Gregory Waller: As Brian [Graney] indicated I’m Greg Waller and this is my favorite place on campus this room right here. I get to teach in here. It’s a real privilege. So I’m delighted to be able to moderate this panel and principally going to turn it over for all purposes to the three participants. I’ll ask Cara Caddoo to be the first speaker. She’s in the Department of American Studies here at IU Bloomington and has a really phenomenal research project on early cinema that goes way beyond exhibition project that completely surprised me in the full extent of the material she’s discovered. I thought I had some of that stuff down. So to be this surprised was great and I congratulate her on it and I’m really looking forward to seeing the further iterations of it and hearing what she’s got to say today. Then we’ll move to Matt Bernstein who is the Department of Film and Media Studies at Emory University. There’s more information about everybody in the handouts that you got. Dana White, who is not at the Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts but now is the Senior Faculty Curator for Manuscript Archive in the Rare Book Library at Emory, working specifically on African American Sports history.

So let me ask Cara [Caddoo] to start. Each person will have, I don’t know, around ten minutes or so and then we’ll open it to questions.

Cara Caddoo: Thank you. It’s such an honor to be here. Thank you, Greg [Waller] and Dana [White] and Matt [Bernstein] and Brian [Graney] and Michael [T. Martin] and everyone else. So I just want to take this opportunity to really maybe talk through some of the issues and some of the kind of things I’ve discovered in my own research in terms of this question of platforms for access. I kind of want to focus on I guess first of all the question of archives and then secondly the question of how do we use the digital to preserve and to digest and then to kind of exhibit the ideas or the knowledge that we have come upon.

Before I do this I want to kind of preface with some of the ... I guess kind of the framing issues that I’ve encountered in my own research. A lot of that has to do with the social role of cinema in turn of the century black life. I focus on a very period from like 1896 to the 1920’s but I would say most of my stuff is from the 1890’s to the 1910’s. So at this very formative moment in my research I’ve kind of, I had a different kind of project when I first started to do my research and that was how did cinema affect black people. As I was going through the archive I realized that I should be asking a very different question and that was how did black Americans make modern American cinema because I think that is a really fundamental and important question that the kind of the spaces and the places of early black cinema help us to understand.

So the first thing in terms of the framing issuing is the nontheatrical, which I think a lot of us have been thinking about lately. So my research kind of focuses on the ways that churches and black lodges and schools were really important spaces in the formation of early black cinema practices. Even there there’s a tension with this term nontheatrical because how some of these private spaces like the black lodge would rent out storefront spaces. If you’ve been in the square you’ve seen a lot of lodge buildings around there. They would rent out storefront spaces in these privately owned buildings and organizations to these commercial theaters.
So this question of the nontheatrical led me to think about how do we think about the place. How do we think about the place of cinema and thinking through, for example, Doreen Massey, the geographer, description of place says always constructed out of articulations of social relations made within the context of extra local political and economic forces. So if we think about the place of cinemas being only these kind of commercial theaters in a certain very kind of simplistic way that place is in many ways it’s a white space. If we look beyond that to these nontheatrical and these minimal spaces we can kind of see a much more kind of expansive and reconfiguration of our idea of the place of cinema.

So with that in mind, I just want to some of the archival issues that I’ve encountered. I did a lot of my research in the basement of the Schomburg. I lived there for a couple of years. I started my research at a time when there were some kind of digitized black newspapers but there were a lot that weren’t or that I didn’t have access to. So I did analog research. I read each page on the microfilm and turned it and went line by line by line. That was like probably the first few years of doing research on this topic. Then when some the newspapers that I was looking at become digitized I started to kind of explore those archives.

Some of the issues that I’ve encountered have a lot to do with the ... I think questions that have been asked before about the search functions of digital newspapers. I think one thing that’s really important that I’ve kind of encountered is the fact that a lot of these early black newspapers had less resources, right, so less resources in terms of like extra staff to copy edit things, to distribute their papers. So a lot of the search functions are designed off of this idea that there is like not misspellings because another editor is, you have a staff of 20 people who are looking and spell checking everything. Also, the fact that a lot of language in the early black press is coded language because they can’t be explicit about certain things. So it really takes, I think, a different kind of approach to doing searches on digitized materials.

That said, I do think that there is an amazing amount of opportunity now that I’m here and much further away from the Schomburg, which has been my main archive. It’s great to have those full pages and to actually read them and skim through them. But in terms of the search function I think a lot of the articles and stuff that I’ve tried to even to back and find by typing in a few of the words they’re just, it doesn’t come up in those same papers.

Then finally what I want to think about is the way that we kind of distribute or digest the information that we come up with. That is, I just wanted to show you a couple of slides here. They’re still in development. I started out thinking about the question of these films I’m looking at which don’t exist anymore not only in terms of the content of the film but where are they being shown and what does that tell us about this social and geographic relationships, the transmission of information. At this really important moment when black Americans are moving from rural spaces to urban spaces along these migratory pathways how are the social connections of black life being created.
To kind of think about this question to digital I’ve been using GIS software to digest some of this information and to understand how these processes play out. I started out with like markers like magic markers and old railroad maps. The thing about old railroad maps is that they’re often national maps and I’ve discovered that a lot of these networks, these circuits of exhibition, these social relationships transcend national borders. So in many ways we see Kansas, Texas, Mexico much more closely integrated with one another in these early black cinema practices than for example Wichita and New York City.

So this is just, I think these are some of the spaces. This is still adding in cities. You can see all sorts of different codes that I have to myself but places where the traveling, these are also I forgot to mention earlier in these churches and these lodges the people that are showing these films are itinerant, black itinerant film exhibitors. So when I started to map out the beginning, the first reports, the next ones, I saw the development from places that I didn’t expect. So in the west in particular like in Kansas and Missouri and then kind of moving along what I soon discovered when I threw the railroad map on there, the railroads, the very same systems of transportation that are being used by black migrants to resettle at the turn of the century.

So this is one map. I think I have another. The red lines are the railroads. It’s not complete. The railroads are not exactly precise but you can kind of see how they’re falling along those pathways. These are sites of black theaters, colored theaters from around the 1904 or ’05 to around 1920’s. You can also see located in urban spaces along the railroads cities where there’s a lot of black settlement have more theaters. You can see down there at the very bottom these networks that are; oh this map was, sorry. This little blue map right here, sorry about this. This is actually supposed to be part of the last map. I threw it on the wrong part. That’s the church exhibitions and you can see that there are church and lodge exhibitions and you can see they’re going down into Cuba right there.

Then I just have one more which is the route of one exhibitor named C. E. Hawk and that is actually his pathway. So he’s moving from Savannah where he’s based. He’s moving down the railroad through Florida and then he goes to Key West and makes a loop through Cuba and then he goes back up. So seeing how and at the same time he’s also an agent for the Freeman, the newspaper the Freeman. So he’s selling newspapers, reporting, getting news, sending news back and exhibiting these films. So, yes, that’s what I’ve come up with.