

## Contact of Models

### An abstract: The Embodied Archive.

**Ellen Nolan**

**PhD candidate, University of Westminster, London**

For my presentation I will discuss my research approach, findings and practice images. My practice-based PhD draws directly from the physical archive of my British great-aunt, Nita Harvey, who was selected by Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille in a worldwide Paramount beauty contest, shipped over and signed to Hollywood's Paramount Studios for a three-film contract in 1933. As Harvey's descendant, I inherited her physical archive in 2007, after it had been stored in my aunt's garage since 1987, upon Harvey's death.

Drawing directly from the Harvey archive (London, 1928-38), using feminist film and photography theory together with wider theories including memory, oral history, radical empathy, reparative aesthetics, archival studies and specifically studies of early Hollywood cinema to underpin my approach, I am excavating Harvey's hidden history through the lens of my childhood encounters with Harvey and my memory of our conversations (1977-1987). Through my scholarly encounter with the archive, I will argue the case for embedding Harvey's oral history posthumously, as an unpublished narrative to the body of her existing archive, bringing my familial encounters with Harvey into my research. And positioning Harvey's perspective to align with corroborating archival documents in such a way as to establish new significant findings of marginalised women's history and experience in 1930's Hollywood to create a counter-hegemonic discourse that punctures 1930's Hollywood mythology.

Archival documents include: Multiple Paramount publicity photographs and negatives, Hollywood casting reel, newspaper clippings, film set photographs, Harvey's published magazine diary on Hollywood, notebooks, hundreds of family photographs and negatives of Harvey, letters, telegrams, contracts, cheque-books, annotated scripts, hotel bills, menus, equity membership, passport, US matchbooks, button collection, silk palazzo pants and a satin pillowcase filled with arm-length leather fringed gloves.

My first encounter with the archive happened as a child, through regular familial visits to my great aunt's home in Richmond, Surrey, (1979-1987). Sitting on Harvey's sofa, I watched, captivated as she produced large black and white photographs of herself pictured in 1930's Paramount publicity stills. Harvey always accompanied these images with a sentence that became her familial oral history, "*I didn't make it in Hollywood because I refused to go on the casting couch.*" And Harvey's oral history became embedded as part of my viewing of the photographs. Harvey attached a narrative to her Hollywood photographs, 'performing' the photographs to me as a child, and with her shadowy Hollywood take, shifted my viewing and reading of the glamorous images she held in front of me to a darker place, encoded with her oral history. Viewing Harvey's archive as a repository, ephemera is cross referenced and

aligned in my archival practice and research, established through Harvey's oral prism. Harvey's oration is key to understanding her marginalised history. And with perspective familial accuracy, Harvey's embedded experience of 1930s Hollywood, what this informs us in the field of cultural film history, and how this can be aligned and compared to what has changed in similar context now.

I am actioning my encounters with Harvey and her oral history by embodying the archive and Harvey's experience, through pattern cutting and re-presenting two key outfits from the archive, The Hollywood casting bikini and the two-piece wool suit (fig. 3 & 8). Wearing Harvey's archival outfits and performing in them using Harvey's archival gestures, I am putting myself in Harvey's shoes, and my research findings, aligned with radical empathy, offer new traces of Harvey and her experience, re-presented through my photographs.

My approach is performative and is mediated through my body as a genealogical dialogue with Harvey and her archive, to establish a dynamic between embodied subject and archival object. Using photography and film to capture my performances based on key archival images, and positioning Harvey's oral history as an overarching narrative frame to return to archival U.S sites that Harvey visited in 1933. When photographing the U.S sites (Paramount Studios/ The Roosevelt Hotel, Los Angeles Grand Union Station/ The Hollywood Sign), I am performing the archive through contact with her outfits, embodying Harvey's experience and inhabiting the archive through my empathic experience of Harvey's narrative. The pattern-cut casting bikini is deconstructed to reveal a one size fits all nappy (Fig. 3), exposing both the infantilisation of this outfit, and the humiliation I experienced when needing assistance to place the bikini material through my legs, as one would for a baby. Wearing the outfit, I felt exposed by the amount of flesh it revealed and the lack of support the bikini gave my breasts and bottom. The two-piece wool suit and heels restricted my movement in the hot L.A temperature and positioned my walking stride into a tight, short step, and typical of the longer, tighter skirts of the 1930's, encouraged a deep swing to my hips and I found myself walking with an unfamiliar 'feminine' wiggle (Fig. 9).

Through my ongoing encounter through an embodied archive, I re-member and re-vision traces of the past using research and photography to disturb history, and action questions about objectification, feminine lived experience, cultural shifts and change, and in doing so challenge current archival structures to offer new ways of approaching archive as object.

Key words: Encounter/ Embody/ Re-present/ Traces/ Object.

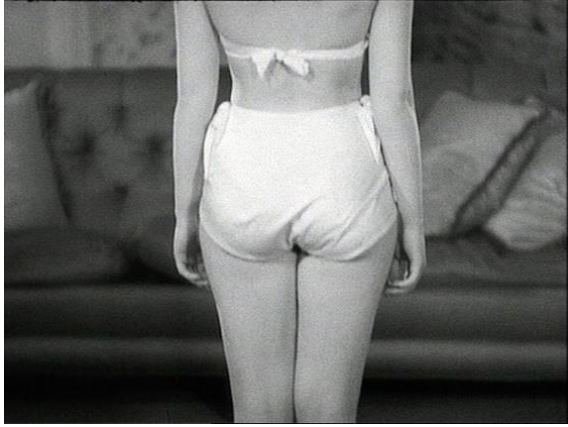


Fig. 1 Hollywood casting film still, c.1933. ©Nita Harvey Archive



Figure 2. Hollywood casting film stills from 35mm Nitrate Reel, c.1933. ©Nita Harvey Archive

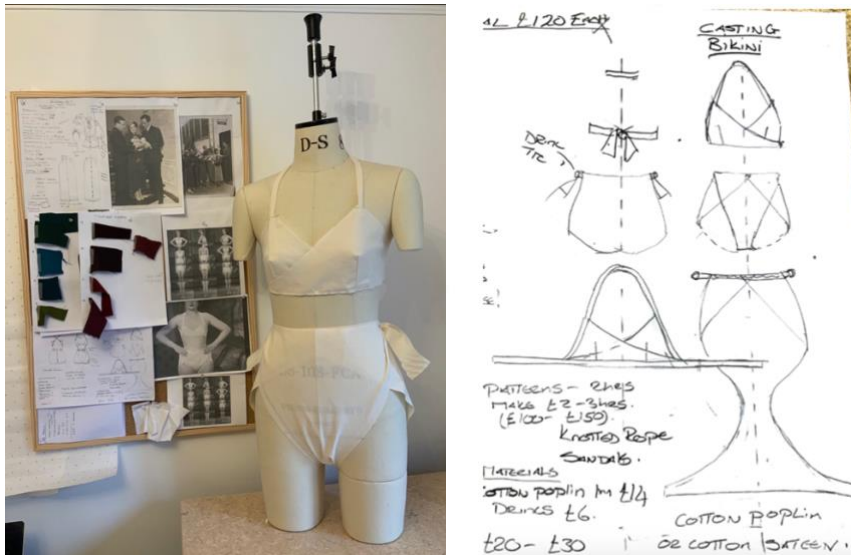


Figure 3. Commissioned Atelier Hollywood casting bikini toile, with Nita Harvey archival photographs & atelier sketched pattern. (2021)



Figure 4. Performance Still (I), Hollywood Sign, Hollywood, USA. (2021) ©Ellen Nolan



Figure 5. Performance Still (II), Hollywood Sign, Hollywood, USA. (Bolex 16mm still) (2021)©Ellen Nolan



Figure 6, 7. Paramount publicity photographs, c.1933. (Harvey middle & second left) ©Nita Harvey Archive.



Figure 8. Atelier two-piece suit toile with Nita Harvey archival photographs, & atelier sketched pattern. (2021)



Figure 9. Performance Still (IV), Paramount Gates, Hollywood, USA. (16mm Bolex still) (2021) ©Ellen Nolan





Figure 10. Performance Still (V), Paramount Gates, Hollywood, USA. (2021) ©Ellen Nolan



Figure 11. Performance Still (VI), Paramount Lot, Hollywood. (2021) ©Ellen Nolan