the Zip Coon figure in order to guarantee the 'natural' inferiority of the black man." (Butters 2002: 12) This validation of a racist iconography, according to Butters, illustrates how cinema continued to shape working-class racism; by depicting Black people as socially unfit, these films reassured—and unified—poor white Euro-American workers by providing them with an even lower social group to look down upon. This perspective is consistent with the theory famously developed by David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) which examines how such power differentials operated in the Antebellum period. Secondly, it explains the near absence of Black workers in early silent films, as they were required to fit the racist stereotype of the 'lazy coon,' unfit to participate in nation-building – a narrative constructed to uphold and reinforce white superiority (Pines 1975: 10).

2. The Colored Players Film Corporation and the emergence of race movies in Philadelphia

10 After Lubin's film career ended abruptly in bankruptcy in 1916 and his studio collapsed, race films advocating for the advancement of Black people began to emerge in Philadelphia. Modeled after the Lincoln Motion Picture Company—founded by African Americans in Los Angeles in 1916—the Colored Players Film Corporation was established in 1926 by white producer David Starkman and Black actor Sherman H. Dudley. The two men aimed to attract an emerging Black

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middle class to theatres while promoting the idea of a Black Hollywood that would challenge the enduring racist stereotypes that the films of Lubin and his counterparts had so firmly implanted in the minds of American viewers. Leonora Starkman described her father's project as follows: "My father was a crusader. Nobody played the black people as heroes and heroines. This fit in with his ethic. He felt the black people shouldn't be stepped on, that at the same time he was making money he could glorify their position." (Sampson 1995: 218) But the impact of race films was constrained by the growing dominance of Hollywood and its overwhelming whiteness, the challenges of independent film production, and the limitations of audience reach—white viewers were largely unwilling to pay for Black films which were harshly impacted by the rise of Hollywood producers who had no financial interest in them. Black cinema could only survive thanks to Black investors, not white ones (Crémieux 2004: 27).

11 Starkman's adventure was short-lived; the studio produced only four notable films with moral themes before shutting down in 1929 following the delayed release of *The Scar of Shame*, a drama shot in 1927, that reinterpreted the traditionally white theme of class division within an African American context. This all-Black cast film follows the story of Louise (Lucia Lynn Moses), a lower-class girl who is rescued from her abusive stepfather by a young bourgeois, Alvin (Harry Henderson). He then marries her in secret since she is not of his social standing. This social divide mirrored a geographical one at the time, with established Northern African Americans distancing themselves from their poorer, unsophisticated Southern counterparts to protect the progress they had fought for over generations (Torriano 2001: 24). This brings us back to the original stereotypical Sambo/Zip Coon pairing: while both Southern and Northern Black individuals were marginalized by white society, within an all-Black context, exclusion became primarily class-based. Throughout the film, many title cards mention class issues without ever using the word, but rather "set" (00: 38: 06), "group" (00: 32: 57), "kind" (00: 21: 26), or even "caste" (00: 38: 09)[5], most probably to avoid a Marxist terminology, especially after the First Red Scare (1919–1920). Very quickly in the film, it becomes clear that what really separates Louise from Alvin is not merely money, but education. He is a well-educated piano composer whose mother lives out of town and has sent him to

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a respectable boarding house to start a career in Philadelphia, hoping he will return to marry the fine girl of their "set" she has chosen for him. Surprisingly, Louise and her alcoholic, abusive stepfather live next door to Alvin, making the typical geographical separation of lower and upper classes among whites inapplicable to Philadelphia's Black community at the time. Additionally, Alvin's upbringing is most clearly defined by his respect for women and strong moral values which ultimately compel him to marry Louise without his mother's consent to protect her from her stepfather. But this sacrifice only gets him into trouble when Louise, upset that Alvin would not tell his mother about their marriage, violently rebukes him and makes a deal with a shady family friend, Eddie, to go work in a cabaret. A gunfight between Alvin and Eddie leaves Louise wounded and scarred for life (hence 'the scar of shame') when Eddie accidentally shoots her (00: 54: 00). She immediately accuses Alvin, who goes to jail. What emerges from this sophisticated, high-quality drama is its concern with matching the aesthetic of white films, even to the extent of making the main characters appear as white as possible. Alvin and Louise have thin noses and are consistently overexposed to bright lighting, further emphasizing their artificial whiteness. In contrast, the mean or vulgar characters—such as the stepfather and the bartender—are depicted with darker complexions. Secondly, and quite surprisingly for a film advocating social uplift for Black people, the narrative suggests that education is acquired from a young age and that people brought up in poverty, like Louise, the 'bad sort,' cannot be trusted, as if the absence of moral standards was inherently ingrained in them. At the end of the film, she kills herself because she cannot win Alvin back, leaving a note to exonerate him—remorse she could have experienced earlier, out of morality instead of despair. The penultimate title card (01: 23: 42) is very explicit in the film's judgment on the lower class's lack of education and cultural capital: "A child of environment! If she had the proper training, if she had been taught the finer things in life, the higher aims, the higher hopes, she would not be lying cold in death! Oh! Our people have much to learn!" While advocating for better education for Black people, the film fails to offer a concrete solution, and even seems to discourage men like Alvin from assisting uneducated working-class women, who are portrayed as inherently dishonest. In the end, the poor girl dies in despair, while the bourgeois man marries the daughter of a wealthy

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lawyer—an extremely complacent message aimed at the middle class and a highly judgmental, even condescending, one toward the lower class that is depicted as hopelessly trapped in a cycle of social reproduction [6]. This analysis aligns with Kevin Kelly Gaines's remark about W. E. B. Du Bois's celebrated study of the Philadelphia Black community, which was unique in the 1890s:

> "Ambivalence, marked by the tension between racialized and social, environmentalist perspectives, describes Du Bois's sociological tour de force, *The Philadelphia Negro*. Although Du Bois's pathbreaking study documented the discrimination faced by blacks in Philadelphia, it also flirted with dominant racial visions of urban pathology that viewed the presence of poor blacks in the city, and particularly that of single black women, as a moral peril." (1996: xix)

12 Like many race films of that period, *The Scar of Shame* avoids overtly racist content but instead indulges in class discrimination, effectively branding the working-class woman with a scarlet letter. She can only redeem herself by sacrificing for 'the good sort', illustrating how racial solidarity ultimately fails to function as a social equalizer. Just four years later, Warner Bros. produced *Baby Face*, a tale of immorality centered on a white working-class woman and her Black maid, once again relegating the Black character to the margins – even in narratives of moral transgression.

3. Class and race-consciousness in pre-Code New Deal film, *Baby Face*

13 *Baby Face* is the first notable example of a film set in Pennsylvania in which issues of gender, class, and race intersect—the first fifteen minutes take place in the mining town of Erie. It focuses on a white working-class woman's economic and social struggle while more subtly engaging with issues of race through a secondary character [7]. The film epitomizes the Depression-era survival narrative, where seemingly porous class barriers—overcome by sex—ultimately close when morality prevails. This pre-Code film made the headlines for its provocative story. It follows Lily Powers (Barbara Stanwyck), the

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daughter of a pub-owner, who uses her sexuality to ascend the social and economic ladder in New York, eventually fleeing to Paris after one of her heartbroken lovers commits suicide. The film opens by introducing Erie through the iconic image of smoking chimneys from a steel mill, dominating a gray landscape as Lily gazes out the window of her father's seedy bar. Herds of miners, loud and covered in grime, flock into the bar after work, attempting to grope and kiss her. This harsh environment has visibly shaped her into a hot-tempered, strong-headed woman who knows how to protect herself and her father's Black employee, Chico (Theresa Harris). The only glimpse of hope in this industrial inferno comes from the visit of a kind old man, who offers her advice and books. The beginning of the film is characteristic of the social realist trend of the period, reflecting the hardships of the Great Depression. Lily and Chico are the only women struggling to survive in this toxic, male-dominated environment. When Baby Face refuses a pass from a mobster, the rejected man returns and kills her father—who had been prostituting her since she was thirteen. She then seizes the opportunity to escape from Erie to New York with Chico. Considering how Lily stood up for her friend against her father and then agreed to sleep with the train conductor so they could both travel illegally, one might expect Chico to experience some social elevation in New York—a liberal city of opportunities. Unusual for its time, although 'racy' films were more common during the pre-Code era, the film explicitly depicts Lily's willingness to sleep with the man without hesitation. In doing so, it subverts the conventional notion of sacrifice (Black for white) and brings visibility to two marginalized characters. At this point in the film, the white prostitute and the Black servant stand on an equal social footing. Yet, upon their arrival in New York, where the towering skyscrapers replace the steel mills as symbols of capitalist hierarchy and oppression, Chico is completely sidelined. Unlike Lily, who successfully moves up the social ladder, Chico remains in a subordinate position as her maid, not as her friend, reflecting the rigid racial hierarchies of the time. She is doubly marginalized—both by her race and her class. Despite her close relationship with Lily, she remains confined to service work, while Lily is able to exploit her whiteness and femininity to navigate the social order. The film implicitly suggests that race is a key determinant of social mobility: although both women come from the same working-class background, Lily can 'pass' into the upper

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class, while Chico is permanently excluded. Capitalism—including the film industry—and US society as a whole were structured along racial lines, reflecting Du Bois's 'color line' (1903), an invisible barrier that working-class solidarity alone could not overcome. Theresa Harris was a revered actress, but she could never aspire to the level of empowerment that Barbara Stanwyck achieved both on and off screen. As Harris once stated,

> I never had the chance to rise above the role of maid in Hollywood movies. My color was against me anyway you looked at it. The fact that I was not 'hot' stamped me either as uppity or relegated me to the eternal role of stooge or servant. [...] My ambition is to be an actress. Hollywood had no parts for me. (Jackson 1937: 22)

14 As a pre-Code film, *Baby Face* presents an immoral tale of social survival during the Depression era, openly and repeatedly alluding to transactional sex as a means of upward mobility in high society. However, it does not challenge the Code on racial issues. In the end, Chico is harshly rebuked by Lily, who abandons her alone on a ship to Paris, suddenly deciding to disembark to reunite with her lover who has attempted suicide. The price for avoiding complete censorship was a moral resolution in which her lover survives, and she agrees to relinquish her ill-acquired fortune to bail him out—ultimately restoring social and racial order.

15 While working-class movies set in Pennsylvania continued to be produced in the 1930s and 1940s—such as *Black Fury* (Michael Curtiz, 1935), *Pittsburgh* (Lewis Seiler, 1942), and *The Valley of Decision* (Tay Garnett, 1945)—they remained overwhelmingly white. *Black Fury*, which included only one Black extra, was, in fact, quite realistic considering that only 3 % of miners in Pennsylvania were Black in the 1930s (Dixon 2023). However, as noted in the introduction, the working class is a broad category, and its historical and cultural invisibilization—particularly that of Black workers, in Pennsylvania and other Northern industrial states—was undeniable during the Hollywood classical era. Following the collapse of the studio system and the impact of the civil rights movement, both cultural and social diversity became more visible on screens.

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Conclusion

16 This article has sought to foreground the role of early cinema in shaping and reinforcing the racialized boundaries of class representation in the United States by focusing on Pennsylvania—a state that was simultaneously an industrial powerhouse, a site of intense racial tensions, and an early hub of film production. From the racially coded silent comedies produced by Siegmund Lubin to the socially ambitious yet classist narratives of *The Scar of Shame* and *Baby Face*, Pennsylvania's cinematic history reveals how deeply race and class were intertwined in visual culture during the silent and pre-Code eras. These films, whether through erasure, caricature, or limited visibility, collectively contributed to a dominant vision of the American working class as white—a legacy later reinforced by Hollywood's centralization.

17 Building on scholarship by David Roediger, Richard Dyer and Norman Denzin, which has demonstrated how whiteness operated as a source of division within the working class, film historians such as Steven Ross and Gerald Butters Jr. have further shown how cinema played a direct role in the invisibilization of Black workers. In France, Anne Crémieux has emphasized the resilience of Black cinema despite Hollywood's hegemonic whiteness. In the US, scholars including Kevin Kelly Gaines, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, and Thomas Cripps have celebrated the artistic and political significance of Black filmmaking, while also recognizing that in the silent era, racist stereotypes were the norm and high-quality race films were the exception.

18 While Black characters were largely absent from or stereotyped in mainstream working-class narratives due to systemic racism, the selected productions examined in this article (silent shorts, a race film, and a pre-Code film) reveal that, when Black characters did appear, their stories did not promote working-class solidarity. Nor did they construct a Black version of the 'striver' figure often offered to immigrant workers, who, despite facing discrimination, were encouraged to assimilate and granted narrative space in films like *Black Fury*.

19 By adopting a regional lens, this article highlights the value of decentering film studies from Hollywood's dominant geographical and ideological perspectives. Pennsylvania's early film history is not mar-

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ginal but crucial for understanding how regional cinematic cultures interacted with broader dynamics of labor, race, and representation. Future research should explore how Black workers were depicted in films set and produced in other industrialized Northern states.

20 While early cinematic depictions failed to meaningfully represent Black laborers, later works like *Fences* (Denzel Washington, 2016)—set in 1950s Pittsburgh—finally centered on Black working-class experience, offering a belated yet necessary corrective. Similarly, television series like *American Rust* (Showtime, 2021-2024) or *Mare of Easttown* (HBO, 2021) continue to engage with class and post-industrial decline in Pennsylvania, though they often maintain the trope of the white Rust Belt worker, once again sidelining Black labor.

21 Ultimately, the case of Pennsylvania invites a broader reconsideration of how we study labor, race, and media. A regional approach to cinema history makes visible the mechanisms through which certain identities were legitimized while others were erased. By revisiting the roots of these exclusions, we also open the door to recovering and re-inscribing the voices, bodies, and stories that early cinema worked to suppress.

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1 In this article, 'Black' is capitalized, and not 'white' or 'brown,' in order to refer to a specific group in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms. "For many people, *Black* reflects a shared sense of identity and community. White carries a different set of meanings; capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists." (Laws 2020).

2 Films like *Nothing But a Man* (Michael Roemer, 1964), shot in Chicago though set in Alabama, and *Blue Collar* (Paul Schrader, 1978), set in Detroit's auto industry, stand out for centering the Black working class. These films do not merely include Black workers as extras or secondary characters, as is often the case; rather, they place their experiences at the heart of the nar-

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rative. To my knowledge, the first film to focus explicitly on the Black working class in Pennsylvania is *Fences*, Denzel Washington's 2016 adaptation of August Wilson's 1985 play.

3 Miriam Hansen pointed out how the tramp figure—a lower-class character who did not necessarily represent the working class *per se*—became a staple of silent shorts at the turn of the 20th century, as seen in films like *The Tramp's Dream* (Siegmund Lubin, 1899) and *Weary Willie in the Park* (Thomas A. Edison, 1901). She argues that "while sharing in the sadistic pleasures occasioned by the social other as either exponent or victim, viewers could put a safe distance between themselves and a lower-class background from which many of them were at best one or two generations removed" (1991: 58). Hansen also notes that these films were screened in vaudeville programs (prior to the rise of the nickelodeon in 1905) and were therefore aimed at a middle-class audience: "The comic display of class, ethnic, and racial stereotypes might have fulfilled a two-fold function for such audiences. It offered a nostalgic potpourri of older folk traditions, as derivative and eclectic as anything in vaudeville" (59). This helps explain how race and class stereotypes became normalized in pre-Hollywood silent cinema.

4 Using the Southern segregationist rhetoric, which played a great part in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, the film imagines the alliance of Northern and Southern whites against African Americans who are depicted as predators.

5 The timing given corresponds to the first occurrence of each word in the version of the film that is available on YouTube via: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8qwvgn2WZI. Consulted 25 August, 2025.

6 The film's quality was praised by leading scholars like Donald Bogle: "Melodramatic but effective, *The Scar of Shame* was an eloquent statement on the color caste system and the divisions that exist among black Americans. (The girl's father is very dark; so, too, is the racketeer. Almost all the other characters are fair-skinned. The girl is clearly a victim of her 'dark' biological background.) This movie was possibly the finest product of the entire independent movement." (Bogle 2001 [1973]: 107) But its message raises class-related questions: "*The Scar of Shame* argues that the African-American community is divided by class but it offers no solutions for bringing the race together. In reality, the upper class (Mother Hillyard) and the lower elements (Eddie) both attempt to fragment the community even further with their selfish actions and behaviors." (Butters 2002: 214); it also

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raises race-related ones: “Unfortunately, the picture stumbles when it asks the Negro to rise above the life of the streets because it draws a veil over the external forces that made the slum what it is. Thus the hero, Alvin Hilliard [sic], can end his suffering only by opting for white culture and rejecting black. Hilliard’s decision, because he is a musician, is cast in musical terms: in order to escape the ghetto he must become a teacher of stuffy ‘white’ music. His landlady smugly predicts he will be ‘the leading composer of our race.’” (Cripps 1993 [1977]: 196) These are critical aspects of the film that shouldn’t be overlooked as they certainly highlight the price of assimilation (that is internal division based on class and skin color).

7 This shift from films produced in Pennsylvania to a studio-made film set in Pennsylvania is due to the monopoly imposed by Hollywood from the 1930s onward.

English

This article explores the historical invisibility of the Black working class in early American cinema, focusing on Pennsylvania between the 1890s and 1930s. Drawing on African American studies, film studies and labor studies, it examines how films from this period reinforced racialized conceptions of the working class by excluding or distorting the image of Black laborers. From Siegmund Lubin’s racially coded comedies to the race film *The Scar of Shame* (1929) and the pre-Code classic *Baby Face* (1933), the study traces how cinema shaped public perceptions of race and class. It highlights the persistent absence of Black working-class protagonists, especially in narratives rooted in Northern industrial regions, and argues for a regional approach to film history that re-centers marginalized voices. Ultimately, the article reveals how early film culture contributed to a dominant vision of the working class as white—an exclusion still echoed in contemporary representations.

Français

Cet article étudie l’invisibilité historique de la classe ouvrière noire dans le cinéma américain des débuts, en se concentrant sur la Pennsylvanie entre les années 1890 et 1930. S’appuyant sur une sélection de travaux en études africaines américaines, cinématographiques et sur la classe ouvrière, il analyse comment les films de cette époque ont contribué à racialiser la représentation de la classe ouvrière en excluant ou en déformant l’image des travailleurs noirs. De Siegmund Lubin et ses comédies stéréotypées à *The Scar of Shame* (1929), film à casting afro-américain, jusqu’au pré-Code *Baby Face* (1933), l’étude retrace la manière dont le cinéma a façonné les imaginaires sociaux autour de la ‘race’ et de la classe. L’article invoque une approche régionale de l’histoire du cinéma qui valorise les voix marginalisées et montre

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que cette exclusion des ouvriers noirs a contribué à normaliser l'image d'une classe ouvrière blanche – une représentation encore dominante aujourd'hui.

Mots-clés

Africains Américains, cinéma, invisibilisation, Lubin (Siegmund), Pennsylvanie, classe ouvrière

Keywords

African Americans, cinema, invisibilization, Lubin (Siegmund), Pennsylvania, working class

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Julie Assouly

Maître de conférences HDR, Textes et Cultures (UR4028), Université d'Artois, 9 rue du Temple, 62000 Arras

julie.assouly@univ-artois.fr
julie.assouly@univ-artois.fr
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/164272658

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