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AFROAM: A VIRTUAL FILM PRODUCTION GROUP

A Dissertation

Presented to the  
Graduate School of Leadership & Change Program  
Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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January 2022

AFROAM: A VIRTUAL FILM PRODUCTION GROUP

This dissertation, by Bill Taylor Jr, has  
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Graduate School of Leadership and Change  
Antioch University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

### AFROAM: A VIRTUAL FILM PRODUCTION GROUP

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Because of the gatekeeping practices of the Hollywood film industry, and the high cost of both filmmaking and distribution in general, Afro-American filmmakers have struggled to produce films with “global reach.” This study visits the possibility of Afro-American filmmakers using alternative technologies and infrastructures to produce high-quality films, thereby bypassing the high cost and exclusionary practices of Hollywood studios. Using new 21st-century digital technology, this study involved the creation of a small geographically dispersed virtual film production team. The study’s foundational framework was a constructivist qualitative research paradigm, using Action Research, and supported by 24 months of triangulated data from field notes and a Likert-type end-of-study survey, both of which were then addressed in an end-of-research online group discussion using the Zoom platform. The research question was, What are the most effective leadership and team-building practices/processes for creating a virtual geographically dispersed Afro-American film production team, with the intent of producing digital films, using new digital technology, social media, and the default global infrastructure of the Internet? The major conclusion of the study was that it is possible for a small virtual team to produce broadcast quality digital film using only *consumer-level* computers and cameras, audio and lighting equipment, and readily available software. This dissertation is available in open

access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu/>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* action research, Afro-American/Black filmmaking, virtual teams, Hollywood, digital technology, racism, Foster Photoplay, leadership

## Acknowledgements

This research is dedicated first to my God Jehovah and His Son Yeshua Hamashiach. It is also dedicated to my very tough, resilient, and no-nonsense African ancestors, whom I revere and love but do not worship nor pray to. This royal group of Africans includes my mother and father, grandparents and great grandparents, including both aunts and uncles, all of whom created a nurturing and safe *village* for me to grow up and mature in.

It is also dedicated to my Antioch University/College elders, none of whom I ever met, but whose work was a major influence on my PhD studies in general, and this specific research. On the academy side, Clifford Geertz, with his “thick description”, along with Douglas M. McGregor and his “X and Y” theories. On the entertainment industry side, actor Cliff Robertson, director/actor Leonard Nimoy (Mister Spock), and my favorite social activist and hero, writer/producer Rod Serling.

Of course, as an Afro-American producer of programmatic content, I must acknowledge the influence of my elder filmmakers on whose shoulders I stand, such as William D. Foster of Foster Photo Play, Oscar Micheaux of Micheaux Film and Books, along with the Johnson brothers of Lincoln Motion Pictures. Included in this vast cloud of heroes are filmmakers Spencer Williams, Ossie Davis, Sidney Poitier, and, of course, the Godfather of the newer generation of filmmakers, the late photographer and film director Gordon Parks. Not to be forgotten are brave white men of integrity such as Richard E. Norman of Norman Studios and Alfred N. Sack of Sack Entertainment who hired and supported early Black filmmakers and production crews.

If I accomplish just one quarter of what these giants of scholarship and entertainment accomplished during their lifetimes, and am able to use those personal accomplishments to

improve the quality of life of at least *one human being* on this earth, then I will have considered my life a success.



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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

### **AfroAM: A Virtual Film Production Group**

This study is a result of my personal interest in new digital technology and its potential use as a tool of empowerment for marginalized populations in society. The Internet, digital technology, and social media are the foundation of the 21st-century information revolution, a revolution with close similarities to the Industrial Revolution in Europe, Japan, and the United States from 1750 to 1850. I am persuaded that new digital technology, the Internet, and social media can be used as tools to benefit society. Unfortunately, these digital technologies can be used in ways that can also harm people and have negative impacts on society.

There are stories in the media concerning middle and high school-aged students killing themselves after being bullied by their peers through text messages, emails, or other social media. On more than one occasion, a vindictive ex-boyfriend has posted naked pictures of his former girlfriend online to embarrass her. In spite of these sad and horrific examples of the misuse of technology, the potential exists for the Internet, digital technology, and social media to be used in a positive way to communicate, inform, and move media at the micro, mezzo, and global macro levels.

New technology could be used to help middle school teenagers with obesity or literacy problems. It might be used to aid the elderly in educating themselves about healthcare or to provide them with information concerning social and medical benefits available to them. As demonstrated during the Arab Spring of December 2010, technology has the potential to empower social or political activists by allowing them to organize in ways that would have been impossible just 20 years ago. With this vision in mind, I narrowed my interest in the potential of new digital technology to my own area of expertise, which is radio, television, and film.

The study is specifically focused on the use of virtual organizations as a platform for Afro-American film production, providing an alternative to the traditional Hollywood film infrastructure. Historically, Afro-Americans have been more or less excluded from any meaningful participation in the American film industry. Although things have somewhat improved since the earlier days of Hollywood in the 1920s, there are still only marginal opportunities for Black directors and producers, and many of the traditional racist Hollywood film narratives still exist but are often portrayed in more subtle and polished modern-day story forms.

The University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative 2020 executed a longitudinal survey of some 1,300 films involving 1,447 Hollywood directors from 2007 to 2019. Of the 1,447 directors associated with those 1,300 films, only 88 directors were Black (6.1%). Of those 88 Black directors total, only eight were women, including Gina Prince-Bythewood, Kasi Lemmons, Melina Matsoukas, Sanaa Hamri, Stella Meghie, Tina Gordon, and Ava Duvernay (Smith, 2020).

Influenced by these findings and with an interest in alternative film production systems, this research is informed by a perceived research gap. Based on a basic literature review, there seems to be little or no research concerning the strategies, processes, or best practices regarding leadership and team-building in virtual organizations that produce mass media products, and specifically, none involving Afro-American filmmakers. It is this gap that informs the dissertation.

### **Technology and Virtual Organizations**

The first all-transistor commercial radio, released in October 1954, used four transistors. Each transistor was about the size of the tip of one's baby finger. Eventually, the electronics

industry transitioned from using separate transistors to the use of integrated circuits, which permitted engineers to place thousands of transistors on a piece of silicon smaller than the tip of one's baby finger, a fact that drove rapid advances in the operational speed and the miniaturization of computers.

This meant that grandparents who as teenagers had enjoyed the four-component transistor radios of the 1960s, such as the Regency TR-1, in turn bought Walkman hand-held radio/cassette players for their kids in the 1980s that used thousands of transistors, and later purchased iPods for their grandkids in the 2000s, powered by innovative Apple A8 processors containing two billion transistors located on just one microchip.

To put this into historical perspective, the ever-popular Gameboy, the hand-held game used by many millennials during their childhood, contains more computing power today than many of the earlier supercomputers used by the United States for missile defense during the Cold War and more power than the onboard computer of the Apollo space capsule used for the first moon landing mission in July 1969.

It is this 50-year history of rapid advancements in transistor, microchip, and integrative circuitry, combined with innovative computer design and miniaturization, that provides the technological foundation for today's 21st-century virtually distributed work groups. My interest is in Afro-American virtual groups who can produce broadcast quality digital films and other mass communication programmatic content without the use of traditional, historically expensive film studios and equipment.

### **Study Purpose**

This study is about empowerment. It is about the empowerment of Black filmmakers and the community they might serve through the use of 21st-century digital technology. Contrary to

popular myth, the printing press was not originally created by Johannes Gutenberg in Europe. The Chinese invented the original block press, and later a more advanced version of a movable type press. Later the Koreans, and then the Mongolians, both of whom had been exposed to earlier Chinese technology, developed more advanced movable type presses, the Korean version being in use some 200 years before Gutenberg was born. Later in Europe during the 1440s, Gutenberg's creation of a faster and more efficient screw-type printing press created a shift in power between the elite upper class of Europe and the common citizen. This shift was initiated through the "democratization of knowledge" made possible by the increased production and availability of books, newspapers, and pamphlets to the general European population (Hargrave, 2013).

Twenty-first-century digital technology could potentially create this same shift in power for Black filmmakers by allowing them to reach more people, both general audiences and also specific target demographics throughout the African Diaspora.

### **Study Problem: Historical Racial Context**

The major problem addressed by this study is the Afro-American filmmaker's lack of access to Hollywood. There has always been a love/hate relationship between the Hollywood film industry and people of African descent. Historians, researchers, and other scholars have documented the century-long cultural battle between Hollywood and Afro-American filmmakers (Bogle, 2001; Cripps, 1993; Guerrero, 1993).

Some scholars credit William D. Foster, owner of the Foster Photoplay Company (founded 1910) for being the first person of African descent to make films and to own a film production company. As possibly the first film director of African descent, he produced *The Pullman Porter* (1910) and later the *Railroad Porter* (1912). These films are historically



significant because they are most likely the first Black films ever made in the United States and maybe the world. They are also most likely the first movies to be produced by a Black film director with an all-Black cast.

It was the pioneering Foster who laid the foundation for the Johnson brothers and their Lincoln Motion Picture Company (founded 1917), and Oscar Micheaux and his Micheaux Film and Book Company (founded 1918). Blocked by Whites from working in the American film industry, Micheaux, the Johnson brothers, and other Black pioneering filmmakers started small boutique film companies producing films with a counter-narrative to the racist and Eurocentric cinema produced by White directors and producers of the time. Some of these racist producers included American inventor Thomas Edison with his 1905 film *The Pickaninnies*, Essanay Studios' *The Dancing Nig* (1907), D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1917), and the more infamous *Gone with the Wind* (1940) directed by Victor Fleming, who had just finished directing *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

The tradition of Black filmmaking covers more than 112 years, beginning with Foster and the Johnson Brothers during the 1900s and continuing with Oscar Micheaux and others during the 1920s and 1930s. During the 1940s it was Black directors like Spencer Williams and George Randol who continued the tradition, working both with and for Sacks Entertainment in Dallas, Texas. During the 1960s and 1970s writer/director Gordon Parks laid the foundation for directors such as Topper Carew, Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis, Stan Lathan, and Charles Schultz. In the 1980s a very young independent filmmaker by the name of Spike Lee emerged, leading the way for many present-day directors such as the late John Singleton, Ryan Cooglar, Gina Prince-Blythewood, Steve McQueen, and Antoine Fuqua.

This study intends to build on the accomplishments of past and present filmmakers by utilizing the new advances and advantages of 21st-century digital technology. The research goal is to discover a level of most effective practices in leadership and team-building while using digital equipment and other tools to provide an independent virtual global infrastructure for Afro-American film production.

### **Research Question**

The study was defined with the following research question: What are the most effective leadership and team-building practices/processes for creating a virtual geographically dispersed Afro-American film production team, with the intent of producing digital films, using new digital technology, social media, and the default global infrastructure of the Internet?

### **Research Approach**

#### **Methodology and Method**

Unlike positivistic causal research, which measures or counts data to study the relationship between variables, this study focused on the qualitative *processes* and *perceptions* within the virtual film production group itself. This exploratory research frame informs a more inductive approach to the problem. With that in mind, a constructivist methodological strategy was chosen as the strategic epistemological framework with all of its philosophical underpinnings, using an interpretative research paradigm.

#### **Research Design**

The design used for this study was *action research*, a research approach that informs practical real-world change and problem-solving in a specific situation and community. The study involved a geographically dispersed three-member film production team. The production team used consumer grade computers, high quality computer tablets, single lens digital film

cameras, and off-the-shelf audio production hardware. The enabling software technology for the study was consumer grade video-editing and audio-mixing software. The technology was used to produce a short 23-minute film using a virtual film production team operating nationally as a geographically dispersed work group.

To operate as a geographically distributed work group, the team took advantage of the global connectivity and storage capabilities of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The research focus was not so much on the digital film itself but on the leadership/team-building and processes/perceptions that occurred within the group during the making of the film. The film really only served as a *proof-of-concept* item, exhibiting the success of the group's ability to work virtually to produce mass media content.

The study involved two separate protocols. The primary data collection method was researcher field notes taken during the entire study. That protocol was also used to modify and adjust team operations based on feedback. The second research method was an end-of-study individual survey, combined with a group discussion session. The individual survey allowed team members to give personal feedback, with the additional end-of-study group discussion session allowing the team's participants to respond to and add to each other's feedback. This group session also allowed the researcher to seek further clarification concerning data acquired from both field notes and the end-of-study individual surveys.

### **Delimitation**

The study sought a level of effective practices for building and leading a virtual team intent on producing and distributing digital film on a global scale. However, the research was delimited to focus on the internal perception and processes of the virtual team as it worked to produce a short film.

Although one of the long-term strategic goals of the study was to publish the team's short digital film at the global level using social media and the Internet, it was distributed only on a small scale. The steps and strategies to realistically promote and market programmatic film content at the global level were outside both the skill set of the researcher and the parameters of this study. Even though AfroAM is in the process of becoming a real-world functional organization, the study itself covered only about two years of the team's actual activities, providing a brief temporal window of the team's operations and processes.

### **Personal and Professional Motivations**

My professional background includes many years of professional major-market broadcast experience. My expertise is in radio and television production. In the area of radio, I have worked in various positions, including disc jockey and producer. I presently do freelance voice-over work, and in the past have worked as a radio news reporter. In the field of television, my experience includes work with both studio and location production crews. I have worked both as an assistant director (AD) and as a television director. I have an undergraduate degree, a Bachelor of Arts in Communication with a major in Radio/TV broadcasting, and am a film school graduate, holding a terminal degree, a Master of Fine Arts in Film Production with a minor in Art History. During the course of this research, I also received a master's degree in Leadership and Change. Academically, I have taught Communication at the college level at four different institutions, three of which were historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). I worked at these different institutions as an instructor, lecturer, and associate professor.

My positionality during this study was that of an Afro-American team leader and co-researcher. The research was executed *with* my participant AfroAM team, as opposed to the traditional research position of doing research *on* my participants. Being the virtual team's leader

placed me in an internal emic research positionality, allowing me to obtain a native-view of team dynamics and processes, as opposed to a more positivistic etic or external researcher positionality.

The study was important to me on two levels, one being technical and the other being social, with a specific focus on social justice. As a production professional in the areas of radio, television, and film, I am encouraged and fascinated by advances in digital technology and the effect that these advances are having on professional audio and film production processes. Twenty years ago, to produce broadcast quality films or other mass media content required large production crews and expensive multimillion-dollar studios and equipment. Today, it is possible to create a better-quality media product with fewer crew members, less money, and cheaper production equipment, all from the basement or garage of one's own home.

A good example of such a successful endeavor is the 2014 documentary film *The Black Miami* by directors Michael Williams and Carlton Smith; produced by Dr. Marvin Dunn. The young filmmakers used the same type of camera equipment, film editing software, and computers that were used in this study. Presently, their film is being globally distributed through Google Play and Amazon Prime Video.

Digital technology, social media, and the Internet have created a major paradigm shift in access for the average everyday citizen and for the small independent professional producer. Today a two-person documentary crew can easily produce an hour-long digital film for a major network using affordable consumer grade computers and digital cameras.

The Canon EOS 5D Mark III is a \$3000 camera that can be purchased used for about \$2100. This DSLR (digital single lens reflex) camera can photograph pristine broadcast quality digital film. Final Cut Pro and Adobe Audition are two professional digital editing software

suites. Both suites are priced to be accessible to the general consumer and can be used to edit, color-correct, add special effects, and mix audio for a documentary by a single individual. In today's digital production environment, one person can bypass musician unions, the need for a 20-piece orchestra, and very expensive recording studio rental fees, and instead single-handedly score, record, and mix a full orchestra with nothing more than consumer level desk or laptop computers, using music production software such as Garage Band, Pro-Tools, or Notion 6.

This 21st-century paradigm shift in access and power has the potential to provide an alternative to the Eurocentric gatekeeping roadblocks faced by many Afro-American filmmakers who have struggled to create within the traditional Hollywood infrastructure.

### **Dissertation Structure**

#### **Chapter II: Literature Review**

The literature review consists of two major topic sections. One section is a brief historical review of the American film industry, including the major players and studios involved in the genesis of Hollywood. The section also documents Afro-American filmmakers' historic relations with Hollywood as well as the present-day industry culture. The second section is a brief review of literature concerning leadership theory and team building. The review also includes a section on VOs or virtual organization (teams).

#### **Chapter III: Methodology and Design**

Chapter III describes the research design and methodology used in the study. The overall research design is action research. The primary data collection method involved the use of researcher field notes. The secondary method involved an end-of-study individual survey, combined with a follow-up team discussion group. The chapter also includes a two-year chronological record of the team's activities from November 16, 2018, to January 29, 2021.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

Chapter IV presents data retrieved from both protocols. The researcher's field notes produced an etic longitudinal view of team operations during the study. The end-of-study individual survey, combined with the team discussion, provided qualitative metadata concerning team processes and perceptions. Both methods were used to collect, triangulate, and analyze the data. Chapter IV also includes the team's 23-minute film documentary.

## **Chapter V: Discussion and Recommendations**

Chapter V involves an in-depth analysis of the study's results and a parallel discussion of the results compared with emerging literature. Because action research is cyclical and iterative, the recommendations infer that even though the dissertation study is at an end, ongoing practitioner research is continuing as AfroAM transitions and begins to operate as a real-world entity.

I intentionally did not follow traditional APA formatting with regards to the names used to describe African-Americans. I used the many different names that Afro-Americans have used to describe themselves, and a few names that have been used by outsiders to describe Afro-Americans. African-American is the correct term according to the APA style guide. However, many of *us*, African-Americans, use the shortened and more convenient term Afro-American.

At the end of slavery (1865), Whites called people of African descent niggers or colored. Many of those freed Africans described themselves as African or Colored. However, after World War I, and especially during the Harlem Renaissance or so-called New Negro Movement period (1918–1936), Afro-Americans began to use the term Negro. For many years, the term Negro was considered a politically correct term until it fell out of favor during the early 1960s when the

term Black came into use. Today *we* often use both Afro-American and Black in the same conversation, sometimes even in the same sentence.

Since the thrust of this study is about taking control of *our* narrative, I will use the terms Colored, Negro, Black, or Afro-American depending on what time period is being discussed, or the possible frame of mind of the person or persons being discussed. The importance of my position is found in an old African proverb, which states, *it is not what you call me, but what I answer to, that makes me what I am.*



## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The status of Africans during early American history was tenuous at best. Before slavery began, Americans of African descent had been living in the United States since the establishment of the first English colony of Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. At the time of the 1798 ratification of the United States Constitution, there were a small number of free male African landowners living in the country. By 1804 all Northern states had abolished slavery, with the last stronghold of the institution supposedly collapsing in the South at the end of the Civil War in 1865. However, Neo-slavery, enabled during the post-Civil War period through the South's share-cropper system and criminal justice chain-gang system, continued for many generations after the official end of the Civil War.

After the Civil War, American society continued to be segregated in both the North and the South, driven by hatred and ignorance, financial greed, and cultural/racial stereotypes, codified for centuries in European society as far back as the Middle Ages. England is an example of this Middle Ages Eurocentric hatred. England and other countries intentionally used a tactic of labeling people that it intended to colonize as less than human. Heng (2018) states, "Though scholars differ on the legacy and intentions of English conquest, few disagree, given the documentary record, that the indigenous colonized were indeed portrayed by England as primitive and even subhuman" (p. 37). This Eurocentric informed hatred eventually facilitated the race-driven social segregation in the United States, which was mirrored in the country's nascent film industry, with so-called Colored filmmakers effectively blocked from participating. The story of this industry segregation began in France, with the invention of celluloid film, and the film projector.

## A New Medium

Film technology as we know it today began in France. Around 1895 Auguste and Louis Lumière invented the camera/projector while working for their father's photographic business. Louis was a trained physicist, and his brother Auguste was a business manager in the family business. Both brothers made movies using their newly invented *cinematograph* camera. However, they eventually got out of the filmmaking business, ironically claiming that there was no future in cinema.

In the United States, technology, organizational restructuring, and economics fueled the growth of the new medium, which eventually evolved from a mere entertainment novelty to a newly emerging American industry. With regards to technology, it was the creation of better celluloid film stock, a new type of film projector shutter, and a patented camera film loop called the Latham Loop that made the photographing and projecting of film images easier.

Organizationally, various White American film companies survived and continued to grow by merging or buying controlling stock in their competitors' companies to gain access to those companies' patents, cash flow, and other resources. As far as can be ascertained, there were no so-called Colored filmmakers or film companies during this period from 1896 to 1909, even though the popularity of this new form of entertainment was rapidly growing.

Cripps (1993) stated that the primary economic factor driving the growth of American filmmaking was the phenomenal demand for new movies by the newly arrived and mostly English-illiterate European immigrants. It was this immigrant demographic that represented a significant market of people hungry for this new form of entertainment. New entertainment meaning silent film, a new visual medium in which actors communicated using facial expressions and body language, much of which could be universally understood, no matter the

language background of the viewing audience. Cripps posits that the new immigrant box office power also influenced the positive manner in which immigrants were portrayed on the screen: “because they bought more tickets than any other identifiable group and because many of them came to own the movie industry, immigrants received a friendly treatment in films, even before America at large accepted them” (p. 6).

So-called Colored Americans were effectively blocked from joining and taking part in the growing film phenomenon. White filmmakers, however, were becoming wealthy while entertaining newly arrived European immigrants and intentionally marginalizing people of African descent by pushing false narratives and racist images onto the American film screen. Early examples of these racist types of films include Sigmund Lubin’s *How Rastus Got His Pork Chop* (1908) and later D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Cripps (1993) emphasized the point that “As white men learned the craft of the cinema, blacks would find it less hospitable . . . The worst problem for blacks remained exclusion from the seats of power” (p. 13).

The transitional growth of film, from a French developed technical novelty in 1895 to a viable American industry by the late 1920s occurred slowly at first, helped by American made improvements of European camera and projection technology. The industry grew and matured as new companies and studios were built during the early 1900s. With the production of the first American feature-length narrative film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), and Thomas Edison’s invention of his Kinetophone film sound system in 1910 (17 years before Hollywood embraced “talkie films”), the industry began to slowly stabilize in the late 1920s following many years of corporate espionage, political intrigue, and industry chaos.

The players in this new medium were a loose confederacy of inventors, theatrical talent from the stage, businessmen, photographers, bankers, investors, thugs, con men, and film

processing laboratories. It was a confederacy composed of mostly White men, second-generation Europeans of Protestant and Catholic backgrounds from the business world. However, seeming to better grasp and understand the potential of film as a mass entertainment medium much earlier than any other group, a massive influx of Jews from both the business world and Vaudeville began to heavily invest their time and money into this new business of filmmaking. Another reason for the influx of Jews was because during this time period there was unfortunately a strong amount of anti-Semitism in the country, making many professions in the United States unavailable to Jews. However, the fledgling film industry was wide open and available to anyone who was white and male, offering great potential to the country's Jewish population.

For Americans of African descent, systematically shut out of the business, there were few if any jobs for Afro-Americans behind the scenes. Production crew members such as cameramen and soundmen, directors, or producers were almost always White men. The conditions of the Colored actors in front of the camera were not much better as they found themselves able to garner only minor acting parts, usually playing exotic natives or some other stereotypical object of ridicule for the benefit and entertainment of newly arriving White immigrant audiences: an early pattern of the monetization of racism in the American film industry.

### **From Chaos to Consolidation**

The Hollywood film industry grew out of a quest for freedom. Created by inventors in Europe, motion picture technology was improved upon by their cousins in the United States. Edison and other inventors aggressively competed—spending many years inventing, illegally copying, and outright stealing technology from each other and from their European cousins in an attempt to dominate the new motion picture industry. During this period, the government patent office required very little proof of originality, and as a result, film companies were able to

illegally copy each other's technology and submit it to the copyright office, passing it off as their own. During the early years of American film, when an inventor applied for a patent, there was an *assumption* of originality until there was a challenge against it in court (Staiger, 1983).

Macgowan (1965) described the industry as being in chaos during the late 1800s and early 1900s, chaos involving sheriffs seizing cameras, court injunctions, and even the insertion of saboteurs into a competitor's company. In a move to monopolize the fledgling industry, Edison attempted to create a situation where anyone showing motion pictures to American audiences had to use his technology, either buying it or by paying leasing fees for its use. In a move to consolidate his power, he and other manufacturers created the Motion Pictures Patent Company, the so-called Trust, which operated from 1908 to 1915. The Patent Company, or Trust, was a confederacy of about 10 different manufacturers who agreed to share business patents and licenses with the intent of gaining control of the emerging American film industry.

This industry-wide battle for power seems to have had no major effect on the few Colored film companies struggling to exist during this time period. William Foster and his Foster Photoplay company, the Johnson Brother's Lincoln Motion Picture Company, and Oscar Micheaux's Micheaux Film and Books Company were all located in the Midwest or on the West Coast, far away from the Trust's Eastern Seaboard influence.

Members of the Patent Company or Trust manufactured film projection equipment and controlled the production of the films shown on those projectors. To force out non-Patent Company competition, Edison's confederacy leased and sold its equipment and projectors with the stipulation that only Trust projectionists could operate the equipment. Rushing to monopolize the film business, Edison and his Trust put rules in place to ensure that films made by competing

non-Trust producers could not be projected using any of the Patent Company's projectors, projectionists, or exhibition houses.

Some film producers resisted Edison and continued to show their movies independently. To counter this resistance, Edison and the Trust would in turn send detectives and sometimes even groups of thugs to establish and enforce his stranglehold on the industry in the New York area and along the Eastern coast of the United States (Thomas, 1971). In a move to get away from Edison's lawsuits and ruffians in New York, many actors, directors, and technical personnel began to migrate as far away as possible, relocating from cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Jacksonville, Florida, to the West Coast in the Los Angeles area.

There were two main reasons for actors and filmmakers to move West. First, it put distance between Edison's thugs and detectives on the East Coast and themselves on the West Coast. Secondly, great weather and good California sunshine made for a year-round summer climate that was good for production.

During the early days of filmmaking, there was no lighting technology for interior filming. As a result, earlier films studios had either no roofs, or had roofs that could be opened and closed to allow for lighting interior scenes. Always dependent on good weather for indoor lighting, rainy or cloudy days forced film directors to stop production. Compared to New York and the East Coast, California offered longer seasons of milder weather and many more days of good sunlight for production (Erish, 2012).

### ***The Commodification of Hate***

Unfortunately, the migration of the fledgling industry from the East Coast to the Los Angeles area did nothing to improve the way the film industry treated or portrayed people of African descent. The very popular production of films like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) only

further codified the racial stereotypes of earlier White produced movies and set a standard that persists even until today.

Bogle (2001) credits Edwin S. Porter, director of *The Great Train Robbery*, with creating the first “Negro” American film character in the 12-minute 1903 movie *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Although the actor was a White man in blackface, a common practice borrowed from the European theatrical stage, Porter’s film was the first documented presentation of a “Negro” character on the American film screen. According to Bogle, building on the success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, White filmmakers created a number of racist character types on the early American movie screen. Bogle labels these categories as the Tom, Coon, Mulatto, Mammy, and Buck acting types. Bogle maintained that these stereotypes were used in the movie industry, “to entertain, by stressing Negro inferiority” (pp. 3–4).

According to Bogle (2001), the Tom character was a socially acceptable Negro on America’s movie screen. In spite of being marginalized by Whites through beatings, insults, and harassment, the steady old Tom was always faithful and never rebelled against White slave owners. The Coon represented the Negro as an object of amusement for Whites. Bogle names two different classifications of Coon, one being the Pickaninny—a harmless Negro child with wild hair, bulging eyes, and harmless antics—and the Uncle Remus. Bogle maintained that the Uncle Remus type Coon was easy going and philosophical with good humor, a stereotype often used by White filmmakers to show that Negroes were happy and content with their marginalized, subservient position in society. Of all of these stereotypes, Bogle considers the Coon stereotype as the most damaging: “Coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting dice, or butchering the English language” (p. 8).

The third Negro stereotype, the “tragic Mulatto,” was usually one of the more likeable Negro stereotypes among White audiences. The Mulatto was the offspring of a Negro and a White parent. Being mixed, their features often involved being lighter in skin color and having physical features closer to the Eurocentric standard of beauty or handsomeness. According to Bogle, White audiences often sympathized with the Mulatto, feeling that the Mulatto’s life would not have been so tragic if he or she had not been tainted with Negro blood in their veins. The Mulatto storyline usually involved the person either trying to *pass* for White in society or as being too ambitious and getting rejected by White society because of their mixed blood.

Bogle’s Mammy was portrayed as a big, dark-skinned, bossy, overweight woman who was both independent and headstrong. A gentler version of the Mammy is the Jemima—friendly, humorous and sometimes religious, and much politer than the Mammy. Bogle (2001) correctly pointed out that Negroes of the Mammy type were often referred to as “handkerchief heads” (p. 9). The term, which is very derogatory, is still in use today among many Afro-Americans. It is a term used to describe an Afro-American female who is anxious to please White people, and because of that fact, should not be trusted.

For White audiences, Bogle’s so-called Buck was most likely the most hated type of movie screen Negro. Bogle (2001) described the Buck as “always big, baadddd niggers, over-sexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (p. 14). Bogle pointed out that in Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation*, Griffith attributed any attraction of a Negro man toward White women to be “animalism innate in the Negro male. Thus the black bucks of the film are psychopaths” (p. 14).



Bogle (2001) stated that the so-called Negro was often the object of humor at his or her expense: “Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey” (p. 4). These racist and demeaning stereotypes were the only images of Afro-Americans on the early American film screen. Many of these stereotypes still exist in today’s American film industry, but they are much subtler and more sophisticated in form.

### ***Hollywood Genesis***

One of those businessmen looking to escape Edison and his gang by moving west was Carl Laemmle. Laemmle was a nickelodeon owner. The 1880s era American term *nickelodeon* was used to describe a storefront movie theatre where one could pay to see a movie for five cents or a nickel. The term nickelodeon is a combination of the American currency five-cent piece called the *nickel*, combined with the French term *odeon*. The term odeon in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe described an enclosed theatre. It was based on the Greek word *odeion*, used to describe a place for musical performances. As movies grew in popularity, American audiences graduated from going to the earlier popular peep shows located in arcades and shooting galleries, viewing short two- to three-minute moving pictures inside of a machine, transitioning instead to storefront inner-city Nickelodeons, where longer feature movies were projected on a screen, often nothing more than a white bedsheet on a wall, located in a room suited for larger audiences.

During a protracted struggle with Edison and the Trust, Laemmle formed his own independent film company to fight against attempts to monopolize the film business. Schatz (1988) stated, “Laemmle defied the Trust by creating the Independent Motion Picture Company to produce his own pictures . . . in 1912 he merged IMP with several other renegade outfits to form the Universal Film Manufacturing Company” (p. 16). Eventually, Laemmle sold off his nickelodeon theatres and moved his entire film business to California, shifting his business focus

from exhibiting films to one of making films, building what would eventually become known as Universal Pictures. Although it was a major Hollywood studio, Universal Pictures was considered one of “The Little Three” because it never vertically integrated organizationally, but instead focused on the production of movies, allowing others to handle the distribution and exhibition of its films.

Vertical studio companies such as Fox Film Corporation (21st Century Fox) produced their films in-house, owned and controlled their distribution channels, and owned and managed the theatres where the films were exhibited. This new vertical organizational structure was intentionally monopolistic, ensuring that only films produced by the company itself could be shown in its theatres, a policy used to block the exhibition of films from competing studios or independent producers.

By the time the industry had fully transitioned to sound (talkie) pictures during the late 1920s, The Big Five Hollywood studios had successfully consolidated film production, distribution, and exhibition under one roof, forming five self-contained corporate conglomerates that coexisted with three other major non-integrated studios.

Several factors contributed to the growth of Hollywood as an industry:

- Edison and his manufacturing confederates attempted to control the film industry in New York and along the Eastern Seaboard. This action prompted filmmakers, businessmen, and other artists to flee New York and move to California to get away from Edison and the Trust.
- American manufacturers made significant improvements to film technology brought from Europe, and also invented original technology of their own.

- Independent film producers created or purchased distribution channels and theatres to gain more control over the distribution, marketing, and exhibition of their own independent films.
- Some film exhibitors became filmmakers themselves both to acquire better quality films and to acquire more of them.

However, all of these factors, although significant, were not the salient reason for the phenomenal growth of Hollywood. The dominant driving force behind the growth of the American film industry was the Jewish immigrant businessman.

### *Jewish Showmen and Their Vision*

More than Edison and the Trust, or any technological advances or groups, it was really first- and second-generation Jews from Eastern Europe who brought their retail business experience, their sense of showmanship, and their entertainment and amusement industry experience to California to conceptually create and build the Hollywood film industry.

There was a significant difference in vision between Edison and the Trust, and other Jewish filmmakers and businessmen regarding the purpose and potential of film. Edison and his confederacy of film equipment manufacturers were not interested in filmmaking per se, but were more focused on renting and selling their film equipment. Huettig (1944) described the early Edison era film industry's orientation:

At first the business was dominated by companies interested primarily in the manufacture and sale of motion picture equipment. This is attested to by the formation of one of the most famous and successful patent pools in the country's history, the Motion Picture Patents Company. (p. 3)

Edison and his Patent Company, or Trust, made films not out of any great love of film, but rather to use the novelty of the new medium to produce revenue through the leasing and selling of the group's film cameras, projectors, and other equipment. The focus was not on the

entertainment potential of the film medium, but rather on film as a promotional and marketing tool, to sell the manufacturer's equipment.

Jewish entertainment and amusement businessmen brought a different vision to the industry. As Huettig (1944) stated, "Originally, a movie was an object of curiosity; people went to see what it was like. With astonishing rapidity, movie-going became a mass habit" (p. 4).

Jewish businessmen in the amusement and entertainment business were professional showmen, some of the first to truly realize the mass appeal potential of film as a popular culture medium. Many of these businessmen owned shooting galleries, penny arcades, and Vaudeville theatres; others worked in retail and merchandising businesses. Unlike Edison and other equipment manufacturers, these showmen/businessmen, benefiting from their situational awareness of public taste and trends, were foundational in initiating the transition and growth of American filmmaking from a novelty and promotional tool for equipment manufacturers to one of mass entertainment.

These immigrant businessmen accelerated industry growth by developing films with strong narratives, using drama, humor, and documentary (reality film) formats, often borrowing stories from well-known novels, plays, and other literature. Gabler (1988) stated that "they understood public taste and were masters at gauging market swings . . . they had a peculiar sensitivity to the dreams and aspirations of other immigrants and working-class families" (p. 5). These industry founders were immigrants themselves, or the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Members of the same immigrant population that flocked to their movies.

Adolph Zukor, a former fur trader and businessman from Hungary, was the founder of Paramount Pictures. William Fox, the creator of the Fox Film Corporation (21st Century Fox), was also Hungarian. Louis B. Mayer, the boss of the largest of the major eight studios, Metro-

Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), was born in Russia. Brothers Harry, Sam, Albert, and Jack Warner, founders of Warner Brothers Pictures, were second-generation Polish immigrants who originally founded their company in New Castle, Pennsylvania and Youngstown, Ohio, eventually moving the company to California and building a new studio (Gabler, 1988).

These Eastern European Jewish immigrants and others like them were significant players in transitioning American filmmaking from the inner-city peepshows and storefront nickelodeons of the late 1890s to the large studios and theaters of a mature industrial system of American entertainment during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

It is ironic that the very actors, directors, and entertainment businessmen who fled the strong-arm tactics of Edison and the monopolistic Trust company in New York and along the Eastern Seaboard, would themselves eventually create even more powerful and insular studio monopolies on the West Coast. These new, more powerful studio monopolies eventually forced many smaller White Hollywood studios to close, with the larger studios often buying and absorbing them in order to acquire their patents, licenses, and other assets.

### **Resistance: Psychological Warfare**

From the very beginning, Afro-Americans fought to become a part of America's growing filmmaking community. There were continued efforts by Whites, normally male studio heads, with the power to approve or disapprove a potential film's production, to disenfranchise Blacks interested in directing and producing films. Support from the business/finance world, also normally White and male, was lacking. Guerrero (1993) maintains that this type of gatekeeping was intentional, but intentional for a much darker purpose than just monetary reasons: "For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy

of American society” (p. 2). The darker purpose, was to create narratives to help maintain White’s position of power and privilege.

In some ways the narratives of today’s Hollywood film industry are not very different from those themes found in the films of D. W. Griffith, Thomas Edison, and other racist filmmakers who portrayed Black people (especially men) as lazy and misogynistic, stupid and lacking integrity, and belonging to a people without any *known* pre-slavery culture or history. It was common then, and not unusual today, for Hollywood to produce globally distributed films portraying people of African descent as ignorant, poor, violent, and dishonest, using characters who are drug dealers, prostitutes, or gang members. Strangely missing are films concerning the pre-European histories of African kingdoms and civilizations, such as Sonhai, Nubia, Aksum (Ethiopia), and Kemit (Egypt). Missing are real-world film narratives concerning Africa’s and Asia’s pre-Western civilization contributions to the sciences, mathematics, engineering, and architecture. However, although effectively blocked from participation in the rapidly growing White controlled film business at that time, Americans of African descent were in no way passive. They were not victims. This first generation of Negro Filmmakers understood something that a very young Malcolm X would declare some forty years later: “Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you take it.” (Breitman, 1990, p.111). These early African-descendant filmmakers resisted racism by organizing their own film companies, independent of the White segregated film industry. Filmmakers Peter P. Jones, William “Bill” Foster, and the Johnson brothers were some of the better-known members of this resistance movement, which began around 1910.

As far as can be ascertained, there were no Afro-American film producers, writers, or directors between the period of 1890, with Edison and his early peep shows, and 1903 with

Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films. There seems to have been no Afro-American filmmaking in the United States until William "Bill" D. Foster opened his Chicago-based Foster Photoplay Company in 1910.

William Foster moved to Chicago in 1910 and eventually started the Foster Photoplay film company. He is most likely the first so-called Colored man to produce film shorts with all Colored cast members. Impressed by the progress he observed in the Negro Theatre in the United States, Foster wanted to translate and duplicate that success into the film medium. More or less a hustler with street smarts, Foster was an entrepreneur who was good at organizing people and making money. Working originally as a writer for the Negro-owned *Chicago Defender* newspaper, he also worked as a business manager and talent agent for a number of Negro theatre actors. Owing no film equipment himself and having no ensemble of actors, he took the initiative by borrowing equipment from a local camera store and recruiting his actors and actresses from the well-known Pekin theatre in Chicago to make his first film, *The Railroad Porter* (1910).

Foster is credited with writing, directing, and producing at least three films (*Birthmark*, *The Butler*, and *The Railroad Porter*), none of which were financial successes (Potter, 2014). After a seemingly short and commercially unsuccessful attempt at making films, Foster faded from the film business.

Following Foster's lead, numerous Colored or Negro film companies were started. These small boutique companies slowly emerged, their owners intent on participating in the country's new industry and in taking control of the social narrative concerning Americans of African descent and others in the African Diaspora. This period of growth coincided with the so-called New Negro Movement. The appellation, Negro, introduced by Afro-Americans to signify a new

post-World War I awareness of self, and the right to define one's self: apart from, and counter to White men's definition of African descendant people. The popularization of the new name was informed by returning War veterans, the Harlem Renaissance (1917–1930), and the Afro-French and Caribbean Negritude movement (1920s–1930s) all of which promoted a celebration and love for all things associated with African descendent people, anywhere in the world.

In spite of this new awareness reflected in Negro literature, entertainment, and the arts, the Golden age of Afro-American filmmaking initiated by Foster in 1910 was short lived, and by 1927, some 17 years later, many of the new Negro film studios were either extinct or dying.

### ***In Defense of Their Humanity***

Defeated during the Civil War, White Southerners were angry because of their loss of economic wealth acquired through the *human trafficking* of African people. To regain their position of power and to *justify* their past actions, they used many forms of communication including both the press and other popular culture mediums to vilify the North and to justify the murder, torture, and marginalization of Africans. Chadwick (2009) stated that “Novelists, playwrights and magazine writers reinvented Southern slave-owners as noble cavaliers, fighting not for slavery but for states' rights and the honor of their Southern women and families” (p. 10). Although accurate in his view concerning how Whites used mainstream media and popular culture to attack the humanity of African people, Chadwick unfortunately went even further by actually *justifying* the racist actions of those White writers, playwrights, and magazine writers, his reasons being that it was necessary to *heal* the nation:

Was this rewriting, which persisted for forty years until the beginning of the film age, morally and ethically honest? It may not have been, but surely it was necessary, as Abraham Lincoln said in his second inaugural address, to bind up the nation's wounds. (p. 10)



According to Chadwick, media that dehumanized Africans and justified terrorism; the hanging of innocent women and children, the rape of African women; the burning, hanging, and mutilation of innocent African men was *reasonable* and *needed* because it helped solidify the North and South into a stronger and more stable Union. Evidently the pain, sadness, and suffering of other human beings who just happened to be African was secondary in importance to having a strong unified country.

It was in this historically dangerous and hostile environment that brave and determined men of African descent resisted the lies perpetrated by the White popular media and instead created their own film studios to *flip the script*, so to speak—to change the narrative. The Johnson brothers, Gil and Noble Johnson, and Oscar Micheaux were the most prominent filmmakers in that fight during the Golden Age of Black filmmaking, 1910 to 1927.

#### ***D. W. Griffith and The Clansman***

Although Colored filmmakers like William Foster, Peter P. Jones, and others had already been working to produce films with counter-narratives to racist films produced by White film studios during the mid-1900s, it was really D. W. Griffith's racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915) that served as a rallying point for many Colored film studios. Both Lincoln Motion Picture and Micheaux Film and Books were started after the release of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, possibly because of Griffith's film. Today Griffith's film is loudly celebrated as a technological miracle for that time period, which it was, but with only muted if any references to its intentional racist narrative..

*The Clansman*, the original name of the film *Birth of a Nation*, was based on the book of the same title by Southern Baptist Minister Thomas Dixon. In spite of being a *Christian* minister, Dixon, like Griffith, was racist and saw no problem with the institution of slavery itself. Cook

(1968) quoted Dixon as saying, “I believe that Almighty God anointed the white men of the south by their suffering during that time . . . to demonstrate to the world that the white man must and shall be supreme” (p. 142). Dixon, however, did express some qualms over the brutality of some slave owners. Bitter about the alleged mistreatment of Southerners by Northern troops during the post-Civil War era, he was also possibly influenced by the concept of *manifest destiny*, a term invented in 1845 by newspaper columnist and editor John O’Sullivan who supported slavery and who advanced the idea that White Europeans had a God-given-right to expand into the Western territorial United States.

The United States government, through *ethnic cleansing*, removed Native Americans from their land with the intent of possibly expanding African slavery into the Western territories and opening a way for white homesteaders who were migrating West into areas controlled by Mexico to the Southwest, and further North into the future state of Oregon, an area controlled by Great Britain at the time.

Griffith himself was a Southerner from Kentucky, whose father had been a colonel in the Confederate Army. Previous to *Birth of a Nation* he had directed some other movies, most of which had Civil War period themes. Although a technically brilliant piece of filmmaking, *Birth of a Nation* portrayed Colored legislators as lazy and stupid, driven by wild animalistic sexual drives, who spent their time in the state capital with their feet on the desk eating watermelon and chicken legs while in session.

The White director very cleverly played on the sexual fears of White audiences by showing roving crowds of Negroes carrying equal rights signs. The signs carried by the Negroes read “equal rights, equal politics, equal marriage” (Griffith, 1915). Griffith in just 16 frames of the film had equated the guaranteed constitutional freedom of so-called Colored people with sex

starved Colored men wanting to have sex with White women. It was an image intentionally calculated to strike fear in White women and anger in White men.

In *Birth of a Nation*, many of the film's major Colored acting parts were played by Whites in Blackface. Griffith's cutting-edge technically superior film showed every stereotype mentioned by Bogle. The movie was full of scenes such as the one with happy dancing Coons, dancing for White onlookers who had come down to visit the slave quarters. There was the bossy Mammy who called other Colored people no good "niggers" and who physically overpowered and beat up Colored men from the North. It should be noted that Griffith was careful to never have any white character in the movie call any Colored person a "nigger." In the classic divide and conquer strategy of many racists, Griffith uses the Colored woman's character, the Mammy, to label Colored men as lazy, no count, and no good. If the man was from the North, he was labeled uppity and arrogant. Also present were the sexually frustrated Buck soldiers who not only lusted after every White woman in sight but who also kept Whites from voting, while at the same time helping the Colored population to stuff the ballot boxes. Not forgotten by Griffith was the ambitious and sneaky psychopathic Mulatto, portrayed as being manipulated and encouraged by White abolitionists from the North to mistreat Southern Whites. There was also the ever-faithful Uncle Tom, who would fight even his own Colored brothers to save the White daughter of his master.

The Negro community and many in the White community reacted immediately, criticizing the movie as an intentional attack on Negroes. W. E. B. Dubois's six-year-old National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) attempted to have the film banned, with no success. They were successful, however, in coordinating demonstrations in many urban areas. The showing of the film caused riots in metropolitan cities like Philadelphia

and Boston. In some places, White gangs roamed America's streets beating innocent Negroes, and in at least one case, a White man murdered an innocent Negro teenager in Indiana after watching the movie.

According to Cripps (1993), the American film industry's attitudes toward Afro-Americans mirrored the country's racist attitudes toward other non-Whites such as Native Americans, Africans, and Asians, although Asians were recognized as at least a people who had a *known* history and culture, supposedly unlike Afro-Americans (p. 39). These attitudes were consistently reflected in the unrealistic and delusional portrayal of non-Whites in America's new popular culture medium. Astonishingly, people of African descent, were portrayed on the American film screen as lazy, childlike, pathological human beings with supposedly no known history or culture.

### ***Lincoln Motion Picture Company***

The motivation for the birth of many of the earlier Negro film companies was reflected in a number of their mission statements; to portray Negroes in a more realistic light to counteract the abundance of racist images on the screen (Cripps, 1993). This goal of changing the screen image of the Negro took on a new intensity after the screening of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Cripps (1993) stated that the mission of the Johnson brothers and their Lincoln Motion Picture Company was to "picture the Negro as he is in his everyday life" (p. 50). Founded in Omaha, Nebraska and later incorporated in Los Angeles, California in 1917, the Lincoln Company produced its first film, entitled *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition* (1916), before Lincoln Pictures was actually incorporated in California. The 1916 two-reel length film was about a Negro college graduate character, James Burton, played by company cofounder and

Universal Studios actor Noble Johnson. In the story, Burton leaves home and goes to California to get a job on an oil rig. He is denied the job because of his race but eventually gets the job after saving the life of the White oil rig owner's daughter. Later in the film, the oil rig owner promotes him, making him the boss of an oil expedition after discovering that Burton has an engineering degree. While on the journey, Burton realizes that the signs of oil he is finding on the expedition also match signs he has seen back on his father's farm at home. He eventually discovers oil on his father's farm, ends up making himself and his family rich, and marries his hometown sweetheart.

This film was most likely the first major, widely seen, and commercially successful response by the newly minted *Negro* filmmakers after years of racial marginalization on the American film screen. In contrast to the stupid, childlike, sexual deviant images of Negroes presented in most White films, the Johnsons created a hero who was a college graduate of a historically Negro college, a person who was both educated and ambitious. In spite of the racial prejudice displayed in the storyline of the film, the Burton character persevered and was eventually rewarded for his perseverance and integrity, which allowed him to work for himself and ultimately provide for his family.

The major themes in the story were the importance of family, the benefits of ambition and perseverance, plus the rewards and freedom that can be created by hard work and self-sufficiency, a mantra promoted by Southern Negro activist and Tuskegee University president Booker T. Washington, a hero figure of both the Johnson brothers and future filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. The film itself was both a commercial and critical success.

The Johnsons' second film was a much more extensive production. It was entitled *The Trooper of Company K*, based on the historically accurate story of Negro soldiers who fought a

famous battle against the Mexican Army under the leadership of General George Pershing. The Negro soldiers, often-called *buffalo soldiers* by Native Americans because of their curly hair, suffered heavy casualties with a number captured against the Mexican army at the Battle of Carrizal.

Taking advantage of some of the famous newspaper stories of the day, the Johnsons and their fledgling motion picture company strategically wrote the script as a western adventure, using some of the actual surviving members of Troops K and C of the *famous fighting Tenth* Calvary. In addition to the regular actors, more than 200 additional extras augmented the movie cast.

Lincoln Motion Pictures approached White film companies in Los Angeles and borrowed or rented materials and equipment needed to produce the movie. Unfortunately, in spite of the eventual success of *The Trooper of Company K*, the Lincoln studio continued to have problems with distribution and exhibition; it was a major challenge convincing White theatre owner to show Lincoln Motion Pictures' so-called race movies. The studio was also having trouble obtaining advanced pre-production financing, something critical for the solvency of a film company.

Being cash poor, the company was often forced to wait until it received profits from earlier films before they could begin their next film project. As a result, by 1921, the Johnson brothers' Lincoln Motion Pictures Company had shut down. George Johnson continued working for the U.S. Postal Service, and his brother Noble worked for Universal Studios, extending his acting career for almost another 30 years with the help of his childhood friend and schoolmate, Universal Studios actor Lon Chaney (Potter, 2014).

Because of Johnson's lighter complexion, many of the characters he played during the next 30 years involved appearing in roles as a Native American, a Latino, and as an Arab. However, the Black characters he played continued to be the usual racist stereotypes of Afro-Americans and exotic African Natives.

### ***Micheaux vs. Griffith***

Although Lincoln Motion Pictures and other Colored independent film companies worked to create counter-narratives in response to Griffith's racist film, it was really Oscar Micheaux's Micheaux Film and Book Company that filled the vacuum created by the closing of Foster photoplay and the Johnson brothers' financially troubled and slowly failing Lincoln Motion Pictures studio.

Micheaux's filmic response to Griffith's racism was *Within Our Gates* (1920). Micheaux had a reputation for being a very aggressive and successful businessman. His position as a significant player in the independent production of race movies was not planned, but occurred more or less by default as a result of failed negotiations with the Johnson brothers at Lincoln Motion Pictures.

As far as can be ascertained, Oscar Micheaux had no intention of ever becoming a filmmaker. Micheaux was already a wealthy landowner and businessman, in addition to being a successful novelist and publisher. Impressed by the success of Micheaux's semiautobiographical novel *The Conquest*, the Johnson brothers wanted to make the book into a film. The Johnsons approached Micheaux, but negotiations eventually broke down because Micheaux insisted on having more input and control in the making of the film, including a larger film budget. Lincoln studio did not want to give up too much control of the film, and with the studio being both cash-poor and struggling, the Johnsons refused. Being unable to make a deal with the Johnson

brothers, Micheaux eventually decided to produce and direct the film himself. He rewrote and adapted his novel for film and changed the title from *The Conquest* to *The Homesteader*.

Micheaux then converted his company, changing the company's name from the Western Book and Supply Company to the Micheaux Film and Book Company. Printing over 1,000 copies of his 1918 novel retitled as *The Homesteader*, he raised money for his new film company by selling the book door to door, many of them to his White neighbors and other White customers in the Dallas, South Dakota community. To further raise the money, he sold shares of stock valued at about 75 dollars per share in his new company. After raising the funds, he wrote the script for the film version of *The Homesteader* (1919). The finished film ended up being an astounding eight reels long (90 minutes) at a time when two reels was the average length of a White mainstream film.

*The Homesteader* (1919), semi-autobiographical with regards to Micheaux's life, was the first film produced by his new company, and it was both a critical and commercial success. Following in the footsteps of the Johnson brothers, Micheaux eventually moved his company to Los Angeles and later set up offices in Chicago and New York.

*Within Our Gates* (1920), the oldest known surviving film by an early Negro filmmaker, was Micheaux's second silent feature film and a direct response to Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. It covered many topics of importance to the Negro community during that time period. The story is about a young teacher from the South who travels North with the intent of raising money for a poor Colored school in the South. The school is unable to survive on the money given to them by the state and is in danger of closing. Micheaux, in his second feature film, addressed a number of the topics covered in Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, but from a Negro's point of view. *Within Our Gates* included such themes as the Jim Crow system, the Ku Klux Klan, and the migration of



Negroes from the South to the Northern urban cities in what historians and sociologists now call the first Great Migration (1916–1940). The topics of White criminal gangs lynching Negroes and of sex between Whites and Negroes were also addressed.

Bowser et al. (2001) stated that Micheaux was a filmmaker whose work had a significant impact on Afro-American culture during the early 20th century, arguing that Micheaux took a leading role in fighting racist images on the screen. The authors give Micheaux credit for resisting the new Hollywood industry and stated, “he worked outside of it as well as against it” (Bowser et al., 2001, p. xviii).

Just 20 years after the Lumière brothers of France produced some of the first films in the world, and before the creation of Hollywood, people of African descent, Negro filmmakers, created numerous small boutique film studios focused on a very specific market niche. The intent was to tell *their* stories, through their own historical and cultural eyes. During this golden age of Negro filmmaking involving Foster, the Johnson brothers, Micheaux, and others, the industry that we know today as Hollywood was still 10 years in the future.

The fact that Micheaux, a man of color, was able to independently produce a movie during that period of American history is a miracle in itself. However, to truly appreciate that accomplishment, one must also understand the conditions of Micheaux’s personal life. Being a member of the first free generation of Africans after slavery, he had no role models to follow. There were no filmmakers of African descent when he was growing up as a young man, and very few professional Colored writers. Three fascinating facts about Micheaux’s life are that (a) he learned his business and marketing skills by working first as a shoeshine boy, then as a railroad Pullman Porter, and finally as a homestead and business owner; (b) he did not know how to read or write, but taught himself as a form of mental therapy; and (c) he knew nothing about

filmmaking; he was more or less self-taught in the craft of making films, eventually becoming the most prolific Negro filmmaker in film history producing approximately one film a year, from 1919 until his death in March of 1951.

Although multiple Negro film companies existed throughout the United States during this time period, it was mainly Oscar Micheaux who provided a counter-narrative to Griffith's delusional film. Micheaux's *The Homesteader* (1919), and *Within Our Gates* (1920) was his response to D. W. Griffith's racist film *Birth of a Nation*. Micheaux, however, was not the only filmmaker to join the resistance to *Birth of a Nation*.

Colored producer Emmett J. Scott produced his own movie entitled *Birth of a Race* (1918). Scott, like Micheaux and Foster, was also a son of former slaves who worked in many capacities during his lifetime. He served as an assistant to Booker T. Washington during the building of the Tuskegee Institute, was a treasurer for Howard University in Washington D.C., and served as a staff member for two presidents, both Taft and Wilson.

To get *Birth of a Race* produced, Scott hired White director John W. Noble, whose real name was Winfield Kutz. Ironically Kutz had previously worked for D. W. Griffith some 5 years earlier. The making of Scott's film was fraught with much chaos and drama, and the finished *Birth of a Race* film received negative responses from critics who felt the film's storyline was not focused and too difficult to understand. It was also a commercial failure at the box office. In spite of Scott's good intentions and valiant effort, the film failed.

There were numerous Black film companies besides Foster's Photoplay, the Johnson brothers' Lincoln studio, and Micheaux's Book and Film studio. Bowser et al. (2001) affirm that historians and scholars are continuing to locate records of other Negro companies from that period. Some of the other existing Negro film companies during this time period include names

such as Whipper Reel Negro News, Rosebud and Paragon films, the Afro-American Film Company, and Colored Feature Photoplay, to name a few. Most of these companies would eventually go out of business, due to the country's growing economic depression, internal cash flow problems, and an inability to transition from the cheaper silent films to the more expensive sound film system.

### ***From Novelty to Industry***

While Micheaux and other Negro producers and directors were working outside of the White American film system, creating films to challenge racist producers like D. W. Griffith, Thomas Edison, and others, the mainstream American film movement was developing into a more mature and sophisticated industry. The Golden Age of Black independent filmmaking continued to develop separate from but parallel to the growth of the White mainstream film industry.

The film industry as we know it today began to develop near the end of the so-called silent film era, between 1926 to 1927. The term *silent film* describes earlier cinema consisting of films with no audio soundtrack. The dialogue between onscreen film actors was pantomimed by the actors, with the actors' words projected as titles on the screen to be read by the audience, sometimes accompanied by a live in-house staff piano or organ player.

The genesis of the silent movies as an industry had begun earlier with the making of America's first *narrative* silent film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). The term *narrative* describing a new type of American film, a film structured to tell an actual story with a beginning, middle, and end, different from earlier short films, which were often no more than travelogues or just interesting scenes from everyday life.

*The Great Train Robbery*, produced by Edison and his company, was written and directed by former mechanic and cinematographer Edwin S. Porter. The film is considered both America's first action and first Western genre film. By the time *The Great Train Robbery* was released in 1903, a number of storefront viewing locations, precursors to today's modern movie theater, were appearing throughout the inner cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. American film was transitioning from being a simple novelty to an actual industry, a new form of mass entertainment.

### ***The Demise of African Filmmaking***

After a strong run during the economically prosperous Roaring Twenties, many smaller studios, both White and Negro, began to fail, unable to survive the decline in popularity of silent films. Many of the failing Negro film studios were located in major urban areas, such as New York, New York; Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; and Dallas and Austin, Texas.

Texas, like Florida and California, offered many months of warm summerlike weather. In both Florida and Texas there were two types of companies involved in Black filmmaking. Both states had Black owned film companies, but they also had small White film companies that produced so-called race movies, mainly for Black audiences.

There were at least three Negro studios in Texas during the early 1920s, Superior Art Production in Houston, Lone Star in San Antonio, and Cotton Blossom studio, which was also located in San Antonio. Like the majority of other Negro film studios across the country, they were not able to survive the challenges of a hostile and unsupportive White controlled industry, expensive technological changes, and a worldwide financial depression.

There were also a few White owned studios that specialized in producing so-called race movies. One of those studios was Sack Entertainment in Texas, and the other was Norman

Studios in Jacksonville, Florida. Before the mass exodus to the West Coast by White filmmakers fleeing Edison and his Motion Picture Patents Company in the New York area, Jacksonville, Florida, was the Southern winter home for many White film companies. When the winter season arrived on the East coast each year, White film companies such as Lubin and the French film company Pathe moved their operations to their winter studios in Florida where they could continue production because of warm summerlike weather.

Richard Norman decided to build his Norman Studios in Jacksonville Florida, also taking advantage of the many months of warm Southern weather. Norman was White, but different from most White film company owners. Reportedly coming from a family of former slave owners, he was motivated by both business ambitions and a sense of social justice. Like most White and Negro film company owners, he was intent on creating a financially successful business. However, he was also concerned with the status of Negro film professionals.

Concerned that the racist mainstream film industry provided no meaningful outlet for Negro actors, directors, and writers, his company hired many Negroes and produced a number of all Negro cast films aimed at both a White and Negro audience demographic. His was one of the very few White owned studios that actually employed Negro film crew members. Norman's Jacksonville, Florida, studio operated from 1920 to 1928, paralleling the Golden Age period of independent Black filmmaking. This 1920 to 1928 time period was also when many New York based White film companies were beginning to migrate from their winter studios in Florida to Los Angeles, California, with a few settling in or near a quiet village of about 500 people called Hollywood.

Like many other small White studios, Norman Studios eventually closed, unable to adjust to the industry's technological transition from silent to talkie films. However, Norman's situation

was a bit different from other small studios. Norman had already personally invented a successful sound system to make and show sound movies. Unfortunately, the industry ignored Norman's system and decided to use a different system as the industry standard. With his sound system rejected and not having the large cash flow needed to convert to the industry's new sound system, the studio eventually had to close. Today Norman Studios' five-building infrastructure is a Federal National Landmark and the location for the Norman Studios Silent Film Museum.

### ***A Hidden Agenda***

In spite of, or maybe even because of, the racist and misogynistic industry culture/climate of America's film industry from 1889 and continuing through to the early 1940s, the popularity of the medium itself continued to grow at a rapid pace. People of African descent continued to be treated as nothing more than objects of ridicule, all for the sake of making an American dollar.

As stated earlier however, Guerrero (1993), insist that it was not just about making money. His assertion is that the American film industry, with forethought and malicious intent, created films to perpetuate both overt and subliminal narratives to justify and maintain a social and political position of racial superiority. Guerrero argues that the films, which admittedly did make money, were used to enforce a social order that was beneficial to a White mainstream society that wanted to continue to subjugate Afro-Americans and other non-Europeans in order to stay in power.

### **The Maturing of an Industry**

While creating and promoting these delusional Eurocentric revisionist narratives, American filmmaking began to emerge as a mature industry around 1927 with the transition from silent films to talking films. The so-called *Talkies* were films with a soundtrack allowing audiences to hear an actor's voice and other ambient sounds such as automobile traffic,

waterfalls, or industrial factory noises. Lewis (1933) stated that film sound technology, “almost completely revolutionized the entire industry.” He maintained that:

The sound picture completely altered the situation. Its appeal at first was based on its novelty. After an improved technique had been developed, however it soon became apparent that the sound picture would establish itself permanently in the cinema. (Lewis, 1933, p. 23)

This new sound film medium proved to be an answer to a problem in the history of some studios, which were struggling, especially Warner Brothers. Suffering from a lack of access to *first-run theatres* where their films could be exposed to massive audiences, and struggling to obtain enough cash flow to produce more films, Warner Brothers barely survived extinction by investing in the new audio equipment and producing talkie movies. It was their investment in and promotion of the new talkie pictures that saved the company:

It was largely the Warner brothers who were responsible for the commercial development of sound in films. In the process of promoting sound, they broke through into the ranks of the major companies. (Huettig, 1944, p. 41)

Other film studios soon followed, and it was the industry’s rush to transition from the cheaper-to-produce silent films to the more popular and expensive sound films that motivated film studios with strong cash flow to invest in new sound production equipment. Only those studios with access to cash reserves were able to buy this new expensive sound equipment. Studios unable afford such equipment were either absorbed by larger companies flush with cash or eventually driven out of business as the popularity of the traditional silent film began to decline. The decline affected not only White owned studios but also signaled the demise of many Negro owned independent film studios, marking the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of Black filmmaking.

Three major factors hastened the demise of many White studios and practically all of the early Colored/Negro film studios. Those factors included: (a) the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic

which killed at least 50 million people globally and affected about 25% of the U.S. population, (b) the demise of silent films and the advent of more expensive to produce talkie sound films beginning in 1927, and (c) the 1929 stock market crash followed by the American depression period (1929–1932); a final economic blow for most small Negro film studios. Even Oscar Micheaux went temporarily bankrupt in the volatile environment and returned to writing for a while, before eventually recovering and getting back into filmmaking.

So, it was the preceding pandemic, stock market crash and depression, coupled with the industry-wide silent-to-talkie film transition which heavily influenced the restructuring of the entire movie industry into a newly formed infrastructure that we today know as Hollywood.

### ***Big Five Little Three***

As the small boutique Negro studios began to close, many smaller White studios also closed or were absorbed by larger companies with more cash-flow. However, the White film industry as a whole continued to consolidate and grow financially. Most scholars agree that eight significant studios eventually became associated with the Hollywood film industry. Some scholars labeled these studios as the Big Five and Little Three. The Big Five studios included Paramount, the Fox Film Corporation (renamed 20th Century Fox and again later renamed 21st Century Fox), Loews/MGM, RKO, and Warner Brothers. The little three included Universal, the very independent United Artists, and Columbia Pictures.

Unlike the other studios, United Artists did not make movies per se. The company, founded by director D. W. Griffith and actors Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks, was more of a cooperative that helped finance and distribute the films of its owners and other independent producers. It is ironic that one of the most racist films ever made in U.S. film history helped fund this major independent studio in 1919. Griffith, flush with money and



momentum from the success of *Birth of a Nation* became one of the four founding partners of United Artists.

These eight film studios, combined with their distribution channels and, in some cases, theatre ownership, became the foundation for the Hollywood industry infrastructure, an infrastructure that would dominate commercial filmmaking in the United States and globally for the next 33 years from 1927 to roughly 1960.

### ***Vertical Integration***

By the 1930s, with the exception of Oscar Micheaux, and later George Randol and Spencer Williams, there were very few films being produced by producers and directors of African descent. Production for directors like Micheaux often meant using someone's personal home or business to shoot a scene. Costumes were often the personally owned clothes of the actors. Many actors used by Micheaux and others had no acting experience at all, along with a few who had some theatrical stage background. Using a strategy that Black jazz musicians would later mimic during the 1950s and 1960s, Micheaux and other filmmakers often distributed their studio's work by carrying their own feature films from venue to venue, and then collecting the cash proceeds at the end of the evening.

Unlike their White counterparts, at a time where the lynching of Afro-Americans was commonplace both in the North and South, Black film directors were actually putting their lives on the line as they drove from city to city, carrying their projectors and film reels to the next venue.

During the time period of 1909 to 1910, when William Foster was starting his Foster Photoplay film company, 22 Whites and 136 Africans were lynched in the United States. During the years 1917 to 1918, when Oscar Micheaux was creating his Micheaux Film and Books

Company, and the Johnson brothers were building their Lincoln Motion Picture Company, 6 Whites and 96 Africans were lynched. During the time period of 1941 to 1949 when Spencer Williams was directing films for Alfred Sacks in Texas and traveling throughout the South with his own film reels and a projector, one White person and 21 Africans were lynched (Ramey, 2010). These early filmmakers were literally putting everything on the line for what they believed in.

None of these men needed to do it. They were all financially solvent. William D. Foster was a talent agent and professional journalist. George Johnson had a government job with the U.S. Post Office, and his brother Noble was a successful professional actor. Oscar Micheaux was already a successful author, landowner, and businessman, and Spencer Williams was a very popular comedian/actor who ran his own Amegro film production company before going to work for Sacks Entertainment in Dallas, Texas, in the early 1940s.

These men, and other lesser-known filmmakers like them, gambled their personal wealth, family relations, and *very lives* to fight for the dignity of African people, to fight against racist narratives in White films and other popular media. They were men of character and unwavering in their commitment. Their actions could be defined by an Igbo proverb. The Igbo people of Western Africa have a proverb which states that, "A man's response to an urgent matter determines his character." These pioneer filmmakers showed both their character and commitment to their community.

Exhibition for Micheaux and others often involved showing their films at a few segregated Negro theatres or churches, the YMCA, or a local activity center. Occasionally some White theatre owners would show the race films along with other White Hollywood films in

segregated theatres, with White patrons sitting on the ground floor of the theatre and Negro patrons sitting up in the balcony in the *peanut gallery*.

The term peanut gallery, originally borrowed from Vaudeville, referred to the cheapest seats in a Vaudeville theatre with the rowdiest crowds. In later years, in racially segregated America, the term came to refer to the balcony in a segregated theatre, where Negroes were forced to sit. Negroes would often *accidentally* drop the shells from the peanuts they were eating down on the heads of the White patrons below, a somewhat humorous passive-aggressive act of protest against racial segregation.

In contrast to the few struggling Black independent film directors and producers, White Hollywood's growing industry involved cash-infused major studios with large areas of land used for back lots to build imaginary towns to make movies, ensembles of contract actors who were direct employees of the studio, and a tightly controlled system of distribution and exhibition. In addition to the development and growth of Hollywood's macro industrial infrastructure involving film labs, studio sound stages, distribution companies, and movie theaters, the micro-organizational structure of many individual studios also began to change. Hollywood's big five studios collectively moved toward a more vertically integrated system of filmmaking.

The term *vertical integration* describes any studio that owns and controls business entities in all three phases of commercial filmmaking. The three aspects of commercial filmmaking involve production, distribution, and exhibition. During the growth period of Hollywood, to describe a film company as being vertically integrated implied that the company originated and produced its own films, owned and controlled the distribution channels for those films, and also managed and owned the theatre where the films were exhibited. Schatz (1988) stated:

MGM and Warner were integrated majors along with 20th Century-Fox, Paramount, and RKO. These five studios developed their own theater chains, and they dominated the first-run movie market palaces and deluxe downtown theatre in major urban centers, where most of the box-office revenues were generated. (p. 11)

The vertical integration system emerged as a result of two different, but related economic conditions. First, businessmen from the amusement and entertainment businesses and Vaudeville were already film exhibitors. These business owners showed films in their Vaudeville theatres, shooting galleries, and other entertainment attractions to financially augment their already established amusement businesses. Realizing that the novelty of film was beginning to wear off and that better quality and more exciting films would be needed if they were to continue to attract audiences, a number of amusement and arcade owners moved into the production and filmmaking side of the business in order to create better-quality films to show in their venues.

Secondly, independent film producers were losing money, unable to efficiently control and monitor for instances of theft and broken contracts by the exhibitors and distributors who were handling their films. In response to this problem, some producers set up independent distribution channels and invested in their own movie theatres. By having separate independent distribution channels, and/or their own theatres, film producers were guaranteed steady income and greater control over the distribution and exhibition of their films. So, the motivations for moving toward vertical integration were in effect bi-directional.

Coming from opposite ends of the industry, exhibitors from the business sector and film producers from the creative sector both benefited from this type of organizational structuring. Film content producers vertically integrated to gain better control of the distribution and exhibition of their product. Hilmes (1990) stated that this also allowed film content producers to get a larger piece of the profits:

Movie makers began to realize that the producer's profits could be maximized by integrating the production-distribution functions. Instead of leaving a considerable percentage of a film's profits in the hands of a special distribution organization, an integrated company could participate in the profits down the line. (p. 30)

The amusement and entertainment businessmen, seeking better quality films to show in their venues, got involved in and invested in studios, distribution channels, and theatres for the purpose of producing and exhibiting their own films. As films gained in popularity, the revenue stream shifted for many of the businessmen/exhibitors.

In the beginning, the amusement and entertainment company owners often used films to supplement their amusement and entertainment business income. However, in some cases the revenue stream from cinema eventually surpassed that of their main business, prompting some businessmen/exhibitors to transition out of the amusement and entertainment business and instead focus solely on filmmaking.

### ***Reaching for a New Demographic***

Ten years after the start of talking pictures and the birth of the Hollywood studio system, a new trend began involving the use of Negro actors in White mainstream films. White Hollywood studios realized they could increase their profits by including Negro actors. Some of those actors included popular people like Noble Johnson, the original president and former co-owner of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, actress Lena Horne, as well as actor Clarence Muse and actor/singer Paul Robeson, all of whom had previously worked with Micheaux. Many of these Negro actors were increasingly recruited by White film studios to participate in Hollywood films, sometimes with a mostly White cast, at other times with an all-Negro cast. This drain of talent put further economic pressure on the few Negro film companies still in existence.

Another factor influencing the eventual demise of the so-called race films and Negro studios was a change in the preferences of Negro audiences. As the first Great Migration (1916–1940) and the second Great Migration (1940–1970) occurred, Negroes from the more rural and agricultural Southern United States began to move to the Northern and more urban inner cities. As this migration continued, the personal taste of Negro audiences also began to change. Moving away from the race film format of the 1920s and 1930s, so-called Negroes were being drawn to Black faces appearing in White mainstream Hollywood movies. Unfortunately, in spite of the new all-Negro musical films with young talent like Sammy Davis Jr. and Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, the stereotypical images continued and would not begin to change until the late 1960s with films like *Nothing but a Man* (1964), an extremely realistic film about life in the South as an Afro-American, produced and directed, ironically, by a White Jewish immigrant from Berlin, Germany by the name of Michael Roemer.

### **Growth and Decline: The End of Hollywood's Golden Age**

After peaking around 1939, Hollywood's so-called Golden Age began to diminish. The eight major studios' decade-long monopolistic power and control over the industry was in decline during the early 1940s, eventually becoming almost nonexistent following World War II. Fueling the industry's decline was a combination of Federal Government antitrust rulings, a drastic drop-in postwar theatre attendance, and competition from the new medium of commercial broadcast television. The so-called Hollywood studio system was dead.

### ***The Village***

Hollywood was just a tiny agricultural community in 1853 that grew into a population of about 500 residents by 1900. The town expanded as more immigrant filmmakers from the Midwest and the East built studios locally. By 1927 the local impact on the village of Hollywood

increased with the advent of sound and the genesis of the American film studio system.

However, challenged on more than one occasion by the U.S. government for monopolistic business practices, the powerful integrated studio system came to an end after the United States government won their case against Paramount Pictures in the *United States v. Paramount Inc.* (1948). It was the outlawing of the industry's vertical business practices that informed the break-up of Hollywood's monopolistic system. Compared to its Golden Age (1930 to 1940) postwar Hollywood was just a shadow of what it had been during its peak years.

During the decline of the Hollywood studio system during the late 1930s to early 1940s, a few Negro directors were still able to make films, normally working for small independent White companies that specialized in race films, following the tradition of the old Norman Studios in Jacksonville, Florida. Two of those White companies were the M. W. Baccus Film studio in Dallas, Texas, and Sack Amusement or Sack Entertainment, located originally in Austin and later Dallas, Texas (Jones, 1995).

Mississippi-born Alfred Sack was the Jewish owner of Sack Amusements, one of the better-known companies employing Negro directors. His Sack Amusements Entertainment Company owned a number of theatres, which served as exhibition outlets for many of the films his studio produced. The studio, actually a very small vertically diversified company specializing in race films, produced its own films, and then distributed them to theatres owned by Sack and others.

Negro director Spencer Williams, *The Blood of Jesus* (1941) and *The Girl in Room 20* (1946), had a long association with Sack, directing and producing a string of an estimated 10 films between 1941 and the end of the decade, after which time Williams moved back to

Hollywood to play the character of Andy in the CBS television network Negro comedy team of *Amos and Andy* from 1951 to 1953.

### ***Fighting for Survival***

After dominating the world through the transmission of American popular culture for decades, post-World War II Hollywood struggled economically. In a move to adjust for a major drop-in postwar moviegoer attendance, and to make up for lost revenue from its newly outlawed monopolistic way of doing business, the Big Five and Little Three studios turned to the new and somewhat still experimental commercial television industry.

Television, which initially had a friendly relationship with the film industry, was increasingly seen as a threat by theater owners. Theatre owners blamed commercial television for the drop in their postwar attendance numbers. Hilmes (1990) stated that by 1948, “television receiver manufacture quadrupled over that of 1947.” Hilmes also pointed out that Paramount Pictures executives observed that family film attendance dropped by 20% to 30% once a new television set was brought into an American household (p. 120). In 1946, roughly 90 million people a year viewed movies in theatres around the country. However, by 1971, theatre attendance was down to 16 million moviegoers a year (Berliner, 2010, pp. 12–14).

It is possible that the drop in movie theatre attendance was not solely the fault of the new commercial television medium. Young soldiers, just back from the war and flush with larger amounts of expendable income from a thriving postwar economy, suddenly had access to other forms of entertainment besides the movie theatre. As postwar attendance numbers continued to decline, Hollywood was forced to seek other sources of income.



The 1950s commercial television industry, with its very large need for original programming, presented a potential partnership for a struggling Hollywood system. This Hollywood partnership with first radio and later television was something that had been in the making for a number of years.

Hollywood's initial association with American broadcasting began with commercial radio. The growth of the commercial radio industry in the United States more or less paralleled the growth of the film industry during the 1920s. Seeing foreign controlled companies as a security risk to the country during and after World War I, the U.S. government used the U.S. Navy to force British controlled Marconi Wireless to divest its U.S. holdings, which were eventually purchased by GE, better known as General Electric.

Because of further antitrust lawsuits, GE was forced to divest its radio holding to RCA, the Radio Corporation of America. As an independent radio manufacturing company, RCA eventually created a commercial radio broadcast network with two sub-networks. RCA's National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was split into the NBC Red network and NBC Blue network. After more antitrust lawsuits and divestiture, NBC Blue network was sold off becoming a separate radio network, renamed ABC, the American Broadcasting Network.

The film industry initially viewed radio as a public relations and promotion tool. Hilmes (1990) stated that "Hollywood's awareness of radio's potential as a medium for film publicity grew rapidly in the late 1920s, and Warner Brothers led the way" (p. 33). Warner Brothers built KFWB in Los Angeles and WBPI radio in New York with the intent to promote the studio's soon to be released films. Existing national radio networks such as ABC and NBC were interested in having actors from their variety, dramatic, and comedy radio programs placed in upcoming films, giving both the actor and the radio programs they were associated with more

exposure, “as early as 1925 a few far-sighted companies on both sides of the fence had begun to explore some of Hollywood’s potential for radio endorsements, talent, and sponsorship” (Hilmes 1990, p. 33).

Three of the major radio networks, NBC, ABC, and CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) eventually expanded into television, creating three separate television networks. However, the new networks had a major problem. Each of them needed large amounts of television programming. In the beginning, some of the more popular programs aired by the new television networks had been transferred from their sister radio networks. Increasingly, programs and stars that were already popular with radio listening audiences could now be seen on TV. Some of those popular stars included people like NBC’s Bob Hope and Jack Benny on both NBC and CBS. CBS also aired programs with Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*, and Ed Sullivan with his talent show of the same name. However, in spite of the fledgling television networks’ live newscast, drama, and sports programs, there was still a shortage of network programming and theater owners began to view television as a threat, as competition that was affecting their theater attendance numbers.

In spite of what movie theatre exhibitors may have believed, it was really the need for Hollywood’s financially declining film studios to find new markets, coupled with three nascent television networks’ insatiable need for programming, that provided a perfect match for the two industries. This symbiotic relationship between Hollywood and the television networks was an answer to the needs of both industries, resulting in Hollywood studios cofacilitating the production of network programmatic content, including television movie dramas, short weekly serial dramas, and the ever-popular western theme series.

Some of the more popular shows of the era included western series such as *Bat Masterson* (1958, Ziv-United Artists' Studios), *The Adventures of Superman* (1951, RKO Studios), *Johnny Rebel* (1959, Paramount Pictures), and the very popular *The Adventures of Rin Tin* (1954, Columbia/Screen Gems Pictures). These popular programs are early examples of the successful partnership between the Hollywood film industry and commercial network television.

Hollywood found a perfect marriage of convenience with the major television networks, but none of that prosperity was shared with those of African descent. They continued to be effectively locked out of the business. Most industry participation by Afro-Americans during that period, 1947–1970 involved continued stereotypical acting roles and practically no involvement in the areas of producing, directing, or working as members of a production crew. This *for Whites only* made-for-television movie industry partnership, which helped America's television networks grow and guaranteed the survival of post Golden Age Hollywood, still exists today.

### **Black Filmmakers and Hollywood Today**

Questions concerning Hollywood access and Afro-American filmmakers today elicit mixed responses from various directors and artist. Today there are more Afro-American directors working within the Hollywood system than at any other time in history. This fact may give the impression that considerable progress has been made during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The question to be asked is whether this apparent progress is real or an illusion.

Scholarly sources are customarily sought and researched for literature reviews. However, data concerning the sense-making and phenomenological positionality of modern Black filmmakers in today's Hollywood was not found in the literature of the academy, but was eventually discovered in the rhetoric and narratives of the directors' own personal experiences.

As a rule, practitioner filmmakers don't write articles or produce scholarly publications concerning the ups and downs of their day-to-day experiences. More than likely, they talk about issues and situations in news interviews or popular books, at film festivals and communication conferences, or while drinking at the bar after a long day of shooting. It was this fresh practitioner experience data that this study searched for and found—data not normally found in scholarly peer-reviewed papers.

Even if scholarly papers had been located, by the time practitioner knowledge reaches the academy, if at all, it is often dated and historical. Jarvis (1999) noted this situation by pointing out that “all of these sources are from the past” (p. 36). Jarvis also posits that knowledge in and of itself is not a privilege of the academy only, but can also embrace the practical real-world knowledge of the practitioner not found in academic literature. However, this practitioner knowledge is just as valid, and in some cases, may be even more accurate than scholarly peer-reviewed papers from the academy because of its more recent creation and application by practitioner experts in the field.

As a working professional in the Communication field, my research interest is that of a practitioner who is curious about how modern-day Afro-American practitioner/filmmakers operate in today's Hollywood industry environment. As a result, in this study, the focus was on the more immediate sense-making and phenomenological experiences of today's Black filmmaking cadre.

### ***The Director Interviews***

A preliminary search of news articles, general books, and magazine exposés was executed to identify themes that would help inform participant interviews. Table 2.1 shows themes derived from a number of sources including media articles, popular books, and

peer-reviewed journals.

**Table 2.1**

*Themes Derived from Literature*

<b>Article</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Theme/s</b>
Black Film, New Media Industries, and BAMMs	Anna Everett	2014	Digital technology and 21st-century Black media moguls	Digital technology is changing the rules for Black filmmakers
Black Women Filmmakers	Claudia Springer	1984	The challenges of Black women filmmakers	Black women filmmakers endure racism/sexism during film school. The scarcity of Black professors (USC, UCLA). Financing and distribution challenges exist.
Hollywood Dreams, Harsh Realities: Writing for Film and Television	Denise & William Bielby	2002	Gender, age, and race inform Hollywood decisions	The unspoken rule for hiring storytellers for Hollywood is that you must be male, White, and younger than 40. Females, Latinos, Asians, and Blacks are rarely hired.
“I Do Exist” “Black Insurgent” to Negotiating the Hollywood Divide	Michael T. Martin	2010	Julie Dash’s experience with Hollywood	Whites are still the gatekeepers who “green light” what films get made. Blacks don’t finance films like Oprah and Tyler Perry do.
Regulating “Nigger”: Racial Offense, African American Activist, and the MPPDA, 1928–1961	Ellen Scott	2014	How the use of the word “nigger” has been “regulated” by Hollywood	The film industry’s censorship system had no real problem with racial marginalization.
No Getting Around the Black	Mark Cunningham	2014	Post-racial Hollywood. Hollywood’s attempt to dilute and control Black culture production	Some Black directors play down the racial content of their films calling it universal.
Role as Resource in the Hollywood Film Industry	Wayne Baker & Robert Faulkner	1991	Blockbuster films are forcing changes in production roles	The producer has gained more creative power in

Article	Author	Year	Subject	Theme/s
“Trying to Get Over”: <i>Super Fly</i> , Black Politics, Post-Civil Rights Film Enterprise	Eithne Quinn	2010	The negative images of the film <i>Super Fly</i>	recent years on par with directors. There are subtle counter-narratives in Black films.

The first four articles reflected themes of (a) the lack of Black financing for Black films, (b) age and culture bias as gatekeeping factors inhibiting both the involvement of Blacks in Hollywood and the production of Black films, (c) a hostile environment and lack of mentorship for Afro-American female students enrolled in mainstream college film programs, and (d) the use of new digital technology in the production of Black films.

The major themes found in the next set of readings showed that (a) the pattern of Afro-American racial slurs used in American films has not improved much since the start of talking pictures in 1927; (b) today there is a trend by some young Black directors to dilute the racial content of their films by claiming that the film’s subject matter is not really Black, but humanistic and universal; (c) as the Hollywood industry shifted away from an artistic industry culture to more of a business and marketing culture in the 1980s, the role of the film producer has changed, with producers growing in power and becoming more involved in the creative process, and the film director’s power somewhat diminishing; and (d) the Hollywood industry, either intentionally or by default, uses films to select and maintain racial order in American society and throughout the world.

The purpose of the eventual director interviews was to compensate for the lack of scholarly literature concerning Afro-American directors and their experiences both in Hollywood and independent film venues. I interviewed three directors using a semi-structured open-ended

interview protocol. This protocol provided a baseline topic strategy. Some of the questions used to elicit general areas of inquiry included

- What has been your experience when working with the Hollywood system?
- Was race or culture a factor in your experiences?
- Was age or gender a factor in your experiences?
- Does the new digital technology give Black directors any more power or access to feature film production today?
- Can you give us some stories of your experience with attempting to produce/direct your films with regards to financing, distribution, and production?
- Is the transition from network television and cable, to subscriber based or pay-on-demand Internet sites like Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, and Netflix creating an environment for Black directors to thrive?

When approaching each director, I informed them that the provided questions were basic ones that I might ask. I gave them the freedom to take the interview in any direction they felt they wanted to, allowing them to focus on issues and/or experiences that were important to them. This allowed me to document the qualitative lens through which they viewed their phenomenological world.

Although the intent was to interview at least six directors, three were actually interviewed in the end. Some were creators of independent feature films, while others were directors of films produced within the Hollywood studio system. Some were directors with aspirations of working within the Hollywood system, but who were not ready to make the racial or gender biased compromises asked of them.

Access to various directors was achieved through numerous strategies. Most directors working within the Hollywood system were located by searching the Directors Guild of America (DGA) website (<https://www.dga.org/>). Searching the member director section resulted in locating the name of the agent or talent agency representing the director. Being a member of the entertainment industry, I had access to some personal phone numbers and email addresses and approached those directors directly. In one or two situations one director facilitated an introduction for me with another director whom they knew personally. I was also able to contact one or two independent film directors through their own personal websites. Many of the directors I contacted were unavailable because they were traveling or in the midst of production. Although the original intent was to choose a wide demographic of director interviews with regards to age, period of activity, or gender, some of the directors chosen were based on a matter of simple convenience.

The first director interview discovered data involving themes of race/culture and gender. Hollywood director Darnell Martin has an extensive portfolio of directing credits including feature films, made for television movies, and television series work. Her credits include Columbia Pictures' *I Like It Like That* (1994); *Prison Song* (2001), produced by Robert De Niro and Jane Rosenthal; and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005), a film produced by music producer Quincy Jones and Harpo television/film studio head Oprah Winfrey. One of her best-known works is the motion picture *Chess Records* (2008), a biopic on the White-owned Chicago based record label of the same name, responsible for producing and showcasing many famous Afro-American rhythm and blues and blues musicians from 1950 until 1969 when the company was sold. Her television directorial credits include episodes of *Grey's Anatomy*, *Law and Order*, and *The Walking Dead*.



Martin graduated from Sarah Lawrence College on a career path very different from her present directing vocation. She recalls, “I was very much into theater, not film but theater. And I was writing plays. And so, when I went to Sarah Lawrence, it was all about playwriting.” Her career goal transition began after seeing the Italian film, *The Conformist* (1970), by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci with cinematographer Vittorio Storaro:

And I really fell in love with that film and the cinematography of it. So, I went and I took a camera . . . a Bolex and started shooting. And I thought at that point, hey; maybe I don't want to be a playwright. I actually want to be a cinematographer, because I loved the storytelling through the lens, not so much the words anymore.

Seeing her new enthusiasm for filmmaking, a faculty mentor suggested that she take a film course to get away from writing words and to learn about behavior and action through visual storytelling. After graduation she was intent on becoming a director of photography (DP). The DP is the technical camera expert who takes a film director's vision and translates it to a visual reality on the screen. In order to reach her new goal, Martin worked in a number of jobs to prepare for her new career aspirations. She was able to get two very highly prized jobs that provided her with a foundational skill set that would help her as a director many years later.

Martin first gained experience by working in a camera rental business: “I worked in a camera rental house, and that was a pretty hard job to get. And I worked, you know, putting cameras together and building cameras and repairing them, movie cameras.” After gaining technical experience repairing and building film cameras, she was then hired by DuArt Film Labs. DuArt Labs, founded in 1922, was for decades the premier company for processing commercial film and video. Martin was able to get one of the few highly coveted jobs during a period when most commercial production and Hollywood films still used negative and positive film emulsions that once exposed had to be developed and processed. Intent on becoming a director of photography, this job offered her practical hands-on film experience: “[I was]

transferring film to tape, and also shooting Kinescope [transferring live programs or video to film] So I was learning about film in a very really hands-on [way].”

Martin’s major career break occurred when she met Ernest Dickerson. Dickerson was director Spike Lee’s DP (director of photography) on films such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Malcolm X* (1992). Martin began working for Dickerson as his assistant cameraperson.

I met Ernest Dickerson and started to A.C. for him, being assistant camera for him, was building the camera for him, so many different things, sometimes focus, camera reports and such. And I got to watch him and see how he shot and he was such an amazing director of photography and creatively had so much to do with the look of *Do the Right Thing*.

Years later both Spike Lee and Ernest Dickerson, who by this time had become a full-fledged Hollywood film director in his own right, wrote recommendations for Martin helping her to get into graduate school at New York University to study film. Influenced by her studies at NYU, Martin again changed her career focus, deciding that what she *really* wanted to do was to become a film director.

Having directed short independent films, Hollywood feature films, and television series episodes over the years, Martin has experienced and had to deal with both racial discrimination and gender bias in the industry. When discussing how to survive and be successful in Hollywood she says that it is not easy because you have to be talented and also get along with people. Martin argues that in a business, which she characterizes as being both “racist and misogynistic,” it is not easy to get along with people while simultaneously dealing with and addressing the racism and sexism. Her challenge as a director has been to address the racist or sexist issue, but in a straightforward and diplomatic way, or, sometimes, a not so diplomatic way.

So, when a man or a white person says something or does something racist or sexist and they happen to be the powers that be, that hired you, you need to correct that. And what makes it difficult to correct, is that when these people who advertently or inadvertently disrespect race or gender feel insulted when you call them on it—so insulted about you

mentioning it, that they in turn make you the aggressor for hurting their “feelings.” It’s like [when] the four women in congress “the squad” call Trump racist, he acts as if he himself has been attacked and calls them racist, trying to reverse the narrative. So when that happens, you have to walk on eggshells thinking, how do I correct this in a way that cannot be used against me, and that is insane, insane..... f\*ck, it is not my problem.

For Martin, her dilemma as a Black female director has been one of addressing racist and/or sexist behavior by setting boundaries, while at the same time not offending the perpetrators who are often White, male, and hold positions of power and privilege. In one situation, Martin found that diplomacy on the production set did not work and decided to take a much more aggressive approach.

While filming with her crew and cast, one of her bosses walked around the studio repeatedly using the word “cu\*t,” a disrespectful slang and street term for the female vagina, customarily used to infer that the woman in question is of low value, stupid, or both. This male studio executive used the term around the production set all day long in front of both male and female cast and crew members with no one objecting, fearful that they might lose their job. Martin spoke up for her cast and crew, attempting to explain the problem diplomatically.

This is a rape culture. One out of six women has been raped. Which means at least one woman hearing you say this all day has been raped. Imagine what this job is like for her, having to hear the man who can get her fired say this all day long: Not even taking into account, how offensive and belittling this word is to women. *Please stop saying it.* This man tells me “I don’t care what you think, I am going to keep saying it.” Then I got angry. And I was like, fu\*k it. You know what? Say it one more time; I’m not going to roll the camera. I’m the director. I can do that. I will not roll the camera until you publicly apologize to the whole crew. Which I knew that they would never do. And so, it stopped being said. But I don’t work on that show anymore.....and all the producers were too afraid to say something. This is the definition of sexual harassment in the workplace. This man [who] was in a position to get men and women fired, created a hostile environment for women in the workplace, and they were forced to grin and bear it. The producers, the studio, and the network have known about this for years, because he [the perpetrator] continually says it on the dailies [unedited film footage viewed for quality control each day] But yet this network will hypocritically continue to hold meetings about how they have a zero tolerance for sexism and sexual harassment in the work place even though I have been blacklisted from the show without it [the sexual harassment] ever being corrected when it happens in a real way.

What Martin found most frustrating concerning the whole situation was that others of color were silent, afraid to speak up because they might lose their jobs.

I don't need women and other people of color to be in the business just to have them there if they're not going to stand up, you know? If we're there, we've got to stand up. You know. I don't need you just to be there. Do something, all right. I'd rather have, you know, an old white guy sitting there going, hey, that's wrong, you can't do that, you know what I mean? [Rather] than somebody, a woman or a woman of color just sitting there and not doing anything because they don't want to get in trouble. You know?

In another situation Martin was faced with blatant racism when the producer/writers on a show she was working on attempted to assign certain types of crimes to specific types of people of color, based on their race. The White male producer-writer wanted to make a house of prostitution called for in the script an *Asian* house of prostitution, and in another setting a male character who was abusing his wife, cast as an *Afro-American* wife-beater.

On another show, another [White] producer/writer got angry because I said his choice of specifically casting Chinese women to play prostitutes in a whorehouse was both racist and sexist; and he was further outraged when I resisted one of his other producers who told me that we had to cast a criminal [character] as Black because he committed a "Black crime, spousal abuse"? I called him racist and refused to cast a Black male actor in that part. And once again I was Black listed.

Martin says that she has many, many stories such as the examples mentioned. She is in no way apologetic for fighting against what she calls a racist and misogynistic industry culture/climate. Despite what she has experienced during her career, both as a woman and as an Afro-American filmmaker, she is neither bitter, nor is she a victim. Following values that she feels are nonnegotiable, she continues to be very active as a director and is very much sought after professionally, directing episodic television shows such as *ER* (1997), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), *Law and Order* (2002–2010), and *Big Dogs* (2018).

I use to be angry for being punished, for standing up for what's right. I use to be angry when I worked better and harder than anyone else, yet I was struggling to support my child, mother, my stepfather, [struggling to get] director work because someone decided

that “Dannell Martin would never work again in this town because she dared to confront me.” I am not angry anymore. I just accept this is who I am, and this is who they are. Let them do what they are going to do. Bring it!! Because what I can do as an artist . . . sh\*t they really can’t ever stop me. I’m fast and I’m good, and there is always going to be someone who needs me to bail their ass out when they are over budget, or can’t get it done. And besides that, there is always going to be a couple of righteous motherf\*ckers, they come in all races and genders, who aren’t being “politically correct” but [are] just being plain fair—and they are going to hire me, and people who look like me. *Because we get it done.*

Martin is not the only Black director to have to navigate the issue of race and gender bias and to have to resist its adverse effect on their professional carrier. Director Melvin Donalson, PhD, has had his experiences in Hollywood. Donalson represents a new type of Black filmmaker that has emerged in the past 20 years. This new brand of filmmaker is not just a practitioner filmmaker like earlier directors, but is also a scholar who participates in media research, writes historical books, and/or teaches at the university level usually holding terminal degree credentials such as a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or a Master of Fine Arts (MFA).

Donalson’s initial experience with Hollywood began when he worked as a script reader and writer. Although he has directed two short films, he views himself as more of a writer who chooses which medium he will use, to include theatre, film, the novel or poetry. His initial exposure to the Hollywood system was an eye-opener.

I guess the first lesson for me that was surprising, and it should not have been, but again, getting that practical experience, was that in about five years, I had about four different agents. They said, “wow, you’re a really good writer” and they would read my scripts. Whatever I’d submit, they’d say, “Oh, this is fantastic,” but what happened was that there was a difference between a good writer, and for the agent, being a writer who was sellable.

For Donalson, this was the first indication that the industry was more interested in the marketability of a script idea rather than the actual *quality* of the writing.

Being a “good writer,” or however you want to define that, in Hollywood, I found out, was not the same as being a working writer in Hollywood. There was a big difference between those two. Between being that working writer and being the good writer. In

those four or five years of working with four different agents, they dropped me because I hadn't sold a feature..... I began to understand very quickly the economics and how they played a part in this thing that we call Hollywood.

*Gatekeeping*, the intentional or unintentional act of allowing only certain types of films to be produced and distributed, has been a historic problem in the American film industry with regards to Afro-American films. Of the many situations Donalson has experienced in an attempt to navigate the Hollywood infrastructure, one story stands out more than the rest. In order to get more exposure for his writing, he entered a writing competition. He took a novel that he had written earlier and adapted it for a theatrical film. The script, which was competing with over 400 other screenplays, did very well. He moved to the quarterfinal of the completion round. This meant that his work was in the top 50 of the approximately 400 scripts submitted. This exposure resulted in a phone call from a Hollywood producer.

I got a call from this producer . . . he wanted to meet with me concerning my script..... I went over to Hollywood, he had this cottage out back of his house, and he was there with one of the guys who was some sort of intern. We started talking about the script, and he congratulated me. He really thought it was a great script, he read it. I was getting excited, and then he said, "but," there's always that but, you know? I said "yes"? He said "your screenplay," and this is 1988, 89 he said, "Your screenplay's very good, it's all the elements I'm looking for, but your protagonist is a Black woman." I said yeah. He said, "I can't sell this," I said, what do you mean? He said, "I can't get money to make a film with a Black woman in the lead." He said that straight out to me in 1988.

The producer, still impressed with the quality of Donalson's writing and still interested in the script material, offered a possible solution.

Basically, he said, "if you write something else, let me know. Or, maybe we could do this, and we'll just have a White actress play the lead, but then it needs to rewrite some aspects of the script. You think about it." So, I thought about it, but it wasn't something I wanted to do.

Race and gender are not the only factors that influence gatekeeping in the Hollywood system. Often age can inform gatekeeping practices. In an article by entitled "Hollywood Dreams, Harsh Realities: Writing for Film and Television," authors Denise and William Bielby

documented that gender, age, and race/culture inform Hollywood decision-making. The authors found that Hollywood has an unspoken rule that in order to get employed, it is preferred that a person is under 40, White, and male (Bielby & Bielby, 2002).

Donalson himself admits to facing age related bias in his day-to-day interactions with Hollywood. In one revealing story, the writer/director recounted an example of what many directors/producers/writers face, especially Black artists. After moving to Los Angeles, Donalson worked professionally as a script analyst for a Hollywood company.

I had some experience as a script analyst. I worked for a few years working part time at a company, they were located in Century City at the time. I would go come in once a week, I'd get one or two scripts and I'd analyze a script and break it down into the language that company wanted in terms of protagonist, themes, topics, plot points. I felt very confident I knew how to talk about a script, and break 120 pages down to less than a paragraph.

These story paragraphs are used to “pitch” a story to a potential film company. In an effort to sell some of his own work he set up a meeting with another Hollywood company. Donalson intended to do his pitches to the company’s story editor. However, when he arrived, he was shuttled off to the editor’s thirtysomething assistant.

[B]asically, the story editor that had the meeting, when I came to the meeting, he did not, and again, it was a he, he sent me to his assistant, and the assistant had to have been in the early 30s, mid 30s the latest. At the time, I was in my mid 50s. Take it back twenty years, somewhere around the mid-1990s [ actually 2000, and 2001]. We sat there, and I brought in ten ideas, because I wrote them all down, and gave him a copy, I had a copy. I went through each one of the ten, and as I was . . . I would try to do what is normally done when you’re pitching; present it with a film that might be well known and to show how that film represents the mood or tension or whatever that might be in the idea that I had.

As Donalson progressed through his ten ideas pitch, he ran into a problem. An unforeseen problem that he was unprepared for:

And I went through [the ten story ideas], I remember in particular, I was referencing Warren Beatty’s *Reds*, which I thought was an obvious film to recognize. I think it had been nominated for an Academy Award, I can’t remember if it won or not. This guy looked at me, and he had no idea. He said, “Reds?” I said, yeah, *Reds*, Warren Beatty,

you must have seen that film. He said, “No.” As I went through the others, I said about eight of the film ideas I had as I tried to reference what I thought would be recognizable, “Hollywood Film.” This young man just had no idea what I was talking about. Some of them [the film titles mentioned] he recognized the title, but he said, “oh, I haven’t seen this, haven’t seen this, I haven’t seen this.”

Donalson had hit a wall, finding himself unable to communicate with the assistant because the young man, a supposed professional in the business, had not heard of or even seen some of the most successful films in the past 20 years. There was no frame of reference that Donalson could use to pitch his story ideas. The young editing assistant was clueless, ignorant or unaware of many popular and successful films that had been produced during his lifetime.

That narrowed that window for me as a writer to try to pitch ideas, because now I’m trying to explain to someone who has no sense of the traditions and history and examples that I’m talking about. He had no idea the kind of film I’m trying to pitch to him. That was a little discouraging. It was a short meeting.

As a result of his interaction with the assistant, Donalson never got the chance to meet the head story-editor, not because the quality of his ideas or writing were poor, but because the editor’s young assistant, White, male, and under 40, was illiterate in basic popular culture and film history. The assistant in effect had become the gatekeeper between Donalson and the head story-editor, maybe intentionally, maybe by default.

Another director who provided his perspective concerning Hollywood and Black filmmaking is Jesse Vaughan. Vaughan has directed both independent and Hollywood films. He began his career at the age of 19 directing local television newscast at WTVR-TV6 in Richmond, Virginia and later WRC television in Washington, D.C. He eventually progressed to directing nationally syndicated talk shows such as *The Jessie Jackson Show* for Quincy Jones Entertainment, *America’s Black Forum* hosted by Julian Bond, *Meet The Press*, and the *NBC Nightly News*. After 10 years at NBC, Vaughan moved to Los Angeles, becoming the Season 5 director of the 1980s comedy series *In Living Color*. During this period of his career, he had the



opportunity to direct numerous music videos/specials for Elton John, Steve Wynwood, Rod Stewart, Anita Baker, and Stevie Wonder, to name a few.

In 2002 he was recruited by Morgan Creek Entertainment to direct the Hollywood comedy film *Juwanna Mann* (2002), a film released by Warner Brothers studio. In 2016 the Ali Sports Foundation choose him to direct an independent film entitled *The Last Punch* (2017), a film focusing on the last professional fight of World Heavyweight Champion Muhammad Ali. His track record as a director whose work covers a wide range of experience, both in and out of Hollywood, provides Vaughan, a winner of 28 Emmys out of a total of 47 nominations with a broad overall perspective of the industry. When asked what type of filmmaker he considered himself (i.e., independent filmmaker or Hollywood filmmaker), he refused to be identified with any specific category.

I am a filmmaker, period. Whether I do something for Virginia State University where I do documentaries and commercials for them or whether I do something for Warner Bros., or independent film that might be distributed by one of the studios, it's all the same to me. I just pour my heart and soul into whatever I do, no matter who the client is.

When asked whether being an African-American filmmaker affected him in terms of his ability to get financing or job offers, distribution deals, marketing, or publicity support, he responded after some reflection.

That's a heavy question ..... You know what, when I look at life, I look at life as not an obstacle course. I don't look at the obstacles in front of me. I look at what's before me as a challenge. If I were to run a race and am a hurdler, you can approach a hurdle and say, oh my God, look at that hurdle; look at how tall it is; look at how wide it is, how tough it is to get over. I don't look at it that way. I wouldn't look at that hurdle and say, wow, look how difficult that is. I look at that hurdle and say, this is going to be a challenge, and I'm going to meet that challenge. I'm going to make this fun so that I don't get frustrated by it. My thought process, maybe it's a little different. I'm always trying to look at the light at the end of the tunnel, and I'm always trying to find the positive aspects to life in that whatever challenges are before me; I look at it as a learning lesson.

Vaughan approaches any barriers with regards to race as an *opportunity* to grow, become more resilient, and learn. The paradigm he uses to view the Hollywood industry is in the context of business, not race/culture. And as a director, Vaughn feels that technology is in the process of slowly changing the film business, both for Hollywood and for independents:

just maybe five years ago or so, in order to make a film you had to shoot in film, which was very expensive whether it was 35mm film or even Super 16 for an independent film. Now the technology is digital, and so you can edit a motion picture on your laptop. You can shoot a film on an inexpensive camera that can shoot even 4k [very high quality] images, so the access or opportunities to be able to create more independent product is certainly there.

Vaughan agrees with his friend Tim Reid, the director of *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* (1996). Both directors insist that distribution can have a major impact on the success or lack of success of a Black film. According to Vaughn, “. . . the issue has to do with distribution and being able to get your product out there . . . there’s still issues in regards to getting product distributed before the public.”

He points out that compared to tiny budget films where most small independent filmmakers have to promote their own films, Hollywood level promotion and distribution costs are extreme:

it might have been Doug McHenry, he’s kind of a legend as a producer. He did New Jack City and Jason’s Lyric. I think he told me the average cost to advertise a film nationwide is \$18 million, that’s minimum, so \$18 to 25 million.

The director feels that the access problem many Black filmmakers complain about is more about *economics* than race. According to Vaughn, it is the multimillion-dollar cash outlay for the promotion of a film that affects a producer or director’s ability to find a distributor. He says the reality is that the Hollywood film industry is a film *business*:

You hear people say, “Well, my film’s not getting distributed,” but there’s another aspect, from the business aspect is who is in your film and is the film good enough to be able to warrant those types of advertising dollars. Motion pictures to me is a lot like

athletics. You have a star on a team that fills a stadium. The same principle applies to actors. Do they have a fan base? Business people when they look at films, they say, well, what's the fan base behind this film and is it worth putting millions of dollars behind it? The other side to it is the quality of the work. Is the quality of the work there? If the quality of the work is there and it's a great story, I think it has a decent chance, but if it doesn't have stars [famous actors], that's where we get into trouble.

According to Vaughan, the fix for the film distribution issues of Black filmmakers is to create new channels of distribution.

[U]nfortunately, in our community though we look outside our community for people to say, do this for me, when in fact, we have enough resources within our communities to start our own distribution company. It's a question as to whether there's someone out there that's willing to do that. It has to be their passion. I think the answer is to do-for-self and create our own outlets; creating our own networks, our own outlets, and opening theaters as opposed to just depending on outside sources, to do that from within our own community.

### ***Reflections: The Big Picture***

Chapter I tracked the immense progress made in transistor and digital technology over a 50-year period. This foundational technology has informed the 21st-century Information Revolution involving the creation of social media, the ability to organize and work *virtually* using distributed work groups at a macro global level, and the advent of mobile computing.

As confirmed by Hollywood director Jessie Vaughan, new digital technology is changing the landscape for film production. In a process that once required a small army of crew members, large amounts of very heavy and expensive technical equipment, combined with many ancillary services such as music recording studios, film development labs, and a cash intensive distribution system, newer digital technology allows a crew of only four or five people to create, produce, and distribute professional caliber digital film using a combination of cheaper cameras and computer based audio recording, music scoring and notation software, and digital film editing suites, many of which fall within the price range of the general consumer.

Chapter II so far has documented the genesis and growth of Hollywood including the many factors that led to its present-day infrastructure. It portrayed how early immigrants, many of them from Eastern Europe, made early inroads into filmmaking, turning what was initially an entertainment novelty into a mature global entertainment industry.

The chapter also documented how Afro-Americans and others have in large part been locked out of any consistent or meaningful participation with regards to directing and producing films, or in becoming the head of a Hollywood film studio. Because of this fact, films portraying Afro-Americans, often written, directed, and produced by Whites, carry story narratives that are unrealistic, sanitized, or at worse justify racism, often providing a revisionist version of American and world history in films like Victor Fleming's *Gone With the Wind* (1939), John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) or John Landis's *Coming to America* (1988).

In Hollywood films, the true history of Africans in America, the cowboys and settlers such as Bass Reeves, shipbuilders like Paul Cuffee, or inventors such as Garrett Morgan, are missing, replaced instead with many of Donald Bogle's racially stereotypical characters. Hollywood's typical portrayal of Afro-Americans often involves less threatening and more "acceptable" films involving urban gangs and drug dealers, weak or morally bankrupt Afro-American men, some type of buffoonery involving grown men putting on dresses and acting like women, or erratic wild-eyed Ebonics speaking men teaming up with Asian law enforcement partners and using Afro-American culture as a comedic foil.

The narratives contained in the director interviews confirm the present-day gatekeeping behavior of Hollywood studios with regards to Afro-American directors and producers. In today's Hollywood, a good script idea can be rejected just because a Black writer's script has an Afro-American woman as the lead heroine in the story. An Afro-American female director can

be stigmatized in a way that negatively affects her career because she refuses to be bullied by racist and misogynistic White men in positions of privilege and power. Hollywood's human resources gatekeeping policies affectively filter Afro-Americans from being hired or promoted to studio management positions that would give them the power to "greenlight" projects by Afro-American directors and others who are not part of the White, male, and 40 or under demographic. In light of these historic and ongoing problems, the thesis of this study suggests a possible alternative to the Hollywood film industry for Afro-Americans. The thesis begins with a look at virtual teams, team-building, and leadership theory.

### **Leadership Theory, Team-Building, and Virtual Teams**

#### **Leadership Theory**

The subject of team building is an important one in this study. Team building was a major factor in the growth of brick-and-mortar organizations during the Industrial Revolution (1750 to 1850), and the rest of the 19th and 20th centuries. It continues to be important in the new 21st-century information age ecology.

The topic has been the focus of scholars from a wide range of areas of study, such as small group communication, organizational psychology, human relations, group dynamics, organizational operations, and coordinated teamwork. Although much of its literature has been influenced by research in industrial psychology, systems theory, social psychology, communication theory, and leadership development, team building is associated with and is considered a subset of organizational development.

In order to understand team building, it is important to view it through the lens of leadership. All teams, no matter what type, have someone who is the team leader or a person who is in charge. The leadership style of a team leader can have a great impact on the culture,

climate, and decision-making processes of a team. Leadership informs the creation and maintenance of teams, no matter how large or small the teams are.

Investigating leadership theories, which inform team actions and behavior, can be a challenge. The majority of theories available were created to explain leadership and team building within large Western organizations. Many, or most, were created in an attempt to understand how leadership could make Western corporate and industrial organizations operate more efficiently and effectively. Team building theories have been influenced by and are more oriented toward the military-industrial complexes of American and European countries.

The concept of power is a major element in understanding leadership styles. Leadership is really about power, not so much power in and of itself, but actually about how a leader obtains and uses power to inspire and motivate, manipulate, or even coerce others to work together to reach a specific goal or goals.

French and Raven (1959) cite two main categories of power, calling one category formal power and the other category personal power. Within these two areas are a number of very specific types of power. Formal power includes Coercive power, Reward power, and Legitimate power, sometimes called Positional power. Personal power is divided into Expert power and Referent power. The salient type of power to be used in this study is personal power with its referent and expert power subsets.

French and Raven (1959) describe referent power as the type of influence an individual leader exercises over their followers. The leader has referent power because their followers have a strong personal affinity for that leader. That affinity could be because of the leader's personal traits such as personality, ideology, or the talent/skill set of the leader themselves. Weber (1968) provides a foundational theory described as charismatic leadership, which could be used to

explain referent power. The attributes of Weber's charismatic leader include (a) strong behavior modeling, (b) a dominant personality, (c) a display of competence in one's area, (d) self-confidence, (e) the ability to influence others, and (f) a communicator of high expectations.

With regards to expert power, French and Raven argue that its underlying elements are very different. Expert power occurs when an individual has a certain skill set, or is a subject-matter expert in a specific area. This actual power comes from individual skills and knowledge that others do not have. This expertise pushes that person into a leadership position by default because they have skills or information, which gives them an advantage in solving problems or obtaining a goal (French & Raven 1959). Leadership theory informs how certain types of power are used, which informs how the use of that power affects the operation of a team or organization.

For the purpose of this study, the functional leadership theory to be used will be visionary leadership theory. Visionary leadership theory is an area of study with beginnings in the late 1970s. Much of its literature is influenced by Weber's foundational work concerning charisma, Robert House's work in the area of charismatic leadership, combined with McGregor Burns's work in the area of transformational leadership. To understand visionary leadership, one must consider charismatic and transformational leadership.

Charismatic leadership theory focuses on attractive personal traits a leader may have that allow them to lead others. Not only do those traits help the leader lead but followers are often attracted to the leader because of those traits. Transformational leadership theory uses charismatic theory as a foundation, but shifts the focus to not only the leader's traits but also considers the *interaction* between the leader and follower.

A transformational leader uses strategies to combine or match the follower's sense of self to organizational goals and values. The theory's focus is shifted away from the basic traits of a leader, and instead focuses on how transformational leaders influence their followers and on how followers in turn influence the transformational leaders themselves.

Bass and Riggio (2006) list four attributes of a transformational leader. Known as the *Four I's*, the researchers categorize the manner in which transformational leaders influence others through modeling, inspiring, considering followers' needs, and empowering others. They name the first *idealized influence* (II), which involves the leader modeling his or her transformational behavior to others. The second is *inspirational motivation* (IM), where the leader is able to inspire and motivate certain types of behavior in others. IC represents *individualized consideration* where the leader shows a genuine concern for the feelings and needs of individuals. Finally, IS represents *intellectual stimulation*, where the transformational leader empowers others by encouraging them to deviate from the norm and to create and innovate.

A major criticism of transformational leadership theory is that it is not value driven. For example, Hitler is known to have created a very prosperous and efficient German society. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad of the National of Islam transformed major Afro-American inner-city neighborhoods by providing jobs and creating successful well-run businesses. Both men could be considered transformational leaders. However, the hate and pain cause by Hitler's Holocaust resulting in the death of 6 million Jews and Elijah Muhammad's position that all White people are devils are of course not quite what most of us envision when it comes to leadership that positively transforms lives for a better world.



In answer to this supposed lack of a moral compass associated with transformational leadership, the concept of authentic leadership theory is considered by some to be an answer to the supposed weakness of the former theory. Authentic leadership, similar in many ways to transformational leadership, has one major difference. Authentic leadership is leadership that is based on a foundation of ethics, which according to theory is critical if the leader is to be considered truly authentic. If the leader models values they do not truly believe in, then that leader by definition is not authentic. Luthans and Avolio (2003) maintain that “The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders. The authentic leader is true to him/herself, and the exhibited behavior positively transforms or develops associates into leaders’ themselves” (p. 243). Authentic leadership is based on (a) the leader knowing his or herself, (b) the leader being clear about his or her personal moral and ethical values, and (c) the leader authentically modeling those values to their followers, with a focus on training and preparing those followers to transition from being followers to eventually becoming authentic leaders themselves.

The reason for reviewing transformational, charismatic, and authentic leadership is because they indirectly inform the teambuilding leadership style used in this study. The leadership style used in this study is visionary leadership. Although not an actual extension of charismatic, transformational, or authentic leadership, vision leadership borrows from and has been influenced by those theoretical leadership paradigms. Visionary leadership was created as an answer to problems created by the Western world’s transition from a 20th-century industrial manufacturing society, to a 21st-century information society.

The construct of Visionary leadership has been driven by late 20th-century trends. As organizations began to *flatten* and become less centralized by removing multiple top-layers of

management, it became more difficult for management to infuse organizational values into teams and departments, which were becoming much more autonomous and often more geographically dispersed.

Burke (2017) discusses the trend of modern organizations flattening and becoming more *loosely coupled*. The term loosely coupled describes organizations that are no longer run as tightly controlled, centrally located chain-of-command management entities, but instead operate as more separate and independent departments/teams, with greater autonomy in their day-to-day activities and decision-making processes.

The onset of globalization has hastened the need for organizations to be less hierarchal and more loosely coupled, thus increasing their ability to respond quickly to rapidly changing social and economic environments at the global level; without having to depend on direction from a traditional centralized, multilayered, hierarchal management team. Organizational leaders have struggled with the trend of modern organizations becoming more loosely coupled. As individual units within organizations have gained more autonomy and become more geographically dispersed, organizational leaders have had difficulty maintaining uniformity of vision among the various units, departments, or teams within the organization. Visionary leadership has been used in an attempt to answer those challenges.

Visionary leadership is not without its critics, however. Sooksan Kantabutra (2006) points to a gap in the vision leadership literature. Kantabutra observes that one unified operational definition of what constitutes a *vision* does not exist in the literature. Presently the definitions for vision are as varied as the different studies looking at vision as leadership. Making up for this definitional problem, Kantabutra instead focuses on attributes, which he believes are foundational to all of the various vision definitions. He lists seven attributes that he considers

foundational to visionary leadership, no matter what operational definition one decides to adhere to.

The seven attributes labeled as essential to a well thought out vision are brevity, clarity, future orientation, challenge, abstractness, stability, and the ability to inspire. Brevity and clarity demand that a vision statement be short and to the point, quickly stated, and easily understood. Future orientation is a long-term view of the organization itself and the external environment in which the organization will operate. Challenge is mission oriented, motivating people to give their very best for a specific goal. Abstractness is the macro view of an overarching ideal, concept, or value which informs the *who we are and why we are doing this* construct. Inspiration is the motivating ideal that makes organizational members want to work toward a worthy goal (Kantabutra, 2006).

Visionary leadership is the theoretical foundation which informed this study. AfroAM was a geographically dispersed virtual team of autonomous members with specific technological skill sets. Although various amounts of charismatic, transformational, and authentic leadership were simultaneously operating within the AfroAM team, it was visionary leadership that was used to create and maintain the cohesiveness of the eclectic membered and geographically dispersed team.

The vision statement used for team AfroAM stated that “AfroAM is a social justice film production group, who will give voice to those who don’t have a voice.” This vision statement met all seven attributes listed by Kantabutra. One very important point to be made is that a vision statement is not a mission statement. A mission statement explains the reason for an organization’s existence by defining the organization’s present-day purpose and objectives.

Vision statements are a lens through which an organization or team focuses on *what it wants to be* in the future and the values that will frame that future-oriented objective.

Although there was no AfroAM mission statement, if there had been one it may have read like this, “AfroAM is focused on building a virtual digital film production team by recruiting top talent and creatively pushing new consumer digital technology to its limits for the purpose of producing quality digital films.” As can be seen, there is a significant difference in the forward-looking vision statement, when compared to the present-focused mission statement.

AfroAM eventually became a team of three members utilizing the global reach capabilities of the Internet and digital technology to produce mass communication programmatic content: digital film. Visionary leadership is the theoretical strategy that was used to create and maintain team productivity and cohesiveness.

### **Team Building**

Barnard’s (1968) definition of an organization or team is two or more people who come together to work toward a common goal. Based on this definition, any group of two or more people, such as a family, sports team, corporation, or community who coordinate work for the purpose of reaching a specific goal, can be considered an organization or team.

Team building (Lewin, 1943; Mayo, 2003; Schutz, 1958; Tuckman, 1965) is a concept that straddles both organizational development and leadership theory. Modern film production crews are basically small creative teams working together to produce entertainment or informational content. Today’s small film production crews mimic the same characteristics of Air Force combat flight crews, small regional sales teams, or first responder firefighter paramedic units. These types of small group units are normally made up of carefully recruited, highly skilled people, who are emotionally bonded, and who exhibit strong group cohesion.

Team building theory comes under a number of headings and borrows literature from a number of disciplines. The genesis of interest in teams can be traced back to the Human Relations School involving the work of Elton Mayo.

Federick Taylor (2006), considered to be the founder of scientific management, viewed individual workers as just cogs (gears) in the machinery of organizational operations. Moving away from Taylor's scientific management theories of the day, Mayo's research instead focused on the importance of the worker as a social animal, a human being with needs. He felt that people did their best work when working within a natural group and focused on a specific task. His so-called human relations theory involved an attempt to improve worker's interpersonal skills, including both communication and the workers' situational awareness of the social environment in the workplace (Mayo, 2003). In today's literature, these interpersonal and social skills would most likely be labeled as emotional intelligence.

Team theory has diversified with a number of models being created in an attempt to understand how teams work, and how to make them work more efficiently. Although Mayo moved away from Taylor's lens of looking at the individual worker, and instead focused on natural groups during his late 1920s and early 1930s Hawthorn studies, it was Kirk Lewin, possibly influenced by the military industrial complex needs of World War II, who began studying groups using his group dynamics paradigm.

Lewin (1943) felt that to understand groups or teams required not so much a look at individual group members but rather a focus on the interaction and internal dynamics of the group as a whole. Schutz (1958), going in another direction, approached the study of groups by focusing on interpersonal relationships among the group members. He proposed that groups solve problems not all at one time, but in progressive stages. Tuckman (1965) and his theory of

group development embellished on Schutz's *decision-making as process* theme by stating that groups did experience a number of stages when making decisions, which Tuckman labeled as forming, storming, norming, and performing.

Although these various approaches to team theory are all valid in their various approaches to explain leadership and team functions, it is really the work of LaFaso and Larson (2001) whose model may best inform the dynamics of productive and cohesive teams.

The researchers focused on team dynamics as a paradigm for effective team operations. The authors listed a number of areas, which they felt were important to successfully build and maintain a team.

1. The team leader has to focus on team goals, build a collaborative team atmosphere, design and guide the strategy of the team.
2. The interpersonal relationships among members on the team must allow for good input and feedback within the team.
3. In problem solving, the team must have clear goals and objectives and must have good small group communications.
4. The best team members are those who are action oriented, with a can-do attitude, and who have problem solving abilities (LaFaso & Larson, 2001).

What makes a strong team? In an attempt to paraphrase and interpret in my own words, here are the qualities of a strong team: (a) a leader who specifies clear team goals and creates a collaborative culture/climate; (b) team members who are secure enough to be open to positive or negative feedback from other members, while at the same time knowing that their input will be listened to and respected; (c) a team leader who facilitates the decision-making process by highlighting the goals and objectives of the team as the group goes through the normal stresses of

solving problems; and (d) a team leader who builds a team by recruiting members who like to solve problems and fix things and who carry themselves with a positive and confident attitude; members who view problems as opportunities, as opposed to those who see problems as roadblocks.

### **Virtual Organizations and the Literature**

Virtual organizations tend to lack the traditional nonverbal feedback of *proxemics*, the way that humans organize their physical space, and *haptics*, the frequency and manner of personal touching. Even in face-to-face video chats, nonverbal feedback such as facial expression, eye gaze, and paralanguage are filtered through digital technology and displayed on a small computer screen, losing much of their impact. Recent virtual literature suggests that the construct of trust in a virtual organization may be a substitute for this degradation in interpersonal communication. Handy (1995) stated that trust is most important for the success of a virtual organization. Panteli and Duncan (2004) agree with Handy but go a step further, maintaining that trust is not something to be slowly developed in an organization but rather something to be firmly established at the very beginning during the creation of a new organization.

However, according to some researchers, trust is not a stable variable, but is dynamic. Yasir and Majid (2004), using Tuckman's (1965) forming, storming, norming, and performing model, maintain that trust in virtual organizations (VOs), is not something that is static but varies throughout the life of an organization. Starting at a higher level during a team's initial forming period, trust begins to decline during the usual team conflicts which occur in the storming phase of a virtual team, eventually rising again as the group enters its norming stage, and finally

reaching its highest peak as the group matures and reaches Tuckman's so-called performing phase, when the team is most cohesive and performing at its highest level.

Another factor that may influence how a virtual team performs is its command-and-control infrastructure. As mentioned earlier, many virtual organizations differ from earlier traditional brick-and-mortar organizations. For centuries traditional organizations have been tightly coupled with the control of the organization coming from a very centralized location of leadership and management. Although this centralized management model worked very well during the Western world's industrial period, it is slowly becoming outdated.

Centralized administration, by design, is too slow to respond to today's rapidly changing global ecology. The dynamic 21st-century global environment is forcing today's traditional brick-and-mortar organizations to become less centralized, or more loosely coupled, giving their various branches or departments more decision-making autonomy. Virtual organizations, which are often geographically distributed work groups, are by their very composition loosely coupled and, by default, less hierarchical and less formalized procedurally. The literature suggests that the trust factor not only helps overcome the challenges of digitalized interpersonal communication in VOs, but may also makes-up for the lack of traditional centralized vertical control with its traditional hierarchical authoritative leadership style. Gwebu et al. (2007) state that virtual organizations are not vertical in management control like traditional organizations, but are indeed by default more lateral or flat, with less hierarchal control:

Vertical control, hierarchical authority, and formalized organizational procedures and policies are typically absent in Vos . . . trust may act as a substitute for traditional control mechanisms by reducing transaction cost, minimizing uncertainty and risk, and helping in conflict and friction resolutions. (p. 44)

Organizational structure is also a factor that may influence how virtual teams operate.

Virtual groups are not all organized or structured the same. Teams may differ in organizational



structure based on their type of work and overall goals. Burn and Ash (2000) list a number of virtual organization models they have catalogued using such labels as virtual faces, coalliance models, virtual brokers, market-alliance models, and value-alliance models to name a few. The various models relate to the relationships that make up that specific type of team.

Some virtual groups are no more than virtual extensions of a brick-and-mortar organization. Other models reflect partnerships, with separate autonomous organizations working virtually with each other to accomplish a goal. For brevity, and to avoid the many definitions of Burn and Ash's different models, in this research AfroAM has been organized on just one model. That model is Burn and Ash's (2000) coalliance model, which they define as follows:

The co-alliance model is shared partnerships with each partner bringing approximately equal amounts of commitment to the virtual organization thus forming a consortia . . . the consortia may change to reflect market opportunities or to reflect the core competencies of each member. (p. 16)

These co-alliance models are usually found in collaborative function work groups, such as groups designing computer software, virtual consulting, or in the case of the virtual group in this study, the production of mass media programmatic content.

So, in summary, trust, less vertical control with more lateral decision-making, personal core competencies, and finally organizational purpose seem to be some of the significant factors in virtual organizational processes and operations. Many of these 21st-century virtual groups are not meant to be permanent teams but are organized temporarily to solve a problem or reach a goal. Lacking the organizational cues of proper work attire, the hierarchical allotment of workspace, combined with the absence of a chance to gossip at the coffee machine or decompress as a group with a beer after work, factors such as structure, trust level, and type of communication become extremely important for the success of a team.

### **A New Direction with New Technology**

The thesis of this study is based on two major 21st-century conditions. First, the advent of new digital technology has reduced the complexity, cost, and amount of personnel needed to produce a film, bringing the overall financial requirements of some types of filmmaking closer to that of the small independent Afro-American filmmaker. Second, the viewing habits of film viewers are changing. The days of traditional big screen movie theaters are slowly fading, and may even cease to exist in the next 30 years.

Today's iGen and millennial generations are using media differently than their Generation X and Baby Boomer parents and grandparents. The generational term *iGen* or *Generation Z* refers to people born between the years of 1995 to 2012, with millennials comprised of anyone born between 1981 and 1996. These younger generations now have access to subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) sources such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. They use mobile devices such as laptop computers, mobile tablets, and smart phones to watch their films, most of which are streamed over the Internet. These SVOD service platforms are growing in popularity and are contributing to the falling sales of and what may eventually be the demise of the DVD.

Because increasing amounts of film viewing are occurring on screens smaller than the traditional large movie theater screen, cheaper digital production equipment can be used for producing films, which would normally be inadequate for large screen theatrical viewing. The concept of cheaper is relative of course.

The low-end digital camera with filming capacities to be used in this study was bought for about \$3,000. These low-end cameras can vary in price from about \$3,000 up to about \$10,000. Cameras in that price range can produce professional digital quality film, adequate

enough in quality for small screen viewing. The definition of small screen includes anything from a tiny smart phone screen to a large flat-screen home entertainment unit.

For photographing top quality films for large screen Hollywood type theatrical release, the digital cameras are more expensive. At the low end a camera body can cost about \$20,000 dollars, and if the entire multiple lens and camera accessories package is included, the price can be as much as \$50,000. At the upper end, a top-quality digital camera capable of producing professional level big screen movie theater images can cost about \$120,000 dollars for the camera body only, and as high as \$500,000 if the package includes all lens and camera accessories. Most Hollywood film projects don't own their own cameras but instead rent. A number of these high-end digital cameras average a rental cost of about \$5,000 a day, putting it out of the price range of smaller independent Afro-American filmmakers. Some of the lower end cameras often used for industrial, television commercial, or documentary type work can be purchased for about \$6000, such as the Black Magic URSA mini Pro. This cost is still outside of the range of many small Black independent filmmakers. However, there are some cheaper DSL (digital single reflex) *still photography* cameras such as the older Canon EOS 5D Mark III that can still be bought for about \$3000 as of October 2021. These cheaper still photography cameras, also have the ability to produce pristine digital *film* footage. It is the lower purchase price of the \$2,500–\$3,000 range cameras, and equipment, that is the focus of this study.

Why is this new technology important? This lower cost digital equipment is important because it creates the potential for global reach for young independent filmmakers of African descent to produce and distribute digital films on a *global level* for the first time in the history of filmmaking. Personal monetized YouTube channels, combined with video on demand (VOD)

platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu, provide different and alternative film distribution channels. from the traditional Hollywood studio system.

It is important for Afro-Americans to have control of the production and distribution of their own films, to tell their own stories, celebrate their own culture, and document their own history. As one African proverb states, “Until the story of the hunt is told by the Lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” Until Afro-Americans can afford to produce and distribute films with narratives concerning their history, technologies, and civilizations at the *global level*, Black themed film narratives produced by others, even with the best of intentions, will always have a Eurocentric orientation which will ignore, sanitize, or even amazingly deny racism, thereby denying the humanity of African and African Diaspora cultures.

Is this type of control by Afro-Americans feasible? Yes, it is already being done to some extent. Although this study has found no research concerning Afro-Americans *intentionally* forming a virtual film group for the purpose circumventing Hollywood and producing narratives that reflect and serve the Afro-American community, there are some millennial Afro-American filmmakers working virtually.

Independent filmmaker Carlton Smith, the codirector of the documentary *The Black Miami* (2014), represents a new hybrid of filmmaker who has no interest in working in Hollywood but who is using new digital technology as an alternative film production system. He began his career almost 20 years ago working as a production assistant for a company that produced country and western music videos. He worked his way up to production coordinator, and eventually production manager. His directorial work eventually got him nominated for Producer of the Year by the Academy of Country Music Awards. Smith admitted, “I was right there on the edge of really breaking the barrier, and going Hollywood or going more mainstream,

per se.” During his brief stay in Los Angeles, with the opportunity to transition to Hollywood available to him, Carlton decided the West Coast was not for him, “I don’t think I’d go to Hollywood. I am happy in South Florida, but I obviously want to continue to make great films.” It was during this time period that Smith and his production partner and co-director Michael Williams produced their first independent film concerning the history of Afro-Americans and their involvement in the building and settling of Miami, Florida.

One major factor that contributed to the filmmakers’ success was the use of new digital filmmaking technology. Twenty years ago, the cost of producing a broadcast quality documentary would have been very high. The budget for a large production crew and high equipment rental cost alone might have been prohibitive for the two. It would have required cash intensive pre-production and postproduction stages involving the purchase of expensive film negative, the high cost of film processing, postproduction sound mixing, and the extremely high cost of special optical effects.

Smith and Williams benefited from the new digital technology, using cameras no larger than a regular consumer camera, and computer software capable of professional broadcast quality editing and special effects. They also used computer software to write, record, and mix symphonic music tracks, all facilitated by the advantage of using the Internet and social media for promotion, communication, and distribution. During our phone interview he stated that he and his co-director “shot the documentary on DSLR [digital single-lens reflex] cameras, a Canon 5D and a Canon 7D. They look like photography cameras . . . Michael did the edit. He did the edit on Final Cut 7 [computer editing software].”

After the initial shooting was complete, the two directors who lived 35 miles apart used the Internet to work remotely as a team. Smith explained that the two directors worked virtually,

“He lived in Miami. I was in Pompano Beach. We would just go back and forth, back and forth and write down time codes and get on the phone; should we leave that in, should we take that out?” Digital technology gave the filmmakers the ability to transmit digital cinema, music, and photographs to any location in the world that had Internet access, requiring no special technology other than a consumer grade computer, and dedicated software, some of which was available for free on the Internet. The young director says that this new style of film production is a picture’ of the future.

You’d be amazed. I still work with a lot of people in the film community and that’s how stuff’s done. Now with digital, you can shoot all day. You can export your footage and you can get it to L.A. to the executive producers or whomever by the end of the day . . . I can compress it [make the digital film file smaller] and then upload it and send it anywhere in the world.

Twenty years ago, even if Smith and Williams could have afforded to produce a film documentary, they would have faced the daunting task of getting it distributed. Major Hollywood studio/distributors at that time such as Tri-Star, Lorimar, or other studios would most likely have not been interested in such a low budget film from two unknown directors. The filmmakers would most likely have had to seek support from the then newer cable networks, such as A&E (Arts and Entertainment), the History Channel, or the Public Broadcasting System (PBS).

Today’s new digital environment, based on the new video-on-demand or pay-per-view business model includes new distribution entities, very different from the older studio or cable systems. Some of today’s film content providers include Apple’s iTunes store (Apple TV), Hulu, Amazon Prime video, and Netflix. Smith and Williams’s *The Black Miami* (2014) documentary benefited from this 21st-century industry business model and is now being distributed on a global level.

After their film was completed, the young directors were unable to get people to look at their work. Smith admitted that, “It’s really hard to knock on those doors and to get Netflix to look at your film and to get Amazon and Google and all these people to look at your film.” Making little progress, the filmmakers discovered and approached Syndicado, a new Canadian-based digital distributor: “What I did was I found a distribution company that was willing to take on the film and do a split with us. They then went to their contacts and they’re the ones that did all the distribution deals.”

Syndicado is an example of a changing film industry. Very slowly, the major studios that have traditionally controlled filmmaking and film distribution for decades such as MGM, Warner Brothers, Paramount, and Disney are being replaced by SVOD platforms such as Hulu, Google Play, and Netflix. These new SVOD entities, which initially were only involved in streaming film over the Internet, have today become major digital film production studios and distributors themselves, creating, producing, and distributing both original content of their own as well as distributing other content. This new industry development interestingly mirrors the outlawed vertical integrated studio structure of early Hollywood, with entities such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, operating in all three phases of filmmaking: production, distribution, and exhibition. Syndicado, the 21st-century digital film distributor who helped Carlton Smith, operates as the middleman, obtaining films from agents and independent filmmakers like Smith and Williams, and then working deals with platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Studios to sell or lease the film rights for global distribution. Smith says technology is changing everything:

Because of the technology, filmmaking has become a lot easier . . . you’re going to see more Black people, just more people making more independent films . . . because of YouTube, because of the Internet, because of the digital cameras. It’s going to explode . . . I think Hollywood is going to start to shrink . . . you don’t need Miramax or DreamWorks, to get it done. You can do it yourself.

Smith, a thirtysomething millennial, is a professional in the field, with two globally distributed film documentaries to his director credits. He and his generation, digital natives, grew up using the Internet, social media, and new technology. He and his cohorts are using this technology in new and creative ways as an alternative to the Hollywood film industry. This study mimicked the alternative systems strategy of Smith and Williams by creating and operating a small geographically distributed Afro-American virtual film production team.

### **Summary**

This research was proposed and conceived by myself, a practitioner. The study was designed to address a practitioner's problem, by ferreting out the most effective strategy for Afro-American filmmakers to appropriate and use new digital systems as an alternative to the Hollywood film industry. Being a practitioner-centric problem, action research was eventually chosen as an appropriate research strategy.

The major advantage of creating a virtual team when compared to traditional production groups is one of cost. Virtual team members can do much of their work from home, saving hundreds and even thousands of dollars in office leasing, utilities, and insurance cost, including a reduction of travel time to and from work. Virtual work also allows a team to use talent from anywhere in the world where there is an Internet connection, as opposed to bringing an editor or composer to the team's location, which would involve the cost of travel, car rental, and temporary housing during pre-production, filming, and pre-/postproduction. Since a virtual film group's product is electronic and digital, there is no cost for film development or processing, and one can avoid the cost of supportive services such as music scoring and recording, or postproduction special effects. Instead, with a few computers and dedicated software for editing, audio recording, and music mixing, most work can be done from the comfort of a team



member's own home or office. This is the status of the 21st-century digital revolution and its ongoing effect on digital film production.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Chapter III describes the research methodology, methods, and design used in the study. The chapter also locates my positionality as a researcher, my personal perceptions, and offers operational definitions used in the research.

#### Research Question

This research explored the potential of Afro-American virtual teams producing films using new digital technology, the Internet, and social media, as an alternative to the Hollywood filmmaking industry. This study is about empowerment, the empowerment of Black filmmakers and the community they serve, taking advantage of a paradigm shift in power, created by 21st-century digital technology.

A research question should inform the methodology, method, and design of a study. This study's methodology, method, and design were chosen based on the best strategy available to answer the research question. The study pursued a qualitative approach focusing on the sense-making and phenomenological experiences of virtual team participants to locate the lens through which they experienced their world. The research was inductive, not deductive, exploratory not descriptive, and topical not cultural. The intent of the study was to collect data on team processes and perceptions in a practical real-world environment, to discover and then enhance the performance of the virtual team in its production of digital film.

The research question asked was, *what are the most effective leadership and team-building practices/processes for creating a virtual geographically dispersed Afro-American film production team, with the intent of producing digital films, using new digital technology, social media, and the default global infrastructure of the Internet?*

## **Methodology, Methods, and Design**

During this study my positionality was that of a co-researcher participating in the research with other co-researcher team members. I worked as the virtual team's leader, while also quietly operating as a field observer. My research positionality was as an internal emic with the intent of obtaining a native-view of team dynamics and processes, as opposed to the more positivistic etic or external researcher positionality. As stated earlier, this positionality allowed me to do research *with* my team members as opposed to doing research *on* other team members. This effectively elevated members of the team to a position of participant co-researchers in the study, as opposed to research subjects.

### **Research Design Choice**

The research design used in this study is action research. The intent of action research is to focus on a practical real-world problem or problems, and through a cycle of data gathering, analysis, and feedback, make immediate real-time adjustments to improve the quality of practice, or to solve a specific problem.

The underpinning philosophical foundation for this dissertation is informed by Kurt Lewin (1943), who is credited with first using the term *action research*. Lewin's outline for action research involved a cyclical strategy of planning, action, and then analysis of the results of that action, for further action. Herr and Anderson (2015) stated, "Lewin believed that knowledge should be created from problem-solving in real-life situations" (p. 12). It is also important to note that Lewin, who was a Jewish immigrant from Hitler's prewar Germany, framed his theory of action research within a context of social justice, a context which informs this research.

There are various traditions of action research, influenced by the fields in which they have been utilized such as education, nursing, and business management to name a few.

However, several very important characteristics differentiate all action research from traditional research.

Herr and Anderson (2015) describe action research as research where “research participants themselves either are in control of the research or are participants in the design and methodology of the research” (p. 1). Denscombe (2010) defines action research as an attempt to define a problem “and discover a guide for best practices” (p. 6). Based on these two definitions, it can be argued that action research is an intervention where measures are taken to change or improve a situation in a real-world setting. Unlike traditional research, action research often relies on the experience, skill set, and talent of participant/stakeholders to inform and enhance the research process elevating those participant/stakeholders to the more democratic and participatory status of co-researchers.

Newton and Burgess (2008) identify three possible modes or categories of action research, including a knowledge-generating mode, a practical (improvement of practice) mode, and an emancipatory mode. The knowledge-generating mode leans more toward the positivist side of research to test a specific “intervention” within the framework of a particular theoretical framework. The more practical mode of action research focuses on improving a service or operation. The emancipatory mode is intended to boost the situational awareness of participating practitioners, to empower them to obtain a better understanding of problems in their field.

This study uses a practical action research mode that allows its participant practitioners to research and develop a level of best practices in the field. This practical action focus has traditionally been used in the area of organizational development and team building. It is a practical mode of research that encourages a collaborative research approach with participants deeply involved in the design and execution of the study. Unlike traditional research, the core

values of action research ensure that members involved in the study are equal participants/co-researchers, and not static objectified research subjects to be studied.

The essential characteristics of action research include repetitive actions of planning to improve a situation, implementing the plan, observing the effects of the intervention, reflecting on the intervention results, and then using that reflection to plan further for an amended intervention based on previous results (Kemmis, 1982). The steps are cyclical and often involve numerous iterations before reaching a position or level of satisfaction. McKernan (1988 as cited in McKernan 1991) clearly defines the utility of action research: “The primary goal of this research is not to write research reports and other publications. Action research aims at feeding the practical judgment of actors in problematic situations” (p. 173). It is for this reason that an action-research design was chosen for this study.

### **Methodology and Method**

The epistemology of this qualitative study was constructivist and sought to discover the lens through which the various team participants viewed their world, and how that view affected the operational processes of the team. Two different methods were used to triangulate the data in an attempt to strengthen the validity of the research results: field notes of observations and conversations, and a final individual survey combined with an end of study online group discussion using the Zoom video meeting platform.

### **Data Collection**

Two different sources were used to collect data for this study. The sources included daily personal field notes and an end-of-study individual survey, combined with a follow-up group discussion using the Zoom platform. These two sources were used to triangulate the information

gathered providing cross-verification of the data to strengthen the credibility and validity of the research. Field notes were the primary method for collecting data.

Field notes as a qualitative method have been effectively used in a number of disciplines including sociology, cultural anthropology, and medicine. My field notes were divided into two different sections. The first section included notations concerning observations of the team during the study. The second section of the notes produced metadata focused on my personal reflections of those observations. The reflections section included audio and video media files, questions, opinions, and other reactions to the observed team performance.

A possible weakness of this type of research method is of course observer bias. Data filtered through the eyes of the observer have the potential to be colored by the observer's cultural background, age/gender, and religious or political views. This potential bias was balanced through the triangulation of the field notes with the end-of-study survey method and team group discussion. The field notes began as soon as the Institutional Review Board approved the study.

### **The Study**

I decided that the most practical way to do research with regards to a virtual team was to actually design and operate one. The literature review in Chapter II documented definitions and research trends to better understand the elements that make up such an entity.

At the micro level, the term virtual team or organization could describe a group who works together in a virtual environment: all residing in the same building of a brick-and-mortar organization. The actual physical distance between the group members might be only a few desks apart. A virtual group can also involve members in different offices on different floors within the same building. At the mezzo level, it could include members scattered across a whole

city. At the macro level, some virtual team members could be dispersed globally among various nation states. For this study the AfroAM virtual team was designed to be a national virtual team operating within the confines of the United States, with some members as far away as 1,400 miles. Originally there was an intent to have an international team with at least one member operating in another country, but it was decided that the complexities of dealing with international law, in addition to handling the rules for conducting international research, would be too much of a burden.

There is also a temporal element involved with regards to virtual organizations or teams. Many VOs are temporary groups that have been created for the short term, to work on a specific goal or problem. Other VOs are more long term, with some being permanent. For the purpose of this study, the AfroAM team was created to be a temporary team, a team that would eventually be *paused* in its present form after the completion of the study, and then redesigned and reactivated as a new real-world team, based on the research results of this dissertation.

An operational definition for a virtual team was needed for the study. It was decided that for the purpose of this study, a virtual team or organization is *two or more individuals who organize temporarily or permanently to accomplish a goal using computers, communication software, and the infrastructure of the Internet or other analog or digital electronic networks.*

During my earlier predissertation research in 2015 and 2017, I designed small virtual teams to study the viability of using virtual groups to produce mass media programmatic content. The 2015 research group was a virtual radio production team. The 2017 research group was a virtual film production team. At the end of each study members of the group were interviewed. The 2015 virtual radio team consisted of eight persons, and the 2017 virtual film group was composed of three members.

During the 2015 study, the radio production team produced a 28-minute radio documentary. At the end of the study, team members were given a semi-structured open-ended exit interview to locate and document lessons learned. Some of the salient lessons learned from the 2015 study were as follows:

1. Members preferred synchronous communication over asynchronous communication. Although emails and texting were effective, real-time face-to-face video chat was the preferred communication method by the group. Unfortunately, the real-time communication during 2015 period was audio only, using FreeconferenceCall.com.
2. The data also showed that members wanted to see not only communication addressed specifically to them, but also wanted to be cc'd and included in cross-team communication not explicitly directed to them. This would have aided in their overall situation awareness, giving them a feel for what was going on with the rest of the team.
3. Members stated that they preferred being briefed on team rules and policies much earlier, at the beginning of the team-building process.
4. Members also felt that future team recruitment processes should use a candidate's digital technology skill-set and their availability for real-time chats, as a *filtering* criterion for choosing those eventually accepted to join the team (B. Taylor, 2015).

During the 2017 virtual film production team study, the subject of communication was again emphasized by team members but with different results. When asked about communication preferences, the results varied not only from member to member but were also situational in context. The virtual team's film editor preferred using email in one situation and video chat in other situations.



Email is my favorite form of communications because thoughts can be carefully constructed, but, when difficult methods or ideas have to be discussed.....Google Hangout [video chat] is best. (B. Taylor, 2017)

The team's production assistant, a single mother of twins and a student voiced her communication preferences based on her time management issues,

I would probably answer an email or text message faster than I would a phone, especially if I am at work or busy with my children.....I probably would say text messaging [by cell phone], or Google chat like chatting back and forth more so than the email cuz sometimes with your phone, the emails don't pop right up. (B. Taylor, 2017)

Feedback from these two earlier predissertation studies informed this research. Literature concerning factors affecting virtual organizations and team dynamics continues to emerge.

Traditionally, organizational literature has focused on areas of management, team building, and culture/climate regarding 19th- and 20th-century brick-and-mortar organizations. However, new research focusing specifically on virtual teams suggested areas of importance that informed this study. As mentioned in Chapter II, some of the themes located in more recent virtual organization literature include trust, a horizontal versus vertical chain of command infrastructure, and the virtual team's structure or style.

### **Study Design**

Chapter II showed that Hollywood has historically portrayed racist or unauthentic images of African descendant people in its films on a global scale. The industry continues to perpetuate and supplement the negative stereotypes often found in other popular culture media. Beginning in the early 1900s, through the 1927 genesis of the Hollywood film industry, until today, people of African descent have fought to create and produce films that accurately represent people of the African Diaspora.

For this reason, the intent of this research was to study and discover some best practices for using virtual teams and digital technologies as alternatives for young Black filmmakers. If

successful, the research results would help those filmmakers create films which countered some of Hollywood's racist narratives, and also help those young filmmakers to sidestep the industry's financial and distribution gatekeeping practices. The AfroAM film team did this by using 21st-century digital technology involving audio/video production software such as Audacity, iMovie, and Final Cut Pro X, using computers, tablets such as the iPad, and digital cameras, all combined with the interconnectivity of the Internet and World Wide Web, for the purpose of producing digital programmatic content.

This concept is not new. There are Black filmmakers who are already using the Internet and digital technology to produce independent films, such as directors Carlton Smith and Michael Williams who virtually produced their film, *The Black Miami* (2014). However, as far as can be ascertained, prior to this study, there had been no scholarly research investigating a virtual team's best practices for producing mass communication programmatic content. As a result, for this study, a real-world geographically dispersed virtual film production team was created, its members scattered across the United States, with the objective of producing professional *broadcast quality* digital film, but using only equipment readily available to the general everyday consumer.

### **Selection of Participants**

A number of criteria were used in the selection of the study's participants. Since the study concerned Afro-American filmmakers, the Afro-American community, and the African Diaspora, the intent was to recruit Afro-American participant team members. Although this was the preference for this particular study, team members from other cultural backgrounds were considered, based on skill set, availability, and convenience.

The original intent was to build a five-to-six-member production team. After considering the logistics and level of difficulty of a larger team, it was eventually decided to create a smaller team of only four members. The final team included a former member of my earlier pre-dissertation virtual team, a White millennial who served as the team's Digital and Infrastructure Specialist. The other members of the team included myself as producer-director, and an Afro-Latina, who was recruited to be the team's producer/consultant. The final team roster consisted of a three-member film production group. In addition to the three-member team, a Hollywood director served as an outside mentor/consultant, and later also became one of the study's Hollywood director interviewees.

### **Team Member Credentials**

In addition to myself, the original team was comprised of Infrastructure and Digital specialist Jake Allinson, Producer Mimi Machado-Luces, our production assistants, one identified as C, and later another identified as M, plus our outside mentor, Hollywood director Jessie Vaughan.

Allinson worked as a video editor and production assistant during the 2017 virtual production team's predissertation research. He was initially recruited through the freelance worker platform Upwork. He is White, a member of the iGen or Z generation, and is the youngest member of the team whose digital literacy and technical skill set were very impressive.

Part of his job during the 2017 pre-research study was to train other team members in the use of the digital editing suite Final Cut Pro and to help build the team's virtual infrastructure. He did an excellent job. By the time this study began, he was almost 19 years old, a full-time college sophomore, and owned a small production company.

Producer Miriam (Mimi) Machado-Luces is an Emmy award winning Afro-Latina documentary film director and television producer. She was born to Trinidadian parents in Venezuela and grew up in Miami, Florida. She identifies herself as a *TriniVene*. Years ago, she was one of my brightest and most gifted media production students, and I personally recruited her.

Her experience includes working in professional television production houses in Washington D.C., and 15 years of working for BET, the Black Entertainment Television cable network. One of her better-known documentaries, produced and directed for BET, is the film entitled *The Afro Cuban All Stars Crossing Borders* (2011). At the time that she was recruited to the team, she had over 25 years of major market film and broadcast television production experience. She also owns her own film and television production company, MIMITVA Inc.

The team had two different production assistants. The first assistant identified as C was unable to work at the beginning of the research because of personal challenges. The team then recruited a second production assistant identified as M during the beginning stages of the study. Unfortunately, M was unable to handle the job of production assistant, struggling with a seeming lack of situational awareness in a virtual environment, or possibly spread too thin with other outside interests. Because of M's difficulty adapting, the team had to eventually let him go.

The team's outside mentor was Afro-American Hollywood director Jesse Vaughan, a winner of 27 Emmys for his film and television work. His credits include two feature films, *The Last Punch* (2017) and *Juwanna Mann* (2002). His television credits include music videos for Stevie Wonder, En Vogue, Rod Stewart, and Elton John, including a number of Season 5 episodes for the television comedy series *In Living Color* (1990–1994). Vaughan has also directed a wide variety of narrative projects including documentary, feature film, and music

videos. As the team's mentor, Vaughan served as a consultant concerning conceptual discussions and technological topics.

Vaughan is also involved in producing small informational films for various colleges using the EOS Cannon 5D Mark III digital camera and the Final Cut Pro digital editing suite. This is the same equipment and software that the AfroAM team initially planned to use to produce the dissertation film. The team's original intent was to take advantage of Vaughan's technical knowledge of both the 5D Mark III camera and the Final Cut Pro editing software to address various technical problems encountered during the production. As the team's producer/director I consulted with Mr. Vaughan who served as mentor.

With the exception of myself and Jake, the team's digital specialist, the attempts to recruit other team members was done through a recruitment letter, my personal broadcast industry contacts, or schools with communication programs. The letter was sent to various sources to locate suitable personnel for the research.

### **Building and Operating the Team**

My job as the team's film director was to focus on the creation of our digital film. It is the director who has the vision and technical expertise needed to bring a film to completion. Mimi's job as producer was to coordinate and administrate the production of the film. As a producer, she was responsible for ensuring that I had everything I needed to direct the film. As the digital technical specialist on our team, Jake designed the infrastructure of our team so that we could work virtually. Our production assistants' job was to assist everyone on the team by keeping notes of meetings, doing research on assigned topics, keeping our Dropbox account organized, and scheduling interviews. The production assistant also needed a social media skill set to build an online presence for the team.

Once the IRB committee approved the research on November 16, 2018, the team began immediately. Our first order of business was to design the infrastructure for our team. The infrastructure had to facilitate the creation, storing, and movement of large files of photographs, music and sound effects, voice-overs, interviews, and digital film footage.

The team itself consisted of three *studios*. Studio A, my studio, was comprised of a 2015 Apple iMac (older mechanical hard drive), a small Behringer 1204 USB audio mixer, a 2011 iPad tablet, and a 2008 and then later 2015 MacBook Pro. Studio B belonged to our digital tech specialist Jake and was comprised of 2015 MacBook Pro laptop, using Final Cut Pro X editing software and a handheld H4N digital audio recorder, and studio C belonged to Mimi the team's producer.

The initial creation and design of the team's infrastructure was led by Jake, the team's tech specialist. His job was to find ways to connect a team that was scattered over some 3,500 miles. The task of building a professional team in general was very difficult for a number of reasons. First, the team's goal was to avoid using high-end professional equipment, but instead use only equipment normally available to the general consumer. Second, both Mimi and I were what Prensky (2011, p. 3) might call "digital immigrants," meaning we did not grow up with the new digital technology. Both of us were originally trained to work in professional multimillion-dollar analog film and television studios during our careers, so there was a steep learning curve for Mimi and me to unlearn many of our *professional* skills and techniques, and instead learn to create using only amateur level digital equipment and production techniques. Jake on the other hand was a "digital native" (Prensky, 2011, p. 3), belonging to a generation that grew up with digital technology. He exhibited a very high level of skill and knowledge of social media, consumer level production equipment and software, and the Internet.

When Jake was asked to set up the team's Dropbox account he did it in *seven minutes*. Twenty-three minutes later he had the whole team connected so that we could share documents, digital film, and audio amongst ourselves. To enhance the environment where we could work together as a team, Jake chose the team collaboration platform, Slack.

Slack is a virtual team collaboration platform that allowed the group to communicate, operate, and create. Slack provided a virtual space that allowed the team to store small files of audio, store text and film footage, to make phone calls, and to share desktops with each other during team meetings. When asked why he choose Slack as opposed to the team emailing, he stated that "email is dead." When I asked him to elaborate he stated, "I think our generation is moving towards faster collaboration, when it comes to solving problems..... Slack helps us solve problems quicker instead of emailing back and forth." He emphasized that using chat or what used to be called instant messaging was faster and more efficient than sending emails. His generation tended not to use emails, because emails were too slow.

Speed of communication was not the only issue or concern during the initial creation of the team. In the beginning, connectivity was also a major issue in building the team. The team eventually concluded that the connectivity problem was a combination of some of our older somewhat outdated computers, coupled with the slow and narrow bandwidth of individual team member's Internet service providers.

The initial problem resulted in dropped phone calls when using Google chat and later dropped video calls with Slack during team meetings. By January 6, 2019, the team had very quickly found an alternative and decided to use FreeConferencecall.com for weekly *audio only* team meetings. Later, the team would transition from FreeConferenceCall, to the Zoom platform for weekly audio/video team meetings.

Secure storage was also a concern for the team. After considering Google Drive, Apple's iCloud, and other cloud storage servers, the team elected to use Dropbox to store all film footage, music tracks, text transcripts of interviews, and photographs. Jake configured the team's Dropbox account, so that whenever one member added a file, picture, music, or film, it would sync and instantly be loaded onto the individual computers of the rest of the team. It was necessary to sync the team's computers to Dropbox, because most of the team's media files were too large to send by email, plus Dropbox offered better protection from potential Internet surveillance, or interference by bad actors.

Once the team's infrastructure was set up, the team continued to work on some basic human resource guidelines for civilized day-to-day team interactions. The team had been working on the guidelines since the middle of November 2018, around the time that its IRB application had been approved and the team had begun the study. The team's guidelines for respectful behavior were called the team's *Rules of Engagement*, a term borrowed from the United States military.

The rules included guidelines for respectful communication between team members for the purpose of informing civilized and respectful behavior of team members toward each other, regardless of their race, age or gender, religion, or political affiliation. The idea of rules of engagement had first been used during my 2015 predissertation creation of a virtual radio production group called Dreamgroup. The guidelines were found to be effective at that time, and the AfroAM team decided to use them again, with some modifications.

During this time period team members were coordinating and communicating on a daily basis, including a group team meeting at the end of each week. The purpose of the once-a-week group meeting was to apply basic action research procedures by reviewing feedback concerning



work done that week, analyzing how to improve the product or process being discussed, and agreeing on and implementing new procedures to improve the quality of that work. Much of the earlier team communication involved basic training and house-keeping chores such as learning how to work in a virtual environment using Slack, FreeConferencall.com, and Dropbox.

Slack was used for communicating and posting work-in-progress samples to the rest of the team. Dropbox was used to store team media files and paperwork, and was organized like a team file cabinet. FreeConferenceCall was used for weekly group meetings and to receive free phone calls from others outside of the group.

Originally the team intended to produce just one practice film, before starting to work on the final dissertation film. Eventually however, between December 2018 and December 2020, the team produced four practice films. As the team's director, I felt that this was necessary in order to help the team increase their production skill set level. Jake the digital specialist learned more about production and producing films by working with Mimi and me. On the other hand, Mimi and I as production experts, became more digitally literate by working with consumer level tools and software that Jake specialized in such as MacX, YouTube Downloader, MacX video and Final Cut Pro X. Each of the four test films were produced to both solve a specific technical problem or problems, and to polish the overall production skill set of the team.

Many of the technical problems involved the team's need to figure out the steps needed to produce a film product that would play well *cross-platform*, from the smallest smartphone and handheld tablets, to laptop and desktop computers, as well as large wall-sized flat screen televisions.

Some of the team's challenging questions were: How can we ensure that titles that look great on a large flat screen television will also be legible on a small iPad or iPhone screen? How

do we ensure that the film's audio-track sounds crystal clear on an iPhone or Android, while at the same time sounding rich and full, with plenty of bass, on a large flat-screen television connected to Bluetooth wireless audio sound bars? How can we quickly move large 10 to 20 gigabyte digital film, music, or text files cross-country between various team members? How do we protect the security of our sensitive material such as phone numbers, interview consent forms, and recorded audio of our team meetings? And, how do we ensure secure communication between team members working virtually as they travel around the country using public wireless nodes, such as those found in airports or local coffee shops? The team used the creation of the four test films to work on answers to some of these questions.

All four practice films were eventually posted on the Antioch PHDLC site, an internal website belonging to the Graduate School of Leadership and Change, which in the beginning was comprised of about 350 members. In each case the feedback to our test films was very positive for the most part, and helped the team to produce a better-quality film the next time. Each subsequent test film showed an increase in complexity, professionalism, and showmanship, resulting in a higher quality film, a result that was eventually exhibited in the final finished dissertation documentary entitled, *Big T* (2021).

There were two areas regarding the process of producing the documentary film. The first part was internal, which involved continually building and improving the team's infrastructure and learning to work together in a virtual environment. The second part was external and involved acquiring and learning to use new digital cameras, computer software technology, and gaining a skill set of being able to photograph *broadcast quality* digital films.

The team's production equipment included an EOS Cannon 5D Mark III DSLR (digital single lens reflex) camera capable of filming pristine quality footage that could be displayed on

1080 HD widescreens, coupled with the use of Pro Master Bi-Color Professional specialist LED lights. Later during the shooting process, a fourth generation 12-inch iPad Pro 2020 was used. The iPad Pro proved capable of recording video in both 4K and 1080 HD.

The team's main digital audio recorder was the Zoom H4N digital hand-held recorder (each member owned one) used in conjunction with an eight channel Behringer audio mixer. This \$250–\$300 hand-held H4N audio recorder allowed the team to record audio superior to what could have been recorded in many professional music recording or radio production studios 30 years ago.

Postproduction software included the audio editing software Audacity, downloaded from the Internet for free. Although Audacity does not have many of the professional features of professional industry standard audio production software such as Adobe Audition (Cool Edit Pro), the free audio production software was able to produce high quality professional audio for all of the team's production needs. For postproduction film editing, the team worked with both Apple's free amateur video editing suite, iMovie, coupled with the more expensive and higher-end consumer priced Final Cut Pro X.

The challenges faced by the team were enormous in the beginning. The first film the team produced was created a month after the team began operating during Christmas 2018. Although the film had not originally been planned for in the original research proposal, as the team's director, I felt that giving the group an immediate project at the very beginning of the team-building phase, would create team cohesion and speed up the steep learning curve of working in a virtual environment. As team leader it was my layman's attempt to quickly usher in and accelerate the team through Tuckman's (1965) forming, storming, norming, and performing stages of team maturation.

The first film involved the use of the Canon EOS 5D digital camera to photograph original footage. The camera produced professional quality HD digital film. It was also the first time that the team used a voice-over recorded by Mimi using her H4N audio recorder. Mimi voiced the narration for the film in Washington D.C. and downloaded it into Dropbox which immediately made it available to everyone else on the team. Mimi's voice was then edited, and mixed with music and sound effects for the Christmas film.

It should be noted that during the entire period of dissertation study, none of the team's members ever met face-to-face. At no time was there a need to mail or ship CD's or records, photographic film, or pictures cross-country. Everything was done electronically, over the Internet and Worldwide Web.

The December 2018 Christmas film was completed and distributed December 9, 2018, at the end of Hanukah. It was posted on Antioch's PHDLC platform to an audience of about 350 persons. The final product, comprised of live digital film footage, still photographs, music tracks and sound effects, was well received.

During the month of November and December 2018, while the Christmas film was being produced, the team continued to look for a production assistant replacement for the team's original production assistant, C. Just before Christmas a young man was located by a senior member of the National 100 Black Men organization.

After contacting the young man, identified as M, and his agreeing to join the team, I explained what type of paperwork would be needed to get IRB (Institutional Review Board) authorization from Antioch to bring him on board. He disappeared for two weeks. Both Mimi the team's producer and I attempted to get the needed paperwork from him, but he did not respond to any emails. After approximately two weeks of no communication, I decided to write an email to

drop him from the team. However, the day I was preparing to send the email, Mimi found him, spoke with him, and got his paperwork in so that we could officially send his info to the IRB committee.

He gave very vague reasons as to why he had been missing when questioned about where he had been. The IRB approved his paperwork mid-January 2019. After being approved M showed up for one initial meeting, and then disappeared again for another three weeks, resurfacing only after the 2019 Super Bowl in February. When Mimi asked where he had been, and why we had not been able to reach him or had not heard from him, he only said that he had some activities that kept him busy during Super Bowl weekend, still failing to offer any explanation for the other two weeks that he was unreachable.

I immediately decided that M had to go. Wanting to be inclusive in the decision-making process, I also asked for input from other team members. Producer Mimi said he needed to be dropped, however our 18-year-old millennial Jake responded by telling me that I was the leader of the team, and that I should lead. He felt it was my job as the team's leader to decide what to do, not his. I was surprised at his response at the time. He later explained during the end-of study-group exit interview, that since he was only 18 years old at the time, working with a group of people, all of whom were old enough to be his parents, he did not feel he had enough experience or know enough about life to help fire an older adult from the team. Even though I spent numerous hours telling him verbally and showing him nonverbally that he was a full and *equal* member of the team despite his age, he still did not feel he had the life experience to make such a decision. Later during the end of study group discussion, he admitted that being asked to make that type of decision caused him great *anxiety* and that he felt, given his age, he should never have been put in that type of decision-making situation.

After feedback from the team concerning M, I sent the email I had written but not sent a month earlier telling M that the team was letting him go. After M was dropped, the team was fairly quiet and subdued for a number of weeks. During our next weekly meeting, we did agree as a team that we would try to locate a *third* production assistant, but if one was not found, a production team of three would be considered viable.

In January during the time when the group had been wrestling with the M situation, the team had decided that it would be good to have a web presence. The building of websites was not part of my skill set, so I delegated the project to Jake and Mimi, both of whom had website building experience. The intent of the offline practice website was to experiment with concepts that might someday inform a public team website in the future, after AfroAM transitioned into a real-world entity.

Jake and Mimi initiated the creation of the website. Jake with his computer coding background along with Mimi and her Afro-centric cultural curation talents made a good website building partnership. They eventually produced a very professional looking site, which included many still photographs taken by Mimi, and a technically sophisticated set-up created by Jake, using the website and hosting platform Squarespace. The Squarespace platform had initially been created as a student project by Anthony Casalena in 2004 while attending the University of Maryland. It proved to be a very easy to use and sophisticated site for webhosting.

Mimi and Jake were able to produce a fairly polished team website using the Squarespace hosting platform. Although the site was never officially published because it was for team members only, it was however mistakenly left in public mode, which allowed about 800 unauthorized visits from other Squarespace customers.

Our second test film, originally intended to be completed by February 1, 2019, for Black History Month, was behind schedule because of wasted time dealing with our missing and problematic team member, M. In an effort to increase the production values of the second test film for Black History Month, the team had planned to use historic archival footage.

Mimi had federal credentials giving her access to both the Library of Congress and the National Archives in Washington D.C. However, physically getting there and using those historic resources had proved to be a problem. Mimi's first attempt to get material for our first Christmas film failed because the streets of D.C. had become a major logjam during the funeral proceedings of former President George W. Bush, December 3-5, 2018. Later in the month before her next attempt, both the National Archives and Library of Congress were closed from December 22, 2018, to January 22, 2019, during the longest budget shutdown of the federal government in U.S. history.

With no ability to access archival film, photos, or music, the team decided to look for other sources. The Internet is full of information related to Afro-American and African History and events, but as the team's digital immigrant film director, I did not have the technical skill set to retrieve the information. Jake, the team's digital specialist mentored and trained me and the rest of the team concerning digital downloaders and converters such as MacX Video converter Pro. This type of software is specifically designed to pull audio and video material from Internet sources and download it on a person's computer.

Once trained, the team was able to retrieve speeches, photographs and audio from Malcom X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Shirley Chisolm, and former president Barak Obama. In spite of being two to three weeks behind schedule, the team worked 12-hour days and finally posted the film to the 350-member PHDLC site on the last day of Black History month, February

28, 2019. Again, the response to the film, which was much more complex and polished in quality, was well received.

The major advances in the second film included first, a much higher level of complex film editing, and better-quality voice-over audio from Mimi, in addition to voice-overs from me that were added to the film. Although my voice-over was recorded hundreds of miles away and at different times many weeks apart, no indication of that fact could be heard when the two were mixed together in the final film track. Secondly, better quality archival still photographs were used with higher resolution, i.e., 1080 pixels by 1920 pixels. And third, the film exhibited a better exhibition of showmanship and overall production values.

After the second film, produced for Black History Month, the team took a much-needed pause. During the three-month period that the team had been in operation, our producer Mimi had gotten married; Jake, who was struggling to find a work-life balance as a sophomore computer major with a very challenging semester of classes, was set to travel overseas to the United Kingdom for some Christian missionary work. I was task-saturated with practicing and learning to operate new digital equipment and software with the intent of producing better quality professional digital films in the future.

As I considered what the team had accomplished so far and the intensity associated with that work, I began to consider what a future real-world production team might look like after the completion of the dissertation. I concluded that a 32-hour four-day work week would provide the future professional team with good work-life balance. I also decided that the future team would take a two day *pause* every two months. Those two-day pauses occurring every two months would involve setting aside two regular work days, and using them for whatever. They could be used to do a two-day team gathering or retreat to just relax and bond as a team, or the two days



could be used for brainstorming future projects, or even used to take field trips to collect ideas for possible future films.

For the first two weeks of March 2019, the team paused operations until Jake returned from England. During that time period, I spent some time interacting with the team's mentor, Hollywood director Jesse Vaughan. I also gave my dissertation committee members access to our AfroAM Slack platform, which had been operational since September of 2018, two months before the team was officially formed. Since all work and team post were saved in Slack by default, this allowed my committee to review what the team had been doing for the past few months. During that time period I also continued to work on ideas to improve our team website.

By March of 2019 the team was very adept at moving large files of digital film between members, and recording and mixing professional quality voice-overs. The team was at a point where using communication and work software such as FreeConferenceCall, Slack, and Dropbox were now second nature. With the team's internal infrastructure established and functional, the group began to focus more on the external challenges of digital film production.

From March 2019 until July 2019 the team spent time doing large amounts of experimenting to increase the team's skill set, and to solve various technical problems. Based on lessons learned from those experiments, I disassembled, relocated, and rebuilt my production studio, the team's studio "A."

In July of 2019 I decided that the team should take an extended break. Knowing that I could not both rewrite and edit a dissertation, continue to write field notes, and produce a film simultaneously, it was decided that the team would take a break. The break would allow me time to continue to rework the dissertation. That time period extended from July 7, 2019, to November 1, 2019.

Although there were no team meetings or productions going on during that time period, I did use the time for personal training and enrichment while taking brief writing breaks. Some of that time was spent talking to and drawing inspiration from other film directors, such as Igbo independent filmmaker Clare Anyan-Osigwe from the United Kingdom, *No Shade* (2018), along with Hollywood directors Darnell Martin, *Cadillac Records* (2008), and Jesse Vaughan, *Juwanna Mann* (2002). I found conversations with them concerning their personal work and the industry in general, inspirational and motivating.

On November 1, 2019, with the rewriting complete, I reactivated the team and we prepared to focus on production once again. However, just before the team began production, my iMac computer, the team's main production computer, crashed. It was eventually found that the problem was the computer's power supply which had to be replaced. The resultant crash created the need to have the computer's hard drive completely erased and reformatted, and backup files reinstalled before production could continue.

Even though the team had produced two practice films, it was felt that we still had a lot to learn and were not ready to produce a professional product just yet. Although the previous films were of good quality, they still had what the team felt was a *student film* look to them. We knew we could do better and wanted a more professional and polished look. The next film, another Christmas holiday film for 2019, would be our third attempt to reach our self-imposed benchmark for quality, complexity, and showmanship.

The team had a lot of catching up to do. There had been no real organized team work for almost six months. Whatever skill set level the team members had achieve earlier in the year, was rusty at best. Production skills can be fairly volatile when not used, especially when

teamwork is involved. So, the intent of the third film was to bring the team back up to speed and to reach for that much sought-after level of professionalism and showmanship.

The first order of business for me as director was to get studio “A” up and running again after having my computer repaired. This involved reassembling the entire studio and running tests to document its ability to produce professional level recording, mixing, and editing. The test took about two weeks from November 1, 2019, to November 15, 2019, to complete. By this time, team AfroAM had been up and running for about a year.

I had been trying to get our producer to record some new audio voice-over tracks for the upcoming 2019 Holiday practice film, but Mimi was struggling to get them produced. She lost her \$200-dollar H4N Zoom audio recorder. This is not the first time that this had happened. When she had misplaced the recorder before, she had taken the initiative to purchase an adapter, microphone, and special software that allowed her to record the audio needed by the team, using her iPhone. Although the audio was not in the format we wanted, we were still able to adjust and use it anyway. Then after buying and using her iPhone adapter and special microphone to record those voice-overs for us, she then lost the adapter and microphone she had purchased. As a result, the team could not rely on her to provide audio for the new Christmas holiday film for 2019. We eventually solved the problem by taking earlier recorded voice-overs of hers and combined them with voice-tracks of her husband (a nonprofessional with a beautiful radio announcing voice) that had been recorded earlier in the year, and mixed/edited them into one smooth track which we eventually used.

This pattern of behavior, where a talented and highly functional team just seems to fall apart, is something that reminded me of a point made by Chester R. Barnard in his book *The Functions of the Executive*. Barnard (1968) makes the point that organizations do not exist in a

vacuum but are affected by the environment in which they operate. The term environment could refer to both internal and external factors such as the external economy or political environment, or the internal context of a team member's family responsibilities, age, gender, or marital status.

I would see this occurring with the AfroAM team. Although the majority of Jake's responsibilities on the team were completed once the team was up and running, he still had the stresses of being a college student with a full year of tough classes as he strove to make the best grades possible for graduate school. He sometimes missed important dates when the team needed to pay its bills.

On the other hand, Mimi as a mid-career professional was struggling with multiple personal responsibilities. The most devastating challenge for her was dealing with menopause. It is a sensitive personal and medical issue, publicly addressed in this study (with her permission). As a male leader of the team, I knew that there was no way that I could comprehend the physical, cognitive, or emotional challenges affecting her ability to perform.

In addition to her physical challenges, she was also a newlywed, married about 30 days after the team began operating in November 2018. Just six months after the team began to operate, she also began a new job as a Senior Television Producer for Prince George's Community College, a job that required her to go through the normal six-month probation period. With these various stressors affecting my team members, I took on a more dominant role in getting the 2019 holiday film completed.

The first December 2018 test film focused on using live footage shot with the Canon EOS 5D Mark III, and working out the logistics of just how to produce a film virtually. The second February 2019 Black History month test film focused on creating more complex mixing of audio tracks, and using more sophisticated visual editing.

The intent of the third December 2019 Christmas film was to focus on, first the use of special effects and second, enhancing the film's narrative through the use of stock footage from companies such as Pond 5. The team also included more digital film footage and less still photographs, and to get the best possible visual quality, used higher resolution archival film footage, and higher resolution photographs..

The completed film was eventually posted to the now 360-member PHDLC website on the first day of Hanukkah, December 22, 2019. The latest production was very successful from a production point of view. All of the benchmarks for the film were met and the response from the PHDLC audience was extremely positive. Our only major failure involved my intent to polish the production skill set of the team, because the team, more specifically Mimi as producer, did minimal work on the project for the personal reasons mentioned earlier.

The completion of the third test film resulted in providing the group with some much-needed production parameters or guidelines to follow for future productions. We decided that any photographs to be used in our dissertation film should if possible use a picture ratio of at least 2800 by 1000 pixels. The 2800 by 1000 ratio produced excellent picture quality in the group's third film. It was also decided that in the future all film audio tracks would be recorded, edited, and mixed in the WAVE format, as opposed to the MP3 audio format. The WAVE format by default produces superior audio fidelity when compared to the MP3 audio format. In the 2019 Holiday film the WAVE format produced superior sound quality.

We also realized that we should only use the Canon EOS 5D Mark III camera in *high key*, or bright lighting conditions. Originally, the Mark III was created to be used as a still photography camera, and was not really designed to be a film camera. Because of this fact, it had some limitations. Although it was an excellent still photography camera, and also photographed

very beautiful digital film footage in bright light situations, the camera did not operate well in low light situations, producing somewhat grainy (noisy) images. With these factors in mind and assured that the group could now produce a professional broadcast quality product, the team entered its pre-production phase for the final dissertation film January 1, 2020.

One of the most challenging issues during the team's pre-production phase was attempting to meet Antioch's permissions requirements. The situation was difficult because no one on the team had the skill set to get music permissions. Obtaining the rights to use popular music in a film can be, and often is, very complicated and very expensive. There can be multiple permissions that must be obtained depending on what music the filmmaker is trying to get permission to use, and how he or she plans to use it.

One song may require a synchronization license, a master use license, and a performance license. The *synchronization license* would allow AfroAM films to synch or use a piece of music in its film or video. The *master license* would allow AfroAM to use a *specific* music performance of a song by specific person, or group. The *performance license* would allow AfroAM to broadcast or post that film with the music on the Internet.

As the film's director, I wanted to use very old R&B or Rhythm and Blues music, because it created the Afrocentric ambience that I wanted in our film. Because of the age of the music, some of it almost 50 years old, the original owners of the music were dead, and the companies they worked for had been absorbed by other companies, which had in turn been taken over by larger companies, or in some cases, the original recording companies were now defunct.

For example, the team wanted to use the first **13 seconds** of a music intro to a 50-year-old record by the R & B group, the Dells. The title of the song whose intro the team wanted to borrow was, "The Love We Had Stays on My Mind" (1971). Attempting to get permission to use

the music proved to be impossible without outside professional help. Finding the present owner of the music was the biggest challenge.

The song was originally written by Terry Collier and Larry Wade for Cadet Records. Cadet Records was originally a subsidiary of and owned by Chess Records in Chicago. Chess Records became defunct in 1975, and its master-tape record library was eventually passed onto and managed by Sugar Hill Records owner Sylvia Robinson, through her music management company, All-Platinum records.

In the 1980s All Platinum financially failed, and the former Chess master-music tapes were bought by MCA Records, a company which eventually merged with Geffen Records, an imprint label of the Universal Music record company. To complicate matters even more, the former Chess records recording by the Dell, now owned by Geffen Records was unfortunately destroyed along with many other Black music classics in the 2008 Universal Music company fire.

Because of the industry's legal complexities in acquiring music licenses, filmmakers normally use professional licensing companies, or lawyers who specialize in the complicated process of obtaining music rights, an option that was unfortunately far outside the AfroAM team's financial budget.

Eventually the team decided to use music from Pond5, an online digital marketplace where creative artist can purchase and sell royalty-free media. Although using Pond5 served the functionality of getting music to complete the AfroAM team's film, the original intent of using older, better quality, and *authentic* Afro-centric music produced by gifted and well-known Black writer/producers such as Charles Stephey (Ramsey Lewis, Earth Wind and Fire, The Dells), or

Howard University graduate Willie Hutch (The Fifth Dimension, Michael Jackson) was unfortunately never realized.

### **A Debilitating Blow to a Struggling Team**

As the team continued in pre-production mode, external forces forced the team to shut down. On Monday March 16, 2020, AfroAM was forced to shut down operation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID virus situation caused the nation's infrastructure to shut down, with many states issuing stay-at-home orders. For the second time in two years, the Library of Congress and National Archives were again closed as were other colleges and universities whose libraries the team had hoped to use as alternative sources of archival photographs, music and film.

The team's intent had also been to use colleges and universities as sources for the recruitment of a small four-person location production crew. This volunteer crew would have been involved in the actual location shooting and production of the film. With most camera and film stores closed, the team also was unable to buy other needed equipment. With the closing of computer repair businesses, banks, and legal assistance to obtain music licensing rights, the AfroAM team, like many other organizations in the U.S., was without the infrastructure support needed to do business on a day-to-day basis.

One of the most devastating problems for the team was connectivity. With the shutdown and stay-at-home orders, the Internet became increasingly crowded because of the higher-than-normal usage by the country's stay-at-home population. This higher-than-normal Internet usage involving streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, combined with online gaming and higher than normal Internet surfing, caused increased instances of dropped Internet telephone calls or chat messages for the team. The lack of available bandwidth exasperated the



situation with degraded upload/download speeds as the team attempted to transfer large files of audio and digital film. In some situations, the group was not able to connect at all as a team.

During my initial 2014 predissertation brainstorming sessions concerning the potential of creating a virtual production team, I had very briefly considered the fragility of virtual teams. To operate as a geographically distributed work group, a virtual team's existence depends on its *connectivity*, provided by software, equipment, and networks. No connectivity, no team. The COVID crisis in 2020 plus a local snow storm with power outages in 2021 provided a real-life demonstration of the fragility of our team. In spite of a virtual team's cost effectiveness, paradigm-shifting power to provide access, and speed of operation, virtual groups as a whole are very fragile infrastructures that depend on millions of bits of computer code, hardware parts, and networking components to work properly for a team to be viable.

Because of the COVID situation, the team's original intent was to be shut down for 30 days, starting March 16, 2020. That initial 30-day period, eventually extended into four and a half months, with team operations not resuming until August, 1, 2020. During that extended time of approximately five-months the team was unable to effectively operate.

Once some of the restrictions to movement and infrastructure were lifted, the team immediately jumped back into pre-production mode. A good portion of the month of August was spent performing audio tests. As a director who was originally trained as a musician and who came from a strong radio production background, I felt that many talented filmmakers who normally are visually trained artists with strong visual skills, are sometimes lacking in their ability to produce strong soundtracks for films. I wanted to make sure that we produced a film that was strong both visually and aurally. During August 2020, most of the team's time was spent experimenting with audio *imagery*.

In radio production, imagery is defined as *creating a picture in the listener's mind*, using any combination of voice, music, and sound effects. In radio there are no pictures, so audio is manipulated to create a picture in the mind of your listeners. In film production the viewer has pictures to look at, and the soundtrack is used to more or less supplement and enhance the visuals. A film director has the ability to manipulate both audio and video to create a real or fictional world, for the purpose of moving the film's narrative forward.

The entire month of August was spent experimenting with and tweaking soundtracks to create a *big* sound for the team's future film. The same experimentation was done with digital film footage in an attempt to also create a *big* and *expansive* visual look or feel for the upcoming film.

At the end of the month the team received some very serious news. One of the team's members and their entire family had tested positive after contracting the COVID-19 virus. This effectively shut down the team for a second time during 2020. Operations would not resume until October 1, 2020.

By October 1, 2020, as the team once again began operations, it was apparent that the chances of getting a film shot before Christmas were very slim for a number of reasons. First, libraries were still closed, making it difficult to obtain historical archival film footage, photos, and music for the documentary. Secondly, the state of Texas where the team had eventually decided to produce the film had a mandatory face-mask law, with mandatory 6 feet social distancing, making any type of legal film interviewing close to impossible. Thirdly, to shoot digital film using a Cannon EOS 5D Mark III camera including all of the lights, microphones, and other equipment accessories for a location shoot, would preferably require four to five crew members; two at the very minimum. Unfortunately, during this time period, traditional sources

for recruitment of film crew members were unavailable because local colleges and film organizations, combined with other Black churches and fraternal organizations, including business organizations and arts programs, were closed because of the pandemic.

### ***Big T***

As early as January 2019, the team already knew what type of film they wanted to make. The team's goal was to gather and document stories from *elders* in the Afro-American community covering various topics concerning their life experiences. As a director I felt that this was very important.

My personal opinion was that a lot of wisdom about life was being lost because many youngsters did not spend time talking with the older members in the community, as much as they had in the past. In fact, I felt that many youngsters did not even talk to each other that much anymore, instead opting to spend their time on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media.

On more than one occasion, I remember sitting in a local pizzeria or other fast-food restaurant observing groups of youngsters. In one situation as I watched a group of about ten young people at a table, I was both perplexed and somewhat saddened as I watched them sit, silently staring at their mobile devices, blank faces devoid of any youthful enthusiasm or joy. unengaged with their peers who were sitting right next to them, and with a total lack of situational awareness. During an earlier period in time, during my youth, a group of six or eight of us in a similar setting would have been excitedly laughing and loudly talking amongst ourselves, fully engaged with our physical and social surrounding.

So, after observing these types of conditions in our community, were young people appeared to be social media addicted, socially disengaged, and with very little interactions with elders in the community, the team felt it important to become Griots (traditional African

storytellers) to produce programmatic content carrying the history, values, stories and myths of the local area, and of the African Diaspora, by educating and also counteracting the dishonest and negative narratives produced about people of African descent

The problem I had as the film's director in a COVID-19 environment was to figure out how to shoot a professional quality film, *by myself*, without any location crew. This is something that is almost never done in filmmaking. There are too many different skills needed to shoot a location film, and too many variables to be dealt with once on location. After about a week's deliberation, I felt I had found a solution. It was a solution which I found distasteful, but a solution that I nonetheless felt was an answer to my dilemma.

Earlier in March of 2020, the Apple computer company released their fourth generation iPad Pro. The iPad is a tablet computer with the same capabilities as a laptop computer but with greater mobility. One of the major features that caught my attention was the iPad Pro's ability to shoot very high-quality digital film.

This \$800-dollar plastic mobile computer had the capability to shoot digital images superior to my \$3000 Canon EOS 5D Mark III. The iPad offered options, such as filming in 4K UHD resolution, a resolution twice as sharp as the normal HD 1080P. The \$800 computer also had the ability to shoot slow motion, or film in time lapse mode. While filming, the beautiful high-resolution iPad screen also offered the ability to adjust the picture or sound of the recording, without the operator having to look at other monitors, or use other equipment for that type of control. With these features, I realized that filming with an iPad pro would simultaneously allow me to perform the job of sound technician, cinematographer, and film director.

The latest fourth generation iPad Pro 2020 could also be used as a self-contained production suite. Using just the iPad Pro alone, the computer tablet had the ability to film

superior quality digital film, compose and create original music sound tracks using Garage Band, and then mix the film's audio. Technically, an entire film using nothing more than iMovie or other editing software, and Garage Band could be produced on just the 12-inch iPad itself, bypassing the use of audio mixers, desks and laptop computers, or having to pay for a recording studio and musicians. This was possible using an \$800-dollar plastic computer tablet driven by its A12 Z Bionic computer chip made up of somewhere around 10 billion transistors, a far cry from the original 4 transistor Japanese AM radios loved by teens during the early 1960s. In spite of all of the great production capabilities of the iPad Pro, my personal distaste for using the iPad was admittedly driven by my personal and professional prejudices.

After spending five years in film school to earn a terminal degree in film production, the thought of using an amateur piece of equipment that any 16-year-old without any knowledge of filmmaking could operate, was an anathema to me. Unfortunately, today's computer software makes it possible for a person who has no talent or ability in a certain field, or who is not trained in a certain field, to produce professional quality material without really understanding the process, or without having to use any of the critical thinking and decision making normally used in producing professional photographs, digital film, or music material.

There is software such as Auto-Tune, that can make a person like myself who has no singing talent whatsoever, sound good. There are automatic cameras such as the Canon EOS Rebel T6, which can allow a person to take beautiful pictures without that person having any knowledge of composition, lighting, aperture or lens choice. So, although I was pleased to have found technology that would allow me to film the team's documentary by myself, without the help of location film crew members, the use of that technology made me feel as though I was

somehow cheating, not actually using the professional skills I had trained so hard to obtain in film school, and during my professional career.

While wrestling with this love/hate concept of working with amateur consumer level equipment, I recalled a moment when I complained to my dissertation committee chair about how I really did not like using some of the newly learned production techniques I had to learn while using consumer level equipment, because it felt *unprofessional*. He wisely and somewhat comically stated that he did not see why it should be a problem, because after all, this was what the dissertation was all about anyway, the attempted use of consumer level technology, to produce a professional level film documentary.

By early November 2020, I had purchased a 12-inch fourth generation iPad Pro 2020. The next three weeks were spent learning how to film professional quality digital film and purchasing adapters and other accessories that would allow me to use the mobile computer tablet as a high-quality digital camera. At the same time, I was in the process of canvassing the local Black community in Dallas in an attempt to locate community elders whose stories I might want to document.

Not being familiar with the city, and not wanting to travel all over the Dallas metroplex hunting for people to interview, I looked for locations where large numbers of Afro-Americans normally congregated. I eventually discovered the Pan-African Connection bookstore. The bookstore serves as a major community gathering place in the Oak Cliff community of Dallas Texas, and includes a bookstore, Art Gallery, and a community resource center, which hosts various activities and services such as a chess club for kids, a community volunteering program, and an outlet and market place for Black owned farms, and other food and dry good vendors.

By interacting with people during various events at the bookstore, I began to locate leads for possible interviews. The lead that eventually found the film's *elder* subject came through the local American Legion. The American legion is the largest military veteran's service organization in the United States, founded in 1919. One of the few Afro-American Post, the Alvin Wheeler Post 292, was located within the same shopping complex as the Pan African Connection Bookstore.

I visited the Commander of local Post 292 and explained that I was looking for elders with life stories to tell. After understanding that I was producing a film, and that the film was connected with my PhD dissertation research, the Commander, retired Navy veteran Keith Wilkerson, who is a PhD himself, decided to help.

Although he had a number of potential candidates, all of whom were former military and who also were members of the post, he suggested a former Marine who served in Vietnam and went by the nickname "Big T." Big T, whose real name I later learned is W. S. Turner, had been awarded the nation's Silver Star after saving the lives of nine marines during a battle his unit fought against an entire Viet Cong company on May 27, 1968.

The taping of the two Big T interviews were the most difficult thing I have ever done during my professional career. Working without a location film crew and alone, I had to set up, operate and monitor, the lighting, audio, and recording of the interview, using a \$800-dollar iPad that I was still learning how to operate.

Professional digital film cameras are much easier to use because they are designed for the sole purpose of shooting film. Using the iPad, which was not really intended to be used as a professional film camera, was much more difficult to shoot with, in spite of the beautiful high-quality digital film images it produced. Shooting digital film with the iPad Pro made the

filming operation very task-heavy, in a solo operation that was by default, already extremely difficult to execute.

Added to the challenge of multitasking the normal technical issues of location filming, was the very serious concern for the health of both myself, and Big T, my participant interviewee. Contrary to most normal interviews for student films, the interviews with Big T were not some light weight student exercises. I realized that if I made any misstep, it could result in myself, Big T, or both of us becoming very sick, or even possibly dying from COVID-19. During that time period, many in the country were sick, and many more were dying.

I was painfully aware of the danger because by November 2020, medical experts had already established that older Afro-Americans and Latinos, especially those 60 years old or older were at risk. And anyone within that demographic, who already had any other pre-existing health issues, were even more prone to catching the virus, and where at *extreme risk* of dying from it.

Earlier in the summer of 2020, it had been scientifically established that a single individual could be infected with the virus, show no symptoms whatsoever, and still be a carrier with the potential of infecting a host of other people. Remembering the mantra to *do no harm*, I stayed away from Big T as much as possible during filming, wore gloves and a face mask, and minimized my time working close to him and touching him (he wore no mask) to adjust his seating position, or to attach his microphone.

Contrary to my usual style of interviewing, during Big T's interview I maintained the six-foot social distancing bubble to protect him, and used hand sanitizer when handling things that both he and I had to touch, such as my Antioch research consent form, his microphone, or his military service medals. In hindsight, even if I had been able to find a four- or five-person location crew, I never would have used them, because having four or five production



crew-members hovering around an elderly man who was not in the best of health during a global pandemic, would have been a sign of very poor judgment, and a gross lack of concern for the health of my participant interviewee.

The live interview footage with Big T was filmed during two separate sessions of about an hour each in length. The American Legion post commander Keith Wilkerson was kind enough to allow the filming to be done in the American Legion Post facility before regular opening hours.

After reviewing the two earlier Big T interviews which were done in late November and earlier December 2020, I felt that there was something missing. Something was needed to tie the two separate Big T interviews together and to give the interviews deeper context. I decided to initiate a third interview with the post's commander Keith Wilkerson. As a military veteran of the United States Navy, I felt that Wilkerson's interview would add perspective for any nonmilitary viewers of the film, to help them better understand the heroic actions of former Marine Lance Corporal, and later battle field commissioned Lieutenant W. S. Turner (Big T).

Once all interviews were filmed, the grueling task of postproduction began. A film's postproduction involves the reviewing and editing of the film. This can involve finding and mixing voice-over narration, music, and sound effects. Other special effects and film titles are also added. In traditional predigital filmmaking, when directors filmed using real emulsion film that had to be developed, such a production would involve a large team of people to handle the various areas such as audio, film, special effects, developing and processing. However, the AfroAM film team, using its new 21st-century digital technology, only needed me as the director to handle many of those areas of production. If this type of single person postproduction had been attempted 20 years ago during the era before advanced personal computers and digital

production software, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible for one person to handle it alone.

For the postproduction of the film, the team had originally planned to use Final Cut Pro, a consumer priced but professional film editing software. However, because of the pandemic and other team issues, I never had time to obtain a comfortable enough skill set level to use it. Instead, I decided to use the less sophisticated and more amateur version of Final Cut Pro, iMovie, a basic editing software that comes packaged with all Apple computer products. It was used to edit and mix the final film.

Because the National Archives and Library of Congress were closed and not accessible to our credentialed team producer Mimi, as were most local public and university libraries, archival footage of Marine boot camp and Vietnam combat footage was obtained from Pond5.com to supplement Big T's narration of his military experience.

From December 20, 2020, to January 21, 2021, postproduction editing continued on the movie Big T. Because of the digital infrastructure of the virtual team, we were able to communicate and coordinate using the team's Slack account. We purchased archival battle scenes and music tracks from Pond5 and stored/posted rough versions of the film in progress in Dropbox, allowing the rest of the team to see the postproduction progress being made.

Twenty years ago, a nonvirtual team shooting with the older emulsion film would have spent large amounts of both money and time traveling to purchase film, shooting the filming, and then taking it to the lab for processing. Once processed the team would have brought it back to the postproduction facilities to edit and mix. Music would have then been added, using real musicians, recorded in an actual recording studio costing the team studio rental fees, salaries for each musician, and the salary for one or more recording engineers. The film would then have

been taken back to the laboratory for a final print to be made. Once a final print was made, copies of that print would have been made and mailed to various customers around the country or world.

The AfroAM team did many of those steps very cheaply and in many cases for free. Taking advantage of the new digital technology, the AfroAM team performed most of those postproduction steps from the comfort of private homes, hotels and airports, or coffee shops, thereby avoiding the overhead of office space, parking space, recording studio time and musicians, or insurance/utility cost. The only tools used to edit, mix, store, and then distribute the film product, were a couple of Apple computers and iPads, a small audio mixing board, and the global interconnectivity of the Internet. Other than the actual location filming of Big T and Dr. Wilkerson, the AfroAM team did everything else in their production by merely pushing electrons back-and-forth across the United States.

This new 21st-century digital ecology allowed the team to produce a quality film, faster, cheaper, and with a smaller production crew, while at the same time maintaining complete control over the subject matter, and having to make no compromises with regards to the film's direction, or treatment of the film's narrative.

On January 21, 2021, as the completed film was being polished and prepared to send to my committee, I emailed the exit survey to the team. As stated earlier in the study, the purpose of the survey was to elicit the AfroAM member's perceptions concerning team climate, culture, and processes encountered during the past two years and during the making of the film.

I asked team members to fill out the survey and return it, and reminded them that once the surveys were returned, the team would meet as a group and discuss the surveys and any other feedback they might have concerning their experience while working on the team. They had

been told at the beginning of the study that they would be surveyed and that the study would end with a live group discussion.

Once the team members returned the survey, I then revealed for the first time, that I had been recording field notes on the day-to-day operations of the team during the entire study. The fact that I had been taking field notes was not originally mentioned to the team, because I wanted to get natural day-to-day reactions in a natural setting. My feeling at the time was that if the team were aware of my observing them, they would behave differently than they normally would, and I would end up with the “Hawthorn effect” polluting my data (Landsberger, 1957).

After revealing that I had been taking field notes, I explained that I would now make those notes available to them, so that they could read and compare my perceptions of various team events during the study with theirs. The team members were told that as co-researchers, they were free to give their feedback on my field notes during the upcoming group exit interview on Zoom. The field notes were sent on February 6, 2021.

Once I had given the field notes to the team I asked the team to pick a convenient date for the team to meet for our team exit interview. One of the weaknesses of the team was that they had sometimes struggle with making certain decisions on their own, without my intervention, something that was very puzzling to me. I could delegate certain tasks to them, such as building a team website and they would independently work well together, and do a very good job. But, if I asked them to decide as a group, on something as simple as a convenient time to meet as a team and let me know what they decided, for some reason they consistently failed.

For this last meeting for the team’s exit interview, I asked the members to “decide on a time and let me know.” Once again, even at this late date, at the end of the research, one member would say this time is good for me, and another would say I can meet at this time, but they were

unable to make a *definitive* decision as a group. Earlier I had tried to fix the problem by giving Mimi the team's producer that job of *forcing* the team to decide. That worked for a while, but now here at the end of the study, the same pattern was apparent. Team members were mentioning good times to meet, no one was taking the initiative to say, "this is when we are going to meet." When a team fails, the failure is the responsibility of the team's leader, and in this area of independent decision-making, for some unknown reason I failed.

After talking to the team and *forcefully* demanding that they pick a meeting time, the group finally choose Saturday February 13, 2021, for the group meeting on the Zoom platform. The meeting occurred on time and had more or less a festive atmosphere. We all felt a sense of accomplishment after two long years of multiple tests, experiments, and a lot of practice, which eventually resulted in a fairly professional and polished documentary film. As a team we felt that we had accomplished our goal of producing something of value to both the African Diaspora, and also to a general audience.

The team spent more than an hour discussing and comparing answers given on their individual surveys, and also commenting on my field notes. The meeting gave the team an opportunity to expand on and explain their survey answers, and to correct or augment what I had written in my field notes.

Some of the data collected regarding team members perceptions were interesting and in some cases, even surprising. Members also gave very specific feedback on the skill set members of any future team should have in order to be successful, and general recommendations for future virtual teams intending to produce mass communication programmatic content.

### **Research Results from the Study**

Field notes provided the main source of data for this study, supplemented with an end of study survey and group discussion. The intent of using the survey as a second source of data was to triangulate the results to enhance the validity of the study, and to serve as a counter-balance for any observer bias insinuated into the field notes.

### **Study Delimitations**

By definition, action research has very specific delimitations. Unlike traditional scholarly research, action research is focused on solving a particular problem in a specific situation and context. The focus is on practice, not theory. The study was delimited to the AfroAM virtual team. There was no intent to generalize to a larger population of virtual teams. The study only documented what was found to be true in the AfroAM virtual team environment, with its specific participants, given their specific skill sets, during a particular period of time.

### **Assumptions**

There were a number of assumptions that drove this action research. I assumed that I possessed the required skill set to successfully execute the study. I assumed that the volunteer participants were personally vested in and convinced of the importance of the research. I assumed that the study's participants would answer all surveys and interviews with integrity and truthfulness. After much planning, designing, and benchmark technical testing of the team's production equipment, I assumed that our virtual studios would perform at the expected level and successfully produce broadcast quality digital film.

### **Ethics**

The ethical goals of this study were straightforward from the beginning. The study was executed in a manner that would protect the well-being of the participants and the community

during the attempt to solve a problem. This became extremely important with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Antioch Investigator's Research Handbook set the foundational ethical guidelines for the study. Further specific research guidelines located in the PhD Leadership and Change program's 2017–2018 handbook also informed the study.

Hilsen (2014) suggests that covenantal ethics, which is based on the “responsibility to act in the best interest of others,” can be an important concept with regards to action research and suggested three concepts that are foundational to covenantal ethics, “(1) the acknowledgment of human interdependency, (2) the cogeneration of knowledge, (3) the development of fairer power relationships” (p. 2). Winter (1996) also posited some essential ethical attributes that should inform action research. Permission should be obtained from the practitioner/participants before collecting data. The lead researcher must maintain confidentiality. The research work must be transparent, and all participants must have both access and input during the study. Contravening points of view from various participants must be acknowledged and negotiated before publication. All of the elements mentioned by both Hilsen and Winter, were monitored and complied with during the study.

With regards to Big T, we went to extraordinary ethical lengths to protect him both physically and psychologically since he was a veteran with intense combat experience. I called him by phone to introduce myself and to tell him what I was doing and what the interview entailed to make sure that it was something that he would want to do. He agreed to the interview without hesitation. He understood that I was working on my PhD and that the film was a part of it. He understood that in the end, a lot of people would see his face in the film, and hear his story. He was clear on what his public exposure might be. He also understood that he had control of the

narrative, and control over how he would be presented in the film. He understood that he could back out or change his mind at any time, even after signing the consent form.

We empowered him by *putting him, the participant, in total control*. He personally saw the film as a way to not only to tell his story, but also as a tool to get enough exposure to help him in his campaign to get the Medal of Honor, which he deserves. It was a story that he wanted told. Since there was no indication that reliving his combat years would cause him harm, and since he readily agreed to be interviewed, I felt there would be no potential harm. I had him sign his consent form, and explained that if after reading it again later, he changed his mind, he was free to back out, no problem.

At the beginning of both interviews and on more than one occasion during the interviews I reminded him that he did not have to talk about anything that he did not want to talk about. I felt that giving him total control of what he spoke about would put him at ease and not force him to focus on an experience that he would rather forget. We made sure that we were transparent with him on what his rights were, and what his exposure would be. He was not pressured nor misinformed in any way. To protect him, *we let him run the show* and do only *what he wanted to do* as a coparticipant, with the power to *walk away at any time*. This follows the ethical and foundational parameters recommended by both Hilsen and Winter in their respective publications.

### **Data Analysis**

In conventional studies, the researcher leaves after collecting data and analyzes the information by his or herself. In Action research, data analysis is a collaborative effort involving the researcher and the participants who hold the status of co-researchers. At the end of this research, I compiled two years of field notes containing my personal observations and reflections



concerning the team. The group was then given an end of study survey to collect data concerning the team's perceptions of team leadership, culture/climate and processes. After collecting the surveys, I then shared my field notes with the team so that they could read them. Once the field notes were distributed, the team participated in a group exit interview so that the data from both collection methods could be discussed, enhanced, or revised. The group's end of study discussion provided even more qualitative data, which served as a check for both unconscious and implicit bias among team members.

After the dissertation's draft was completed, participants were given the opportunity to read the entire study results giving them a complete picture of the final results. This gave them one final opportunity to make any last-minute input or corrections.

### **Qualitative Research Design and Controls**

The overall philosophical positionality of the study was one of critical action research. Critical action research focuses on a system's processes, and is used to eventually change, enhance, or improve those processes. This qualitative study followed a naturalistic research paradigm. Unlike the more positivistic view that reality can be objectively "observed and measured without bias using standardized instruments" the foundational context of this study was that reality cannot be observed or experienced directly by an individual or individuals, but is instead experienced through a person's personal subjective lens, filtered and influenced by the individual's knowledge, experience, and expectations (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 15).

This study's use of a Likert-type survey coupled with a group discussion, in addition to two years' worth of field notes, sought to discover the lenses of both of the team's co-researcher participants and myself, with me operating as a participant embedded within the team, seeking to

capture a native-view of team operations, group decision-making processes, and human experiences.

To use Rubin and Rubin's example, the intent of this study was to demonstrate a "this is what I found" research result, as opposed to the more positivistic position of *this is the way the world is* research result (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 17). The purpose was not to seek objectivity, but to instead be transparent, and to both acknowledge and embrace the team's personal biases and subjectivity. However, in spite of the admitted bias and subjectivity, the study still used a number of controls to ensure the rigorous standards normally expected in scholarly research. Lincoln and Guba identify those control constructs as; dependability, credibility, transferability, confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I attempted to ensure dependability by recording two years of detailed field notes documenting the day-to-day team operations, notes which included self-reflective metadata of my own opinions of, or reactions to, the team's environment and processes. I also suggested that other team members keep daily dairies to help refresh their memories at the end of the study. As far as I know, they never did.

Credibility was sought by my being transparent concerning my own personal biases, my personal and professional positionality in the world, and using that positionality as context when reviewing survey data, the end-of -study group discussion, and field notes. During the end of study group session, the participants enhanced, validated, and corrected the data from my field notes and survey by saying, "yes, this is the way things were," or "no that is not how things were," or "yes, this is the way things were, but there was more to it than that," thereby self-certifying the study data as being both correct and credible. In action research, it is the participants who confirm the credibility of a study.

Transferability was one goal of the study. Transferability is the ability to look at earlier research and to attempt to either recreated or apply that data from a local study to future situations or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 298). Based on the historic traditions of action research, the purpose of this study was to create practical *local* knowledge to answer a perceived problem and to make that knowledge available for future teams. Herr and Anderson (2005) maintain that action research is “grounded in local realities” (p. 98). Specifics for transferability with regards to this study are addressed in Chapter V.

Confirmability is also addressed in Chapter V when the study’s results are compared to the existing literature.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The intent of this study was to discover a level of most effective practices for working as a virtual team, using consumer grade digital equipment and the connectivity of the Internet to provide an independent global infrastructure for Afro-American film production. The study's defining research question was: *What are the most effective leadership and team-building practices/processes for creating a virtual geographically dispersed Afro-American film production team, with the intent of producing digital films, using new digital technology?*

This chapter presents the final results of the study. It includes the finished digital film produced by the AfroAM team entitled, *Big T*. Chapter IV also includes the data and results gathered from field notes, end of study team survey, and the final group discussion. As mentioned in Chapter III, the film is a product of two years of practice and a lot of experimentation and training, involving two broadcast industry professionals Miriam Machado-Luces (Mimi) the associate producer, myself as producer/director, along with the team's Digital Tech and Infrastructure specialist Jake Allinson, a very bright and talented college student and recent Computer Engineering graduate from Cedarville College, in Cedarville, Ohio.

### The Film

Some people mistakenly believe that filmmaking is a simple process. There is a myth that filmmaking basically involves just throwing up a few lights, getting a good microphone, and pointing a camera at your subject. Filmmaking is not a simple process. Even when producing a fairly basic film such as this study's documentary *Big T*, a film director uses a wide array of knowledge from many fields, including the fields of communication, physics, color psychology, electronics, and human physiology. These various areas and others play an important part in a director's ability to persuade, coerce, entertain, and/or inform a film's audience.

Experts suggest that 95% of communication is nonverbal or body language, with around 5% of the communicated information found in the chosen words, grammar and inflection used when speaking. A film director must be sensitive to and understand nonverbal communication if he or she is to be successful in directing actors. Even a documentary film director needs to understand body language to monitor what is occurring as their subjects are being interviewed and filmed in a real-world situation.

Physics is another area with regards to lighting and the optics of lenses. The type of lighting used on a film set *speaks* to a viewing audience. Lighting has a psychological effect on the viewer based on a number of parameters. Is the light coming from above or below, or from the side? Is the light reddish and warm, like light from the old tungsten light bulbs (3200 K) or is it closer to the bluer cooler light of end of the spectrum, such as daylight at noontime, or the bluish light from a flat screen television or cell phone (6500 K)?

If a director is shooting indoors he or she needs to know if the ceiling lights are fluorescent lights. This is important because many fluorescent lights produce light in more of the green area of the color spectrum, though the light does not appear to be green to the human eye, because our brain makes an adjustment. Bright light or “hi-key lighting” in a film can induce a feeling of happiness or energy. Lower light levels or “low key lighting” with lots of shadows can seem to lack energy, or can cause anxiety because we as humans do not like the dark, and on some basic human survival level are afraid of shadows, especially if those shadows hide a person’s eyes, or face.

Optics, or the characteristics of a lens is a major tool for directors. When used, a *normal lens* makes the audience see a subject the same way that our natural eye would see it. A *wide-angle lens* can show a large area of landscape. If placed close to a person’s face, a

wide-angle lens can distort a person's facial features, making them seem funny, or as in the case with many Alfred Hitchcock films, scary or frightening. If used to photograph someone far away, the wide-angle lens can make a person seem weak or small, swallowed up by their surroundings.

A *telephoto lens* of course works just like a telescope, and brings images of faraway objects closer. If focused on an individual, a telephoto lens can hold a subject or object in sharp focus, while at the same time blurring the surroundings or background, a photographic technique called "selective focus." By using selective focus, directors force an audience to look at what they want the audience to look at, by making sure that the important object or subject is in focus, and other things in the picture are blurred. This technique works because the human brain forces the eye to gravitate toward the clearest or most focused part of the picture frame.

Color psychology is another major factor in films. Each culture associates certain colors with things that are good, bad, happy, or sad. An example of this can even be found embedded in the English language. In English and in Latin-based languages, we talk about a person being green with envy or jealousy, or feeling blue or having the Blues. It is considered okay to tell a little white lie because white is associated with good or innocence, but it is bad to tell a black lie, be in a black mood, or be labeled as the black sheep of the family, because black is considered bad. The color red actually physically quickens the human pulse and heartbeat, and pink has been used in some prisons to make prisoners less violent. Of course, no one wants to be accused of being yellow, or of having a yellow streak down his/her back.

Although these terms may sound somewhat archaic to a younger generation, they are examples of how we as humans associate colors with certain traits, moods, or values within our own culture. Color associations do, however, vary from culture to culture. A young teenage

female wearing a form fitting red dress may be considered sexy in one culture, but seen as “loose” in another culture, because “nice young girls” don’t wear tight dresses with those types of colors, only prostitutes do.

As the director of *Big T* I did not have the time or the available film crew to professionally manipulate or control many of these factors while shooting on location. However, as in all films, narrative or documentary, these attributes, controlled or not, do exist and still influence an audience who is watching a film.

Presented here in Chapter IV, is the final result of the AfroAM film team’s, digital film about an American hero of African descent, Big T. As you view the film you might consider some of the film’s elements, such as the type of lens used, the body language of the speakers, the color, direction, or brightness of the lighting etc. The film can be viewed by clicking on the following URL: <https://vimeo.com/651230222/4fa81689cb> (B.Taylor, 2021).

### **Critique and Reflection on the Film *Big T***

Having viewed the documentary, *Big T*, the film can now be used as context to understand what was accomplished in its creation. To do this, some background is needed to understand filmmaking in general. First of all, both Mimi my associate producer and I know that to produce even a short basic 24-minute film like *Big T* would have been very different and very costly to produce 20 years ago. Film production equipment during that time period was large, heavy, and required large numbers of crew members needed to set-up, operate, and take down after a production. Typically, during that time period, crews would have consisted of lighting specialist, audio technicians, cinematographers, and electricians, with all of these positions having additional assistants to help. In this study, the use of new digital technology allowed each

member of the AfroAM team to do double and sometimes triple duty, with regards to the skill set needed to produce a complete film.

During the AfroAM team operations, each member was doing jobs that might have required three or four different crew members years ago. During this study, Mimi worked as an associate producer, a still photographer, and performed voice-over announcer duties during the team's operations. I worked as a director, audio engineer, digital film editor, and cinematographer. Jake had less to do once the filming itself began, having already designed and constructed the virtual team's infrastructure, including contributing coding and technical leadership in the building of the team's website.

Once Mr. Turner (Big T) agreed to do the interview with the AfroAM team, the immediate need was for the team to find a convenient location to shoot the film. The American Legion Post 292 offered us their facility. However, the facility itself produced many challenges. Some of the major challenges included production scheduling, control over the facility's lighting, and ambient noise management.

The facility was normally available around 11 AM, with the custodial crew coming in around 12:30 PM to clean the place, in preparation for the daily 2 PM opening of the post with its open bar, slot machines, and social gathering areas. Working alone, I had to move chairs, tables and other furniture, to create an area in which to film. This general preparation process included the additional task-saturated duties of setting-up, calibrating, and testing the lighting/audio equipment, including the consumer level none-to-familiar but beautifully engineered twelve-inch 2020 Apple iPad Pro.

Because of the workload, and realizing that there was no way that I could get everything set-up perfectly, I decided to shoot the documentary in a style called Cinema Verité, a style of



documentary filmmaking developed by French filmmaker/philosophers during the post-World War II period. In very general terms, Cinema Verité is a style of filmmaking focused on filming reality as it is, or in the words of its creators, filming the “truth.”

Different from the traditional film production practice of working to create the very best lighting, or most perfect audio, or a really beautiful film, the intent of the Cinema Verité style is to faithfully record the film subject’s reality. Technical aspects such as perfect lighting, perfect audio, or pristine cinematography take a secondary role, which in turn, often produces a somewhat rougher and less polished product, the salient intent being to produce a much more anthropologically realistic film. In other words, Cinema Verité’s intent is to produce realistic film content, while somewhat sacrificing production quality.

Examples of this in our film resulted in Big T wearing a gray shirt in one interview, and a blue shirt in the second interview. He could not remember what color shirt he wore in the first interview. Even though I reminded him what to wear the day before, being elderly, he still didn’t get it quite right. So rather than cancel the second interview until we could get the same color shirt that was used in the first interview, we just shot with the mismatched colors anyway to get it done, not knowing how long we would have access to him.

Rather than spending the normal amount of time to hide his microphone cord under his shirt, which is the industry standard, I simply clipped the microphone on his collar and let the microphone wire hang down the front. Although it looked somewhat sloppy, it was done to both save set-up time and protect his health, by cutting down on the time I spent inside of his six-foot COVID -19 safety bubble, and also to minimize the number of times I actually had to touch him. His health was a main concern of ours.

There was a lot of ambient noise in the room, both aurally and electrically. The room had ice machines, slot machines, overhead fans and other electrical devices which I had little control over. Normally an overhead unidirectional boom microphone (records sound from only one direction) would have been used to control recording in such a noisy environment. Since I was alone and not able to use a boom, I used an omni-directional (records sound from many directions) lavalier microphone and placed it on his collar, very close to his mouth. Fortunately, his deep resonant voice overrode a lot of the background noises.

With regards to lighting, the set up was “quick and dirty.” I set up two lights, one on either side of him, both at about a 45-degree angle, and made them very bright. Since I had very little control of the lights in the background, I used the two bright lights to draw attention to Big T’s face, because the human brain forces the eye to always be drawn toward the brightest spot on a film screen, which in this case I made sure, was Big T’s face.

I did not have a third light to outline his head and shoulders to set him apart from the darker background, so I moved him to an area where I could *cheat* by using a light from the building’s wall-mounted blue colored internal security camera to act as a “backlight” on the side of his head and shoulders. This gave his image a more professional three-dimensional look, creating better separation from the room’s darker background.

I turned off the few ceiling lights that I did have control over, to further separate Big T’s brighter image from the darker background. Ideally the lights should have been much lower in the background, or turned off completely, which unfortunately was not possible at the time. If the facility had been available to me for another three or four hours each time we interviewed, I might have been able to design the lighting in a manner that would have been more ideal, but working alone, there was just no time.

I did not have the type of lens choices with the iPad Pro that I would have had with the more professional Cannon EOS 5D Mark III. The built-in iPad lens which I had to use by default, was a wide angle 12 Mega pixel lens with a F1.8 aperture. If we had shot the film using the Cannon, I would have chosen a semi-telephoto lens (75 mm) so that I could have used *selective focus*, which with proper adjustment of both aperture and lighting, would have kept Big T's face and body in sharp focus, but would have blurred the background much more, thereby forcing the audience to focus more on his face in the foreground, ignoring the blurred flags, furniture and juke box in the background.

A film audience is always drawn to the clearest most focused part of a picture. Unfortunately, the iPad's wide-angle lens produced the opposite effect of what we wanted. The only time I was able to obtain the selective focus that I wanted in the film, was the scene at the end of the film that shows Big T's Silver Star medal. The shot of his Silver Star medal is a classic example of *selective focus* used to force the audience to look at the object or subject of importance, which is in sharp focus, while ignoring the more blurred background. However, in order to get that selective focus, I had to place the iPad about an inch way from the medal itself.

Wide angle lenses, tend to produce *deep focus*. Deep focus is the exact opposite of *selective focus*. Deep focus is when most of what appears within the film frame is in focus, from items in the immediate foreground, to items in the distant background. The iPad's wide-angle lens with its proclivity toward deep focus allows the *Big T* film viewer's eyes to roam around the film frame; giving them the option of either looking at Big T's face, or looking at flags, Christmas trees, or furniture in the background. That is okay if the director wants to give the audience a sense of the environment that the subject is in. However, in the interviews with Big T and "Doc" Wilkerson, the content of what they were saying was the priority, not their

environment. Giving the audience a choice of what to look at was something that I as the director would like to have avoided. Had I been able to use the team's Canon 5D Mark III with a telephoto lens, the problem would have been solved by manipulating my lens aperture and lights, to get the sought-after selective focus, ensuring that the interviewees were in sharp focus, and that the background was blurred.

Even though the iPad Pro's lens was not the one I would have chosen if given a choice, it did however produce extremely sharp pictures allowing the viewer to even see the fine hairs of Big T's beard. My \$3000 Canon EOS 5D Mark III would have had to use a fairly expensive lens to reproduce the iPad Pro's pristine images.

Deviating from the traditional Cinema verité style, which often emphasizes handheld movement with the camera, as opposed to stable static shots, I did the exact opposite and chose static shots by placing the iPad Pro on a tripod, using very little camera movement at all. The iPad viewing screen itself was very user friendly allowing me to set the focus and exposure to be used for the film, and then forget about it. The audio level was also automatically controlled. Not having to constantly monitor image exposure/focus, and audio, allowed me the freedom to concentrate on the interview, and ask better questions, which in turn gave me more options later in the editing process. A few members of Post 292 had tested positive for the virus during the time period of our shoot, so I made sure to sanitize myself after rearranging furniture at the end of each interview, and also spent additional time sanitizing our team's equipment.

During the 30-day shooting period from late November to late December 2020, I attempted to contact the Dallas Film Commission to see if they had any guidelines concerning filming in a COVID environment. With the Dallas Film Commission offices being closed, it was weeks before I even got a response.

I eventually got a response from them and was told that there were indeed Commission guidelines for local filming and film crews based on the recommendation from the governor of Texas. Unfortunately, the filming for *Big T* had already been completed by that time. Happily, neither Big T nor Doc Wilkerson ever contracted the virus, in spite of us working for prolonged periods in a close environment.

As was mentioned earlier, producing and directing *Big T* was very difficult because of the sharp learning curve needed to produce and direct using amateur consumer level equipment. However, my basic method for producing the film was no different. As a trained musician, I have almost always begun any productions, radio, television, or film, by the choosing music or other audio first. During my pre-dissertation research, thinking that my *music first* approach was unique, I was surprised to find out that an acquaintance, Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando, also uses this approach with all of her films.

Traditional filmmaking teams often use scripts, photographs, or storyboards as outlines or guidelines to shoot a film. During our two-year study both I and the rest of the AfroAM team normally had very few preconceived ideas as to how we would put our various test films or final film together. For me as a director, the filmmaking process always starts out as very vague ideas just beyond my grasp, that slowly come into focus as I collect music, photographs, and begin to shoot location footage.

I personally produce films and other programmatic content in a way that mimics Afro-American Jazz musicians. In traditional Jazz, a musician may have a song that he or she wants to play, being in possession of nothing more than a musical chart (lead sheet) showing the song's basic chord-changes, with sections set aside for improvised solos. Although Jazz music is somewhat like Classical music where technique and music notation are important, Jazz, like

most Afro-descendant music such as Reggae, Rhythm and Blues, Hip Hop, Gospel and other Afro-centric music, leans more toward improvisation as opposed to strict musical structure, and often emphasizes or focuses more on emotion and mood, as opposed to technique. This was true for the team with regards to the *Big T* documentary and earlier test films.

We began by going out and just filming the first interview with Big T. Because we only had an hour to get the interview completed before the American Legion cleaning crew came in, I later went back and shot a second interview with Big T. This allowed me to complete the questions I did not get a chance to ask in the first interview, and also allowed me to do follow-up questions regarding the first interview. This also helped Big T to do a better second interview because he was more familiar with me, and more relaxed.

After reviewing the two interview sessions, I had some concerns. I felt that something more was needed to help give context to Big T's interview; to show who he really was, and to get some insight into his heroic actions in combat. As a result, I decided to interview Keith "Doc" Wilkerson, PhD, the American Legion's post 292 commander. I felt that I could use his very articulate and energetic interview style to enhance the two Big T interviews. The first interview with Doc went well, but I felt we could do better, so I did a second interview with him, which was much stronger. In the end, we only used Doc's second interview.

After two Big T interviews and two interviews with Doc Wilkerson, I felt the team had enough interview footage to produce a short film. Still, with no idea whatsoever as to how the film would be assembled, I began to listen to the interviews over and over again, probably more than eighty times, and began to choose what I felt was the strongest and most interesting film interview footage.

Bypassing storyboards and pre-production scripts, the film was instead *improvised* on the spot, in real time, like Jazz music, starting with very vague ideas informed by the mood or ambience created by the film's prechosen music, and supplemented by Big T's and Doc Wilkerson's four film interviews; further influenced by ideas prompted by the AfroAM team looking at other documentary filmmaker's work, including the work of some of my Hollywood director and producer colleagues.

### **Structure and Technique**

On a structural level the film did not always follow the traditional linear narrative that many films follow, but from time to time reverted to more of a stream-of-conscious (dreamlike) narrative. Quite often when we dream in our sleep, the stories in our dreams do not follow the everyday logic of our life when we are awake. The "broken logic" narrative in the film was influenced by my past conversations with experienced combat veterans. Having spoken with these veterans, some from World War II and Korea, and others from Vietnam, my own father included, the common theme that I found in their stories was the disorienting chaos, confusion, and noise associated with combat.

Many veterans mentioned the anxiety, confusion, and their attempts in the middle of an intense firefight to comprehend or make sense of what they were experiencing as their senses were being assaulted/overloaded, and their mind struggled to make sense of it all. In an attempt to recreate this disorientation, I used a number of tools in an attempt to mimic this dreamlike broken logic combat experience narrative.

I used the audio imagery of marching soldiers, which are heard while there was nothing for the audience to look at, but a black screen. Normally when a film audience hears something, they expect to see an image of what is making the sound. If they are hearing sounds but are

looking at a blank screen, it creates tension. The audience is forced to create an image in their mind of what they are hearing, while they wait for a picture to appear. The longer the picture takes to appear, the greater the tension.

So, we used the sound of marching soldiers to both create tension/confusion with the audience *and* also in one or two places, to also create a bridge or transition between each major segment of the film. This was the team's manipulation of the film's audio track to create imagery, which by definition is creating a picture in a listener's (audiences) mind, using music, sound effects, voice, or any combination of the three. The marching sound track, comprised of nothing but titles and a black screen, was used to both connect the major segments of the film and to make the audience uncomfortable, to create tension/confusion.

Another technique used in the documentary film was that of "printing." Printing is something that is technically illegal, but is nevertheless used in the broadcast industry. It is simply the act of overmodulating the audio as loud as possible to get attention of a viewer or listener. Both radio and television stations, including the major networks do this with their commercials.

Knowing that people often get up and go to the kitchen or bathroom during a commercial break, broadcast entities make sure that they play (print) their commercial's audio much louder than the program being watched, ensuring that you will hear the commercial even if you just happened to have walked out and gone to the kitchen, or another room during the commercial break. For dramatic purposes the team used this technique of printing in the opening American flag scene to create a sense of *presence*, which by definition is the feeling of actually being there.

Years ago, while serving in the military I remember standing out on a parade ground near a flag on a windy day. I remember the crackle and snap of the flag in the strong breeze.



Personally, for me, that sound evoked patriotic feelings, and historical thoughts of Black fighting units such as the Army Air Force's Tuskegee Airmen, and the 10th Cavalry's "Buffalo Soldiers."

Wanting to make the opening flag shot more dramatic in our film, and hoping to invoke those same patriotic feelings in my audience, I overmodulated (printed) the audio of the flag flapping in the wind and continued to stay on the shot for much longer than the normal amount of time to set the context for what was to come later in the film. Printing was also used with the country/blues music track at the end of Big T's explanation of how his father prayed to God concerning his safety, when he was about to go to Vietnam. The guitar track is printed very loud to dramatize and put emphasis on Big T's recollection of his father's prayer.

Another strategy used by the team was to mix the simple straight interviews with film footage using a more dreamlike or stream of consciousness style of editing and audio mixing. This technique was used in the scene where the film moves from straight interviews of Turner and Wilkerson to the country of Vietnam.

In an attempt to continue the disorientation in the film's transition to Vietnam, we first mixed and *printed* the audio imagery of a C-5 military jet cargo aircraft, along with the thump-thump-thump sound of a Vietnam era Huey helicopter over an empty black screen, and then matched those violent military-technology sounds with a contradictory visual of a beautiful Vietnam morning sky with clouds with the sound of Vietnamese women singing a happy holiday celebration song. We then added the sound of a screaming fighter jet, matching it to a contradictory picture of a beautiful Vietnam morning sunrise.

The C-5 cargo plane, Huey helicopter, and jetfighter sounds were *printed* very loud to create a disorientation and contrast between the loud and violent sounds of military technology,

with the beautiful and almost pastoral images of a morning sunrise in Vietnam. According to stories heard from Vietnam veterans, Black, White, and Asian, Vietnam was a place of irony and contrast with its beautiful landscapes, shimmering bays, rice paddies and lush green mountains, where men and women on both sides desperately fought for survival in surreal conditions, in an environment of exhaustion, death, and sadness.

In an attempt to mimic the chaos and disorientation of war, the team attempted to create those surreal feeling by rearranging and intentionally mismatching sound and picture. The purpose of the mismatching was to convey a sense of things being out-of-order. Many of the film's scenes show artillery guns being fired, but the audio track is the sound of a strafing jet fighter or of men marching. Other footage shows infantry men shooting rifles, but the audience instead hears the sound of artillery shells exploding and/or men firing machine guns. One night scene shows a helicopter landing, but the soundtrack is that of a fighter jet.

Another technique used during Big T's final battle narration, and juxtaposed to Big T's narration of how his fellow Marines were being cut down by the enemy during its fire-fight with the Viet Cong company, was film footage showing the almost beautiful colors and slow-motion explosions of deadly napalm, phosphorus, and cluster bombs. The irony of war is that these very terrible instruments of death, often produced an almost beautiful poetic visual surrealism.

The last technique used by the team was to use a lot of black and white archival footage to give the film a historical feel, thereby emphasizing Big T's personal reflection of his past. Also, personally as a director, I wanted to also show the other side of the story. To avoid making a military propaganda film about Vietnam, I wanted to show the human faces of the *other side*, the face of the Vietnamese people.

We intentionally used footage showing Vietnamese faces, proud Vietnamese soldiers, curious Vietnamese children, and Vietnamese families praying and worshipping, supported by a soundtrack of Vietnamese women happily singing a joyous song to celebrate a Vietnamese holiday. This was my attempt to emphasize the humanity of the Vietnamese people. To show that even though there were major ideological differences within the country during that time period, the Vietnamese were basically no different from us; proud of their culture and traditions, proud of their country, and committed to building a better future for their future generations. I wanted to give them a face, and portray them as human beings.

None of these thoughts or ideas of mine even existed when the team first began to shoot the film. The ideas slowly and somewhat painfully grew after the initial filming was complete and the film was being assembled, mixed, and edited during postproduction. The ideas grew from the team's initial goal of wanting to interview elders in the community who might have interesting stories to tell the next generation, eventually transitioning into one elder's thought-provoking expose on war, courage and self-sacrifice, and the faithfulness of one U.S. Marine to his combat unit, his country, and to himself.

What the team ended up with was a film that on a semiotic level, codified a history of brave Afro-American males who have always gone to war for a country that has historically not even considered them civilized human beings; from a history beginning with Crispus Attucks, the first American, Black or White, to die in the American Revolution, to the Black 761st Tank battalion which helped liberate 15,000 Jewish survivors at the Gunskirchen concentration camp in Austria at the end of World War II, and including today's more recent generations of Iraqi and Afghanistan War veterans of African descent.

The team was successful in its goal of creating a broadcast quality film, where we had total control of a narrative, and that presented people of African descent in a positive and *historically accurate* light. The film was technically successful in and of itself, but even more so because it was produced virtually by a team who never met each other face-to-face during the production process.

### **Summary of the Study's Data Analysis**

The following is a summary of the data collected from my field notes, and the team survey and group discussion. In many traditional research studies, the researcher leaves after collecting data and analyzes the information by his or herself. However, in action research, data analysis is a collaborative effort involving the researcher and the participants who hold the status of co-researchers.

At the end of this research, a personal survey was given to each team member to be filled out. After the surveys were completed and returned, my field notes were then shared with the team. The field notes were a compilation of two years' worth of team observations. After the field notes were completed and distributed to the team, data from both collection methods were then discussed in a virtual group meeting on Zoom's peer-to-peer platform. This allowed the team to discuss and give feedback concerning the field notes and the survey, which added deeper qualitative data, serving as a check for both unconscious and implicit bias among team members.

After the dissertation's draft was completed, participants were given the opportunity to read the entire study results giving them a complete picture of the final results. This gave them as co-researchers, one final opportunity to make any last-minute input or corrections.

### **Survey, Group Discussion, and Field Notes Data**

The team survey was administered January 24, 2021 with a follow-up group discussion occurring February 13, 2021. The team survey was designed as a retrospective Likert type survey measuring strength of opinion. For the sake of clarity and brevity, the comments made by the team, when we later discussed the survey during our end of research group meeting, and field note data are imbedded with the survey results to add context.

The survey measured four sections of interest, which included team improvement processes, team problem solving, team technology and infrastructure, and team culture/climate. The team members were asked to select an answer to questions along a Likert type scale from 1 through 5 with 1 representing a strong *no*, 2 representing a weaker negative, 3 representing a neutral *somewhat*, 4 representing *yes*, and 5 representing a very strong *yes*.

Under each section a number of questions were asked. The first section, *team improvement processes* contained questions directly related to the action research design of planning, implementing, reflecting on or analyzing the results and again planning based on the earlier results.

The first section was introduced by stating, *The purpose of weekly/biweekly team meetings was to identify problems within the team, and to implement changes to address those issues and improve team performance.* The team then rated the following statements under this section. Both Jake and Mimi felt that holding weekly meetings helped the group identify problems within the team. Jake rated this area as a 4 and Mimi a 5. My field notes show that in the beginning (November 2018–April 2019) the team was highly motivated and productive when they participated in weekly meetings.

The team submitted somewhat lower ratings in the area of problem solving with regards to how the group handled a problem as a team. Mimi with her 5 rating, felt that the group did well when problems were identified and fixes for a problem were decided on by the team as a group. Jake rated this area with a lower 3, because during the study he was called upon to vote on getting rid of the older problematic team member, M. Jake felt that as an 18-year-old he was not qualified to make such a decision. He felt that he should not have been put in the position of making that kind of decision, because he did not have the life experience to make such a call concerning a team member who was old enough to be his parent.

With regard to how the team implemented new changes into the day-to-day team operations, both Jake and Mimi felt that the team was successful. Field note data shows that after weekly or bi-monthly meetings, the team did implement changes to fix perceived problems. The team also felt that after the fixes were implemented, the group did a good job of checking to see if those changes produced the desired results of correcting the problem, or improving team performance. Data from my field notes confirm that there was constant *fine-tuning* of both the team's virtual infrastructure and its programmatic production content to improve overall quality and performance.

The next section of the survey focused on team problem-solving and communication. The team felt that overall, it was effective when it *ran into various problems concerning team member performance or communication during the study*. Jake rated the team's actions as a 4 and Mimi a 5 with regard to identifying a problem or potential problem with a member. Because of the small team size, poor performance by any member had an obvious and immediate impact on the whole team, by default.

Concerning whether various strategies were discussed among team members as a group in an attempt to improve a team member's performance, Jake and Mimi rated team actions as a 5. Field notes data confirm that every team member went to extreme lengths to help socialize and inculcate new members into the AfroAM team culture. Sometimes the team was successful, and at other times it was not. After the team discussion, specific strategies were implemented by the team as a whole to help underperforming members to improve. With regards to identifying and implementing specific strategies, Jake and Mimi felt the team did a good job and gave the team a 5 and 4 rating, respectively. The team also felt that on occasions when strategies proved ineffective, the team was good at continuing to search and find new alternative strategies, that might be successful.

The group seemed fairly satisfied with the team-leader's handling of personnel issues on the team. The group felt that I as a leader was effective in identifying and communicating problems to other team members, and that I provided guidance and direction to help work with problematic members, while at the same time allowing the team to continue to be productive and operate on a high level. The group also appreciated that I as the team's leader included them by asking for input when dealing with a poorly performing member. These three areas concerning the team leader's attempt to put out fires (deal with problems) were all rated at the 4 or 5 level.

One highlight of this section was the team's very positive response to the rules of engagement. The team's rules of engagement served as a clear and strong guideline for the group behavior ensuring that underperforming or problem members were always treated in a respectful and humane manner. Jake and Mimi both rated this area as a 5. The data from the group discussion shows that not only did the team appreciate the structure and guidance provided by

the rules of engagement, but they also appreciated being asked to be involved in the original creation of those rules at the very beginning of the study.

The next section of the survey focused on the fact that AfroAM was a virtual team attempting to produce broadcast quality film using only consumer-grade technology for the purpose of producing counter-narratives to traditional Hollywood films and other popular media.

The data from the survey showed that the team felt that the goals of producing professional quality digital film were realistic with the higher ratings of 4 and 5. The data show that the team was very confident that the film could be made, but were not at all sure as to just *how* it could be made. Once the film was produced, data from the survey, field notes, and group discussion show that the team felt that they had accomplished their goal. The team felt that the documentary film *Big T* was successful in producing a positive and historically accurate counter-narrative to the dishonest and unrealistic narratives concerning people of African descent often portrayed in traditional Hollywood films and other popular culture media. Both Jake and Mimi gave 5 ratings concerning this section of the survey.

With regard to the team's software, the group felt that software platforms such as Squarespace and Dropbox, Slack and Zoom, in addition to FreeConferenceCall, were adequate in helping the team to reach its goals. Information from both the survey, group discussion, and field notes, show that the infrastructure provided by the use of these various platforms was *paramount* in helping the team reach its goals.

One very important section of this survey involved the topic of mentoring and training. The data show that mentoring and training was bi-directional, and worked in both directions, from leader to team, and from team to leader. Team members both gave 5 ratings documenting the fact that on various occasions I used my professional experience/skill set to mentor and guide



the rest of the group in fixing technical problems, and that there were also times when I as the leader was open to being mentored or guided by other team members with specific experiences or specific skills, if the technical problems were beyond my own understanding, experience, or personal abilities. As a follow up to that topic, during the team's end-of-study group meeting, Jake mentioned that he appreciated that I as the team's most experienced member would sincerely seek his advice and help even though he was the youngest and least experienced. My field notes show that I relied heavily on both Mimi and Jake who had digital technology experience that I did not have. Some of those areas included building websites, creating a YouTube channel, and shooting digital film as opposed to emulsion film.

The final section of the survey focused on team culture/climate, and communication among the members. The section was introduced with the statement, *The team developed "rules of engagement" to facilitate respectful interaction and professional relations among team members.* The things rated in this section included the group's experiences of working in a virtual environment, which were rated as good, with Jake's 4 rating and Mimi's 5 rating. Though there were definitely the normal periods of stress or frustration at times, the overall ambience or climate on the team was positive and relational.

All team members felt that the team was doing important work. My field notes show that both Jake and Mimi felt that the team's mission would be a benefit to both the Afro-American community, and the African Diaspora, and that the mission and goals of the group were clear and easy to understand.

With regards to the group being cohesive and working well together. Jake rated the statement as a lower 3 and Mimi a 5. Jake felt that there was more room for improvement. He stated that he was not always aware of what was going on. He admitted that at the time, he did

not have the maturity or self-confidence to speak up to voice his disorientation. He also admitted that he did not check into the team's Slack account every day as he was supposed to, which might explain why he was sometimes disorientated or out-of-the loop, so to speak. He was happy however, that when he was engaged, the team listened to and respected his suggestions. Jake emphasized that he appreciated being treated as an equal, as an adult, not as some young 18-year-old kid, but instead as a "high caliber team member that adds value."

One of the original reasons for having the team create rules of engagement was to ensure that each member's day-to-day behavior on the team would never make any other members feel uncomfortable because of their gender or age, or religious or political beliefs. When asked about this, team members acknowledged that none of them ever felt uncomfortable. Jake stated that he never felt uncomfortable being the only White and also youngest member on the team. Mimi also stated that even though she was the only female and Latina on the team, nothing ever occurred to make her feel uncomfortable. When asked if the team members would work on a virtual team again. Jake rated the statement as a 3 with Mimi giving a 5 rating.

The final survey question asked if the team felt that the overall goal of the study had been met. Both Jake and Mimi felt that it had been. Jake said that my stated goal that the team's intent would be to *give those who don't have a voice, a voice*, was accomplished through the production of the film *Big T* (2021). Mimi stated that she felt that the team had done a very good job of producing a film using a virtual team.

With this study, the intent was not to make a film, or to even make a film virtually. Those things are already being done by filmmakers. The goal was to study and research the issues and challenges of using a virtual team to produce *broadcast quality* film, using only consumer level software and equipment. In this area, we as a team felt that we were successful.

### **Recommendations for Future Teams**

Near the completion of AfroAM's end of study group discussion, the team created a list of recommendations for future virtual film production teams. Jake, Mimi, and I collaborated on the creation of a list of personal attributes and qualifications we felt members for a future team should have to produce a skilled, cohesive, and productive team. Each member produced a list they felt a person would need to be successful in their position. As the various lists were presented to the team, other members gave their input and added to the list for a specific team position.

For clarification, a film director is a person who carries the overall vision for the film, and who controls the day-to-day production activities of the entire production crew. A film producer's job is to handle the various administrative needs during a production. His or her basic job is to make sure that the director has everything they need to complete the film. Those things could include making sure the caterer shows up on time so the crew can have lunch/ dinner; or recruiting additional crew members, or firing those who are not performing well.

The producer's work can be as varied as anything from doing basic subject matter research for the film, to obtaining legal permits from the city or the county government allowing the crew to film at a certain location. It can also include ensuring that the production is following union and federal guidelines with regards to lunch breaks, hours worked per day, or OSHA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's, safety guidelines.

On this team, the infrastructure and digital technical specialist, a title and job position we created, was responsible for designing and maintaining the team's ability to communicate with each other, store and transfer large files of music, film, and photographs, and to constantly research and seek new ways to do all of these team chores, better, faster, and cheaper.

### **Film Director**

For this study I served as both the team leader and film's director. There is no specific reason that the team leader has to be the person who is directing the film. The team leader could be the person who is producing, or in my case directing the film. The team leader could also be someone who is not a part of the film production crew at all, but someone who serves strictly as the team's operational or administrative head who coordinates daily operations.

My recommendations in this study, however, assume that the director and team leader are one and the same. In my list for future teams, I suggested that first, the director/team leader must be a person who truly likes people. Virtual teams require an extraordinary amount of communication and interpersonal negotiations among its members in order to maintain team cohesion. If a leader lacks basic communication and social skills, and does not have a rather positive attitude toward people in general, the team will struggle under his or her leadership.

Secondly, the team leader/director must be organized. With regards to AfroAM, I had to work out a clear picture as to how to build a team and then design clear plans as to how to reach that goal. My day-to-day job involved both training myself, and training my team members. We had to create a functional infrastructure in order to work, and at the same time had to learn how to work within that virtual structure as a cohesive team.

With such a steep learning curve for the team, especially in the beginning with many trials and errors and large amounts of testing and experimentation, it was critical to have good time management practices and to set deadlines and realistic schedules in order to stay organized. Had this not been done, the team would not have been unproductive, and would have quickly descended into chaos.

My third suggestion is that the team leader needs to be somewhat fluent with regards to basic digital filmmaking, computer operations, and the Internet. Technically, I was neither. Although a trained filmmaker, I was not trained with regards to *digital* filmmaking and surely not trained in the area of digital filmmaking using only consumer grade equipment. The level of experience I had with working with computers and the Internet was maybe that of a low-level computer technician which allowed me to at least understand the basic technical issues and discuss them with the team over a period of time.

Although I bought the Canon 5D camera, MacBook Pro and other equipment in June of 2017, long before I actually began the November 2018 study, I intentionally did not take the equipment out and practice with it. I wanted to begin the study with me picking up the equipment cold, with no practice, in order to get a measure of the learning curve a new aspiring filmmaker might face. Normally, as a professional, I would have spent that year and a half learning and practicing with the camera, so that I would be an expert at using it when the study began. But I waited.

When the study did begin, I knew I had to spend large amounts of time self-training in order to navigate those technical issues and challenges while simultaneously running the virtual team. Leaving my 20<sup>th</sup>-century-trip to the library and living among stacks of books learning habits behind, I found myself copying our millennial tech specialist teammate Jake, by turning to the Internet and consuming large amounts of online tutorials using Google and YouTube. The learning curve was very steep. So, my opinion is that a team leader will do better if they come to the group with those skills already in place if possible. But, as the study demonstrated, those technical skills can be learned, using a lot of personal effort.

My fourth recommendation is to choose a team leader who can be decisive. Producing a film and running a virtual team requires multiple decisions to be made, every hour, and on a daily basis. After including the rest of the team in the decision-making process, a virtual team leader cannot allow the fear of making a mistake or of making a poor decision stop them from making the decisions that must be made.

Decisions are never objective or impartial. All decisions are influenced by our own personal baggage we bring to the table, the team's history and experiences, and the values that we as leaders are guided by. Those decisions should, however, always be fair, be a result of our best effort, be humane in their execution, and be made decisively. The fear of making a mistake or being wrong, can sabotage the decision-making process if a team leader is not decisive.

The fifth point in my list involves a leader's ability to communicate the team's values, and to lead by example. To be successful, the leader must be able to define and articulate the values and mission, or vision for the group. They must be able to set the direction or goals of the team and to articulate the strategy that will be used to accomplish the team's goals. In our end of study postproduction interview, Jake pointed out that strategies sometimes have to change in the midst of a project, and that a good leader should be able to articulate the strategic need for and character of those changes to the team. I agree with his point.

The last point in my list was that a team leader/director needs to be able to recruit the right people for the team, with regards to maturity, personal values, and skill set. After recruiting the right people, he or she must confidently delegate various amounts of the workload to team members, and then be able to give team members the freedom to flourish and be creative. In other words, recruit the right players, then get out of the way and give the members the freedom to be productive and create.

### **Infrastructure and Digital Technology Specialist**

Jake, our infrastructure and digital technology specialist, had a unique background in that he was both an amateur filmmaker and a computer engineering student. Having designed and maintained the AfroAM infrastructure, he felt that the type of person to be recruited for his position in future virtual film production teams should have skills both as a technologist, and as a film production person. He felt however, that if a person with both sets of skills could not be found, the technologist skills of course, would be the most important.

He listed two major personality traits that he felt were very important for the team's technologist. First he stated that the technical specialist should be proactive, and not just sit around until a technical problem is brought to his or her attention, but that the technologist should be a person who looks for potential problems and fixes them without being asked. This was a personal attribute of Jake. During the study he would often see or foresee technical problems on the team and fix them, often before the rest of us on the team were even aware that there were any problems.

A second trait Jake felt important for a future team's digital tech and infrastructure specialist, was that they would be a person with the ability speak up, be vocal, and actively participate in the day-to-day activities of the team. Having worked on a number of computer engineering internships, his personal observation was that tech people tend to stay to themselves and associate more with other techs, who speak their technical language and understand their area of specialty. He felt that for any future teams like AfroAM the tech person should be someone who at least understands the basics of film production and who actively engages with other team members, voicing he or her opinion in *all* areas of team operations.

### Virtual Team Producer

For the producers position Mimi had a number of recommendations for finding a good producer. A producer's job is more of an administrative position. It is a position that involves taking care of all of the behind-the-scenes chores needed to produce a film. Mimi's salient attribute for a producer was that they needed to be very organized, and to know what the team's film director needs.

Producers are often responsible for doing subject research for a film. They need skills to manage a film's budget. They are often responsible for the hiring and firing of personnel and many other human resource tasks of the team. Producers also handle the legal needs of the team with regards to following federal and union guidelines for length of workdays, lunch breaks, and on-the-set work breaks. They often negotiate contracts with caterers, construction crews, and other independent contractors. Obviously on a smaller team like AfroAM, many of these skills are not needed. However, because of the extremely varied task of a producer on a virtual team of any size Mimi feels that beside just being organized, a producer must be flexible and have the ability to interact with a wide range of both easy going and often difficult personalities. She felt that even if a producer has all of these traits and skills, it is still *very* important to confirm that they will be able to work in a virtual environment.

That statement really applies to all positions. A good director, digital tech specialist, producer, or production assistant, will not be successful, no matter how talented they are, if they cannot adjust to working in a virtual environment. For the AfroAM team, working in a virtual environment where our members were scattered all over the United States, was extremely different from working in a normal traditional brick-and-mortar organization. It took some adjustment for all of us.



Missing was the ability for people to physically see each other every day. There were no opportunities to go out to lunch together or look at someone's most recent baby pictures, hang out for happy hour or go to an evening basketball game as a group. Nonverbal communication was greatly degraded when filtered through Slack or Zoom. For some members, just being on screen where the member could see themselves as they were talking to the rest of the team was somewhat stressful.

### **A Virtual Team Production Assistant**

Unfortunately, we were never successful in recruiting a permanent production assistant. But the team does have recommendations as to what to look for when recruiting one. A production assistant's basic job description involves working with the producer and/or director in whatever capacity needed to get a production completed. One of my first jobs in both television and later film was that of a production assistant. My job consisted of getting coffee for the production crew, making copies of scripts for everyone, going to the store to purchase supplies, doing subject matter research for a production, and working as a liaison between the people scheduled to appear in our productions, and the producers and directors.

Today's production assistants require a very different skill set. A digital environment requires a production assistant to have digital skills. Of course, the basics of the job are still the same. They first must possess an ability to communicate well and interact with a wide variety of personalities. Secondly they must have an ability to understand and follow very specific instructions. Third, they should have an affinity for detail, while at the same time being able to see the big picture to help avoid potential problems which the director, producer, or other production crew members may not see.

In terms of digital skills, it is recommended that a virtual team production assistant be fluent in all aspects of Microsoft Office. They should also be comfortable with working with and creating online content for social media. They should have some basic understanding of film production, or at least be willing to learn. If the production assistant is used on a location shoot, they are normally required to help the director by setting up technical equipment and managing a large amount of record keeping and documenting. They should be comfortable and thrive in a virtual environment, and also be mature enough to work independently, without much supervision. Working without needing much supervision is important, because in virtual environments, members by default have much more autonomy.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to build a geographically dispersed virtual team, for the purpose of producing a digital film, using only consumer level computers, cameras, and production-oriented software. A practitioner's research approach was used by choosing an Action Research design strategy. The research question informing the study was: *What are the most effective leadership and team-building practices/processes for creating a virtual geographically dispersed Afro-American film production team, with the intent of producing digital films, using new digital technology, social media, and the default global infrastructure of the Internet?*

Chapter I explained the motivation for the study, comparing Shockley's invention of the transistor to Gutenberg's printing press, and the massive effect both inventions had on access to information for the masses in global society. Chapter II's literature review contained a historical look at the Hollywood film industry, and Black filmmakers' resistance to its racist Eurocentric paradigm and policies. The chapter also included a basic look at team-building, leadership theory, and virtual teams. In Chapter III I described the research methodology, methods, and design used in the study. The chapter also defined my positionality as a researcher, my personal perceptions, and established some operational definitions used in the research. The chapter concluded with a chronological narrative of team activities during the entire study, within the context of the ethical considerations and guidelines which informed the research. Chapter IV provided the study's results. The results included narratives describing the initial creation and two-year-long operation of the production team. Included in the first part of Chapter IV was the presentation of the documentary film itself. Further narrative data compiled from my field notes documented the production process in the making of the *Big T* documentary. A postproduction

critique of the finished film was also included. Other results included triangulated data from my field notes, a team survey, and an-end-of-study team discussion. To supplement those results, the team offered recommendations for individuals or groups who might consider creating a virtual team in the future for the purpose of producing digital programmatic film content. Chapter V reflects the salient results of the study, the potential value the study offers to practitioners and scholars, and recommendations for further research.

### **The Study**

When I began this study, I admittedly had a number of preconceived ideas as to how a virtual team should operate, and how a virtual film crew might organize themselves to produce a digital film. I humbly have to admit that my preconceived ideas were not even close to the reality of the team's operations and film producing activities. Many of the things learned in this study were only discovered because of the triangulation of combined data from the field notes, individual team survey, and end of study group discussion.

For instance, even though we met weekly, and communicated almost daily, I had no idea that the team's associate producer found our virtual meetings and individual talks using Zoom as being somewhat stressful for her. Over a two-year period, she never mentioned or showed any nonverbal signs of being stressed or self-conscious while on camera. In another situation as mentioned earlier in the study I thought that Jake refused to participate in getting rid of a team member because he felt that I was not doing *my job* as team leader, that it was something I should do. I had no idea that Jake's reticence was not about me, but about his own sense-of-self as a millennial, and his positionality on the team. Without the data from our end-of-study group discussion, I would have never known. So, it can be said that the triangulation of data from all

three sources succeeded, and resulted in providing what Clifford Geertz would call “thick description” into the study (Geertz, 1973).

To better discuss the study’s findings, I have divided those findings into three categories. One category involves technology, including both the technology used to create the team’s virtual infrastructure, and the separate technology used to shoot and produce the film. Another category involves the human resource and operations side of the team, which addresses decision-making and problem-solving, communication, and mentoring/training. The third category involves general personal observations from my field notes.

### **Human Resource Management and Operations**

The major overall finding of this study is that small virtual film production teams, using mostly consumer level cameras, computers and audio equipment, can produce and deliver professional broadcast quality digital film, creating a potential for increased opportunities for aspiring Black filmmakers. This growth in opportunities could inform an increase of historically accurate Afro-centric digital films for the African Diaspora, and for general market audiences. The study also confirmed that virtual teams, which are non-cohesive by default, need enormous amounts of inter-team communication to maintain their cohesiveness and productivity.

Communication was very important during the operation of AfroAM. Traditional brick-and-mortar organizations are of course very different from virtual organizations. In traditional brick-and-mortar organizations there are many nonverbal cues which influence an organization’s culture and climate and affect the everyday relationships of its members. For example, the type of clothes worn in the workplace, or the arrangement of office furniture, personal family pictures, religious items, or even sports paraphernalia displayed in personal work spaces all tell coworkers who you are as an individual, and how you might relate to others on the team.

None of those nonverbal cues are easily available on a virtual team. Even face-to-face Skype or Zoom sessions severely filter team communication because the only visible part of a team member is normally from the shoulders up, and even if a full body view is available, the nonverbal communication is further distorted as it is filtered through a small computer screen and low fidelity speaker. This is critical because about 95% of all interpersonal communication is nonverbal, with only about 5% being verbal.

Lacking the normal haptics (touching) of a warm pat on the shoulder or friendly hand shake, or the proxemics (personal space) which would have allowed us to define and negotiate/regulate the intimacy or formality of our relationships, we as a team compensated by using enormous amounts of time communicating through postings in the team's Slack account, sending multiple emails, and by speaking face-to-face as a group on Zoom. This much needed increase in communication helped to promote trust among team members, which in turn informed and regulated team cohesion.

Another finding was that the AfroAM team did well, because there was a "seasoning period" as the team was being initially organized. During the first month of the study, AfroAM did not participate in any production activities. The team's first 30 days involved basic "housekeeping," just getting organized, learning about each other individually, and learning how to communicate effectively in a virtual ecology.

The production team spent a month just figuring out what worked, what did not work, and how to coordinate basic housekeeping tasks such as connecting everyone to Dropbox, learning how to use Slack, and, realizing that Google Chat was not going to work for us and searching for an alternative real-time communications software.

After the first 30 days, the team members were closer and more familiar with each other, and were more comfortable working in a virtual team environment as we prepared to begin production activities. We found that a 30-day pre-production “seasoning period” helps a team to stabilize, and makes it more resilient to the future pressures and challenges of the film production process and everyday virtual team operations.

We also found that one of the quickest ways to build team cohesion in a virtual and most likely any team environment is to give a new developing team a small project or quick task (goal) to accomplish. As mentioned earlier in the study, before the team began to work on the main dissertation film, I gave the team the job of producing a previously unplanned short practice film. I felt that by forcing the new team to immediately work on a specific project after the “seasoning period” would accelerate the forming, storming, norming and performing team phases, and produce a much more cohesive team much earlier in the study than would have happened if they had not been given such a task.

Another study finding was that it is very important that specific guidelines for behavior be presented *in writing* early during the beginning of team formation, a sort of what we called “rules of engagement.” This ensures that during the normal chaotic, stressful, and emotional situations which will indeed occur during team operations, the group will have guidance to follow, insuring the smooth and respectful interaction of its members as it works to solve various issues.

This was critical for AfroAM, because we immediately encountered major problems in the very beginning of the study. The first 30 days of seasoning were challenging as the team grappled with outdated computers and technology, a very low virtual team skill set, and a steep learning curve with regards to using Slack, connecting all the team’s computers to each other,

and finding an alternative to Google Chat. There were major issues as the team struggled with the poor performance of dropped calls on Google Chat, and the continued challenge of just being consistently interconnected so we could send, modify, and store word documents, pictures, and other media content.

Another finding was that collaborative problem-solving enhances team morale, cohesiveness, and trust. When team members were included in solving team problems, the members stated that they felt that they were valued, and had some control over their environment, and some input into the future of the team. On the AfroAM team, problems were first identified by team members. Then, with the input of the entire team, strategies were chosen to fix the problems and plans put in place to implement new strategies and monitor for signs of improvement. Although this is a basic model for Action Research in general, we feel that the formula should be used on nonresearch virtual production teams as well.

Both mentoring and training/development were very important on the AfroAM team. Our findings were that mentoring and training do not have to come only from the top down, from team leader to teammates only, but should be bi-directional. The mentor or trainer position is not a static position, not necessarily the person who is senior in terms of age or experience, but should instead be situational, with regards to who is senior with reference to a *specific skill set*. In some situations, I mentored Jake and Mimi being senior in experience, but at other times Mimi and Jake mentored and trained me, because they were senior when it came to having certain skills such as building websites, and setting up YouTube channels, skills that I did not possess at the time.



### Personal “Native View” Observations

During this study I observed a number of attributes that I feel made team AfroAM successful in its endeavor. I am sure that there are many attributes which can be associated with the success of a creative virtual team, but the attributes mentioned here are the ones that continually caught my attention as the team struggled with its technical challenges and failures, personal health issues, and renegade member behavior, while at the same time facing problems for which the group had no precedent to follow. I feel that these group attributes made AfroAM a resilient team in the midst of its chaotic micro and macro environment. My list of attributes includes, innovation, adaptability, maturity and integrity, and a team culture where members view negative challenges and problems as opportunities to improve and succeed.

Innovation was a major factor for success. The virtual team had to be created from the ground up, by a group with little to no experience in creating or operating in a virtual environment. The majority of the work during the two-year study was not focused on making a film, but on *testing* and *experimenting* with various ways to create a functional virtual environment, which could be used to create digital programmatic content. The action research paradigm of continual improvement, helped developed a team culture/climate focused on constant infrastructure improvement, and increased film production creativity. This creativity and improvement focus resulted in the team to being able to produce a professional broadcast quality film like *Big T*.

Adaptability was another important factor for success. Any team, virtual or otherwise which cannot quickly adapt in today’s volatile global environment has a much less chance of success and survival. This entire study was a story of AfroAM recovering from failure. Initially, the team’s outdated and technically inferior computers and software made basic inter-team

communication and operations intermittent at best. The team also struggled with the internal challenges of poorly performing team members, exacerbated by a member and their entire family being stricken with the COVID-19 virus.

Added to those internal challenges, the external challenges of a COVID-19 induced shutdown of the country's infrastructure of banks, libraries, film production related business, and university level education institutions, was a major blow to the team. The most devastating blow of course was the inability to use a local production crew to shoot the film's interviews, thereby forcing the team to use only *one* crew member, working with extremely basic and nontraditional equipment and techniques, to film location interviews.

In each case, the team was flexible and quickly found "work-arounds" to get the job done. This study has admittedly occurred during a historically unique time in the world's history. Future virtual film production teams will most likely not face many of these problems. However, they will face other problems, and their ability to quickly assess a situation, find a creative solution and adapt, will add to their resilience, cohesion, and survivability.

Maturity and integrity play a major role in virtual teams. Virtual team members have much more autonomy when compared with workers in a traditional brick and mortar organization. Unless a virtual team member is involved in a real-time virtual chat or meeting, it is more difficult to check on members activities. In a virtual environment, a team's leader cannot walk by your desk to see if you are working, or wasting the company's time socializing. Unless the team has computer monitoring software in place, it is not possible to check as to whether you are performing the much-needed work at hand, or are playing a video game.

Because of the increased autonomy of each individual team member, both maturity and integrity play an important role in team cohesion. A mature team member will do what is asked

of them, and will work to do it at a high level of competency. A mature team member is loyal to the team, takes pride in what they are doing, and exhibits a good work ethic. They are considered mature, because they excel in their work, without the need for close supervision.

A mature team member will also have integrity. When we use the word integrity, we do not mean that a person always does things right. Just because a bank president does not steal money does not mean he or she has integrity. A bank president may not steal because of fear of discovery, or the embarrassment and penalty for getting caught. A true test of integrity would be if a bank president knew of a *fool-proof* way to steal money, knowing that he or she would *never* get caught, but instead decided not to steal, because not stealing the money is *the right thing to do*. True integrity is based on the internal values of a person, not the external pressures of fear of discovery, or embarrassment.

The AfroAM virtual team members had large amounts of freedom (we never met face to face) with many periods of very little supervision or monitoring, and had to be trusted to perform with integrity, to do what was right, to do what was best for the team and its goals. So, the members performed well, not because they were closely monitored, and not out of fear of some negative punishment for being lazy or dishonest, but performed with integrity because of some internal intrinsic motivation, moral, ethical, or religious beliefs. Maturity and integrity create trust within a virtual team, and trust helps to create the cohesion needed in a creative and high performing team.

The last attribute that I found to be true on team AfroAM was that team members loved fixing problem and dealing with challenges. They viewed problems as opportunities to improve and succeed. Without this attribute, AfroAM would never have survived. This attribute can be found in successful people. Professional dancers practice 6 to 7 hours a day on swollen and

bleeding feet to prepare for a performance. Professional football players come home from a Sunday game exhausted with black and blue bruises all over their body. Air Force combat air crews endure intense academic training, sleep deprivation, and extreme climatic conditions during flight training. Dancers focus on the upcoming performance, not their swollen feet. Football players focus on preparing for the next the game, not the pain and bruises. Air Force combat aircrew members focus on flying 12- and 13-hour missions across the world to protect their country, ignoring their mental and physical exhaustion, or the deadly and harsh environment they operate in 5 miles above the earth.

The common attribute in all of these instances is that these people don't consider problems as a burden or as an avenue to explain away failure, but instead are energized and thrive on being resilient, on problem-solving, and getting the job done. For them, a problem is not a roadblock, but rather something to either climb over, walk around, or barrel through, in order to reach the intended goal.

The default process of filmmaking is in and of itself always a period of problem-solving, "putting out fires," or changing strategies. The additional burden of producing the film in a virtual environment with a geographically dispersed team greatly raises the chances of poor performance or outright failure. It is our opinion that any team members on future teams who do not have a "this will be fun," problem solving, and "can do" mindset, will find themselves stressed, frustrated, and not highly productive, creating the potential for them to become a burden to the rest of the team.

### **Digital Technology**

The third category with regards to the study's findings focused on technology . We found that by using today's consumer level production software and hardware, it is possible for a

person with very little production knowledge and low production skills to produce quality digital film footage. This can be done by any person with very little actual understanding of the technical aspects of the equipment, or of filmmaking in general. Today films are being made using iPhones, iPads, and lower-end digital still photography cameras. This fact of course, can have both positive and negative consequences.

For example, a modern DSLR (digital single lens reflex) camera such as the team's Canon EOS 5D Mark III can automatically adjust the focus, white balance, and exposure for a person who has very little background in filmmaking. This fact allows a person with a low skill set to shoot high quality film, in spite of their lack of training.

The negative consequences are that, with the camera doing everything automatically, the nascent filmmaker is not required to learn, or even understand the important parameters of filmmaking such as the issues of color temperature, deep and selective focus, lens aperture settings, or the effects of high key vs low key light levels on picture quality in digital cameras. Hollywood directors Jessie Vaughan and Tim Reid both feel that the automation found in today's production software and camera's/hardware can often serve as a crutch or handicap that impedes the growth of filmmakers in learning their craft.

Basic consumer level media production software such as iMovie and Final Cut Pro, or Audacity and GarageBand, along with hardware like the Cannon EOS 5D Mark III and Nikon D5300 cameras do not have the normal features found in professional level production software and equipment. However, our findings show that a skilled professional, as well as a new inexperienced film production hopeful, can use basic consumer level digital software and equipment to produce a professional product, although with some difficulty.

The reason for the difficulty is different for the two separate categories of filmmakers. The nascent filmmaker is in the process of learning his or her equipment. Since much of the work is automatic, the filmmaker does not really know why the film product is good, when it is good, and what needs to be done to replicate getting good film footage the next time. At the same time, if he or she experiences a situation where their footage turns out to be poor, without the technical knowledge, the aspiring filmmaker may not know why the footage came out poorly, and may have no clue as to how to fix it. So, his or her work output may be somewhat uneven, like trying to hit a bullseye at the shooting range, without any previous handgun training; you literally hit it sometimes and miss it sometimes, but don't really know why.

For the professional filmmaker the situation is very different. He or she may shoot beautiful footage more consistently because of their production experience, and if they run into trouble and shoot bad footage, are more likely to be able to figure out what the problem is, switch the camera to manual, and unlike the aspiring filmmaker, use their technical knowledge to fix the issue and reshoot better footage. The difficulty for the professional is a different type. The difficulty for the professional level filmmaker is that a Canon EOS 5D Mark III is not a dedicated film camera, nor is the iPad. Given that situation, the professional filmmaker must struggle to make up for the camera's limitations in both performance and operation. So, for the professional it can be more difficult to shoot using consumer level equipment, as opposed to using the normal professional level dedicated digital film cameras that most of them are trained to use. In addition, no matter how talented or professional they may be, a professional cannot make any consumer level camera or equipment perform above the level for which it is engineered to perform. A three-thousand-dollar consumer level Canon EOS 5D Mark III still photography camera, that shoots 1920 by 1080P *HD* film footage, will never produce the superior

picture quality of a professional level six-thousand-dollar Red Komodo digital film camera which produces much higher 6144 by 3456 6K digital film footage, and has so many more technical features normally only found on professional level film cameras.

One surprising finding for me in this study was that in today's global environment, members of a small virtual production team really do need to have a wide variety of skills to be a valuable team member. When originally preparing to begin the study, I was sure that people with specific expertise in a narrow area would make the best team members. However, the data show that not to be true. There is less need for a production specialist in lighting, audio or film editing and more of a need for a generalist, who can work in a number of capacities on the team.

The miniaturization and automation of both consumer and professional level software and equipment in the past 20 years now requires fewer people to operate in a production environment, allowing for much smaller film production crews. In a virtual production team situation, smaller crews mean that each crew member must now take on additional responsibilities outside of their own specialty. For example, a future virtual team member should not only be just a cinematographer, but should also be able to, for example, work with social media, or build websites. An audio specialist might also need to know how to edit digital film or design lighting for a film. It is this type of generalization with overlapping skill sets, that make a small virtual team more productive and resilient. It also makes the team cheaper to operate, bringing the cost of digital filmmaking down to a level attainable for smaller independent Black filmmakers, and others.

### **Study Comparisons with Other Literature**

Literature involving virtual teams was interesting when compared to this study. Some of the literature showed similarities to the results of this study. Other literature sources showed

differing results, but did however highlight important concerns with regards to virtual teams.

There are many types of virtual teams that have different functions. For the purpose of this study the AfroAM group was considered to be a *creative* team, the subject of several studies on virtual teams and creativity.

One study Han et al., (2017) described so-called inhibitors that can negatively impact a virtual team's success and creativity. In the study, researchers interviewed virtual team managers with more than five years' experience. The study, identified five so-called inhibitors that can degrade a virtual team's creativity and success. The list of inhibitors included distrust, personality differences, generational differences in views, scheduling issues, and technological difficulties. The AfroAM data shows that all of the inhibitors listed in Han's study did indeed have the potential to impact the team. In the case of AfroAM, some of those inhibitors such as scheduling and technology had a major negative impact on team performance. In other situations, some of Han's list of inhibitors did not play a negative role in the study.

In this study's earlier literature review, *trust* was listed as very important to virtual teams. Handy (1995) identified trust as a construct that helps to make-up for the inevitable degradation of interpersonal communication, which occurs when communicating through electronic means. Yasir and Majid (2004) suggested that trust was not a static construct, but one that might fluctuate, increasing and decreasing within the team over a period of time. Han et al. (2017) listed distrust as an inhibitor to a team's creativity and success. Based on these three studies, it logical to assume that if trust is of benefit to a virtual team, then distrust would surely be an inhibitor. The AfroAM team was a small team whose team members had diversified skill sets, forcing the team to trust and rely on each other with regard to day-to-day operations, and guided by the team's Rules of Engagement to ensure that it was done in a humane and respectful way.



Trust was high on the AfroAM team, so conversely distrust was never an inhibitor during this study.

The AfroAM data show that trust did indeed help with creativity and team cohesion. Although some members found communicating through platforms such as Zoom uncomfortable because seeing themselves on camera while they talked made them self-conscious, the Rules of Engagement and communication styles of the participants enhanced trust, which in turn enhanced both team cohesion and creativity. So, although I agree that Han's construct of distrust could be as problem on a virtual team, in the case of the AfroAM team, it was never an issue.

Han et al. (2017) listed personality differences as a potential inhibitor of team creativity and success. The production team did have a personality problem with the production assistant M. However, before his personality and work ethic became a major problem, the group quickly removed him from the team. Although there were very wide differences in personalities among the remaining team members, those differences never had a negative impact on team performance. Once again the team's Rules of Engagement guidelines for civilized behavior helped team members to negotiate and navigate the dangers of major personality clashes in the group.

Another factor that may have helped the team to avoid the pitfalls of major clashes of personalities, were the critical choices I made when initially recruiting for the team. Mimi our producer was a former student of mine who I knew well, and Jake had worked with me for a year or more helping me with my predissertation research, so I instinctively felt that the members chosen for the team would be a good fit. My only failure was in choosing M, who was not really on the team long enough to cause any major conflicts. He just failed to show-up on time, and do the work.

Generational differences of views, the third listed virtual inhibitor, could have been a major problem on our team, but thankfully was not. I was Mimi's former radio production instructor when she was in college. Mimi on the other hand was already working as a seasoned television professional before Jake was even born, so there was a wide range of generational experiences and views on the team. Data from the survey, my field notes, and the final group discussion, document the fact that generational differences were used in a positive way during the study, and were in no way inhibitors on the team.

From the very beginning of the study, I valued Jake's perspectives concerning his view of the new 21st-century global environment, and used him to learn things (email is dead) from his point of view. On the other hand, Jake was like a sponge, who openly admitted was quietly watching and listening to Mimi and I talk about race/culture, gender, religion, and the differences in millennial vs Gen X and Baby-boomer generations. So, the difference in generational views on the team, which indeed did exist, were never inhibitors, but actually served as cross-generational learning resources for all team members to grow and learn from each other, and at no time did generational differences negatively affect the team's creativity or success. The diversity of generations, could have been a major inhibitor, but the AfroAM team viewed the generational spread as an asset, and used it as a resource to enhance the team.

Scheduling as an inhibitor to team success and creativity was a major factor on the AfroAM team. According to the field notes the issue was a theme that reoccurred throughout the entire study. The chronic problems were that the team could not decide what time to meet. At the beginning of the study, November 2018 to about February 2019, I as team leader made the decisions concerning meeting times, after consulting with other team members. Wanting the team to be more independent of me and more involved in its own decision-making processes, I

delegated the choice of meeting time to the team itself. I told them that I was flexible, instructed them to decide for themselves and to let me know what time they planned to meet, emphasizing the fact that whatever time they chose would be fine with me.

They were simply unable to decide. I found this puzzling. During my predissertation research with Dreamgroup, a virtual radio production team comprised of about seven members it was more difficult to find a time to meet for a larger group. The team worked around that fact by making the most of asynchronous team communication and coordination, using email, text and information post, which did not require team members to meet at the same time. This of course was different when compared to AfroAM which depended heavily on, Zoom, Slack, and FreeConferenceCall for real-time synchronous meetings and coordination.

With AfroAM being so much smaller than the Dreamgroup team, I did not expect scheduling to be a major inhibitor. As long as I decided on meeting times after consulting with the other team members, things were fine. However, for some unknown reason, when given the autonomy to independently decide on a meeting time themselves, they consistently failed, resulting in a number of meetings actually being missed because of their inability to take charge and decide. This continued through the entire period of the research. So, for AfroAM scheduling was unfortunately a major inhibitor affecting the level of functionality of the team.

Han et al. (2017) suggest that technology could also be an inhibitor on a virtual team. For the AfroAM team, technology was the greatest challenge of running the production group. AfroAM also had an added technological burden because of the type of team that it was. Not only were normal technological challenges of virtual team operation and connectivity an issue, but the additional issue of operating separate digital film production technology was also a challenge.

In both cases, whether the technological problems were team infrastructure related, or digital film production equipment related, the problems could be categorized into two types. The first type involved equipment/hardware or software problems—things not working properly. The second kind of technological problem experienced by the team was that the equipment/hardware or software worked okay, but the skill set of the operator was substandard. The best technology in the world is no good if you don't operate it properly.

To address the technology inhibitors, AfroAM spent 24 months configuring the team's infrastructure, running *hundreds* of tests, designing new operational methods, and then starting all over again by tearing down, re-strategizing, and redesigning the team's studio and film production equipment. So, the team did find technology to be the largest inhibitor to creativity and cohesive team operation, an issue that was aggressively addressed on a daily basis for the entire two-year operation of the team.

Sharing was another theme that appeared in virtual team literature. Hahm (2017) listed sharing of information as an element that affects team performance. In the case of the AfroAM group, the characteristic of the team that helped overcome many of its technological challenges was their openness to sharing information, both technical information and otherwise. We found that when members shared information with the rest of the team, it helped the group to overcome many challenges. Our data agree with Hahm's position that information sharing on a virtual team can have a positive effect on a team's' creativity. Hahm's study lists authentic leadership, a team climate of sharing, and a team member's freedom and efficacy to express ideas that will be respected and valued by others as critical factors to team creativity. AfroAM team members spent a lot of time acquiring and disseminating information among themselves. This was often

done informally amongst themselves as a part of our normal business-as-usual daily activities, and at other times through the more formal scheduling of time for mentoring or training.

With regards to AfroAM, the data show that the group's creativity did thrive in the team's sharing climate/culture. It should be noted that when the term *creativity* is used here, it includes not only the creativity demonstrated in producing a film product, but also includes the infrastructure related critical-thinking and innovation used by the team as it wrestled with and pushed the limits of the off-the-shelf, consumer level technology, in its attempt to produce professional quality digital film.

### **Summary**

This study has conclusively proven that it is possible for a geographically dispersed virtual production film team, to produce the broadest quality digital film, using cheaper consumer level cameras, computers and audio and video editing software. The study also confirmed that virtual teams, which are non-cohesive by default, need enormous amounts of inter-team communication to maintain their cohesiveness.

It was also noted that when building a new team, it helps to spend an initial time period, maybe the first 30 days as a type of "seasoning period" focused on taking care of "housekeeping" chores and just getting settled, before engaging in any film production responsibilities. We also found that after the initial 30-day period, one of the quickest ways to build team cohesion was to give the developing team a small project, or simple task to perform, thereby forcing members to immediately work together, and that *written* guidelines for appropriate "rules of engagement" behavior should be introduced at the very beginning of the creation of the team.

It was also established that today's consumer digital technology automates many of the processes of film and audio production, allowing a person with very little production knowledge and low production skills to produce quality digital film. The positive result of this situation is that it allows new aspiring filmmakers to cheaply produce a top-quality product, with the negative side being that the filmmaker often does not really understand the technical and theoretical underpinnings of filmmaking which can potentially impede their growth and maturity as filmmakers.

This study's data established the fact that collaborative problem solving empowers team members and enhances team cohesion by building trust. Team members feel more invested in the team when they know that their opinions are sought and appreciated when dealing with team issues. We found that mentoring and training which is normally executed from top down, from the older most experienced member to the young members, was not the case with AfroAM, but was instead *situational* with the mentor or trainer not being the oldest or most experience necessarily, but the person who possessed the needed skill set.

It was found that on small virtual film production teams (8 or fewer members) it is better for team members to be generalist rather than specialist. On smaller teams it helps when team members can perform more than one job on the team. For example, a member who only knows how to direct is not as valuable as someone who can direct, design lighting on a film location, and serve as a digital film editor for the team.

Although some literature named distrust, personality differences, generational differences, technology and scheduling as possible inhibitors for a cohesive team, this study found that only scheduling and technology were major inhibitors to best team operations for the AfroAM group.

We also found that sharing among members does indeed enhance team creativity. Sharing adds resilience to a virtual team, promotes *creativity*, and enhances *trust*, which informs team *cohesion*.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has generated several avenues for continued research. One area not addressed in this study involves security. The internet is a *public* channel of communication. Sensitive information such as date of birth, social security numbers, addresses and phone number should *never* be sent over the Internet unless that information is encrypted. Sending a document attached to an email over the Internet is no different than laying that document down on the sidewalk in front of a public building. Anyone who is walking by, can decide to take the time and pick up the document and read its contents. The Internet is no different; anything sent over the internet in plain text and unencrypted, can be read by anyone with the time to do so. Emails we may have sent 10 years ago can still often be located on the Internet with a little effort. In today's world, there is software on the Internet, available to the general public, which allows anyone to listen to your phone calls, your voice mail, and read your text, from anywhere in the world, without ever physically touching your phone; although it is a felony in the United States to use it.

AfroAM handled very sensitive information during the study. Among team members we shared confidential interviews with well-known public figures, private interviews with famous Hollywood directors, along with their personal addresses, phone numbers, and so forth. We even had to deal with HIPAA or Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act related issues involving our members when the Covid-19 virus shut down the country.

We attempted to protect our information by using browsers such as DuckDuckGo and encrypted email services such as Hushmail.com. We encrypted some of our computer drives and

flash drives just in case they were lost or stolen, so no one could get the information stored on them. We added strong passwords to all of our accounts, including Slack and Dropbox, FreeConferenceCall.com and Squarespace.com, including our Upwork account. To hide our personal location in the world and our IP addresses, I used a professional VPN or virtual private network, for further security. So, our external security was quite good. However, security threats to the operations of virtual teams are not only external, but can be internal as well.

A disgruntled or dishonest team member has the power and access to do major damage to a group's operations from within, having access to sensitive documents, interviews, and documentary film footage. A very important area for further virtual team research could focus on the challenges of internal security for small virtual teams. Small independent virtual groups, lacking the security resources of larger companies, still need to minimize the same internal threats. Though the team may be small, the security threats are just as serious and consequences of having sensitive material stolen or leaked are just as severe. Studying how small teams could take measures to protect themselves from internal sabotage would be a good area for research.

Since effective communication is foundational for the functionality of virtual teams, research focusing on inhibitors to good communication would be important. Suggested areas for future research could focus on roadblocks to good communication such as differences in cultural background, differences in gender and age, or focus on the way that interpersonal communication is modified when filtered through the technology of Zoom, Slack, or Google Chat, using the electronic mediums of small computer and iPad screens.

With AfroAM transitioning from a dissertation study team to a real-world entity, our research will continue. One important area for us is cross-cultural communication with regard to small virtual teams. As AfroAM transitions into a real-world entity, it will have people from



different backgrounds and countries on the team. This will drastically change the dynamics of the team. In some cultures, a 5 PM meeting means 5 PM, in other cultures 5 PM may translate to any- time before 7:30 PM. Often in Western culture, strategic planning involves working on projects to be executed from a few months to 5 or 10 years ahead, as opposed to some Asian cultures where strategic planning involves working on projects set for many generations in the future.

Women are not accepted in leadership positions over men in some places in the world, and in some places it is considered inappropriate for a younger person to be in a position to direct an older teammate. I think that research in cross-cultural communication for both AfroAM and other interested scholars would be beneficial to production teams that plan to operate on an international level, or for groups who may have team members from different countries or cultures.

### **Conclusion**

It is not always possible to understand one's life journey until you have traveled a good distance along the road, and can turn around and view where you have come from. Although I did not realize it at the time, for me the road leading to this study really began many years ago when I as a little boy of about 7 or 8 years old, sat in front of a black and white television set watching a movie whose title I don't remember. This movie contained three or four whites and a Black man, a classic example of one of Donald Bogle's Uncle Tom characters often found in earlier white Hollywood movies. If memory serves me correctly, this Black man was interacting with the white couples who delighted in his groveling and exaggerated bug-eyed Uncle Tom behavior. Eventually one couple got in a horse-and-buggy and began their journey home. The "Uncle Tom" continued talking to the other white couple who had stayed behind. In the process

of conversing with the white couple who had stayed behind, the subject of ghosts came up in the conversation. In response to the subject of ghosts, the Black Uncle Tom became almost epileptic, mouth open, eyes bulging, and with an over-the-top sense of horror on his face. He began to run as fast as he could toward the home also, eventually catching up to and out running the horse-and- buggy which had left just minutes earlier.

As a 7 or 8-year-old this scene left me confused and with a funny feeling in my stomach. Although the sight of a man outrunning a horse should have been very funny to me as a little child, I did not laugh. As I watched the white actors laugh at the Black man who was outrunning the horse because he was afraid of ghosts, I felt on some vague subliminal level that their laughter was not very nice, but was instead mean-spirited and evil. However, not knowingly having had any personal experience with racism, or having any lexicon to name and identify the concept, I still felt strange. I knew that something was wrong, that the movie I was watching on T.V. was not right, but I was not really sure as to why.

Initially I was confused because I did not know any Black men like the one I saw on the television screen. The Black men in my world did not grovel or act silly around white people, but were strong no-nonsense people, dignified and articulate, including those with very little education. They definitely did not believe in ghosts, and had on many occasions in my neighborhood demonstrated that they were pretty much not afraid of anything, or anybody. They included people who were mailmen, doctors, educators, assembly-line-workers, physicists, welders, lawyers, and custodians, all of whom worked long hard hours to take care of their families.

As I grew older, the Hollywood and popular culture assault continued as my friends and I watched old 1940s and 1950s Black and White Tarzan movies showing Tarzan and his woman

Jane, pushing Africans around and telling them what to do, a situation that the Black men in our neighborhood would never have tolerated, and one that made it hard for us to believe that Africans in Africa would allow either.

Later as an adult, knowing that three-fifths of the professional cowboys who worked along the country's famous Chisolm trail from Texas to Kansas were of African descent, I wondered why Hollywood never had Clint Eastwood run into any of them, or why in John Wayne movies Native Americans were always portrayed as violent and ignorant savages, Asians were portrayed as shuffling, willing-to-please servants, and Afro-Americans were portrayed, not as the real-life Black cowboys of American history, but rather as simple-minded servants, much like the Eurocentrically named Pompey, a Black servant in the 1962 film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Pompey was a servant to John Wayne's character in the film, who after many years of loyalty to his white master, was oh so grateful to receive some *pork chop* money from actor Jimmy Stewart who played a Senator in the movie. This may have been an homage to the pre-Hollywood racist film by Sigmund Lubin entitled, *How Rastus Got His Pork Chop* (1908).

So, the question is "so what"? Why do we care? Why is it important? It is important because this country's mass/popular media has historically been used to disseminate a revisionist history of white behavior toward people of African descent. Hollywood has played a major part in that deception. The historic Hollywood narrative is that Africa is a dark continent, mostly jungle, where African people live, people who have traditionally been portrayed as basically illiterate and pastoral, thereby conveniently ignoring the *indigenous* Black civilizations and empires such as Cush, Nubia, Egypt and Ethiopia. This great American industry has consistently produced films that blatantly lie and ignore the pre-Western/pre-European and present-day

contributions that African people have made to the world in the areas of mathematics, the sciences, and the arts. Because of Hollywood's 106 years of global reach, with its gatekeeping ability to greenlight or block certain movies, and with a tight hold on distribution, the industry has instead filtered and pushed narratives around the world that people of African descent are essentially Ebonics-speaking clowns, crossdressers, and drug dealers, who are mentally inept, and by default basically violent people, who are and always have been objects of ridicule. This 106-year-old narrative is not an accident, but what Guerrero (1993) describes as "Hollywood's ideology of racial domination and difference that constructs black people as *other* and subordinate, while it naturalizes white privilege as the invisible but sovereign 'norm' " (p. 5). Because Hollywood has for many years made money off of these racist narratives, I personally describe it as the "monetization of hate." It is insidious, and as Hollywood director Darnell Martin alluded to in her interview, created and funded by White men (some, not all) in positions of power and privilege.

The only way this situation improves is for new and upcoming Black filmmakers to have access to infrastructures and technologies *outside* of the traditional production and distribution channels, allowing them the space to practice making films, failing, and then practicing to make more films, eventually succeeding as they grow and learn their craft.

Traditionally many gifted filmmakers have been unable to grow and mature because of the cost of filmmaking, because they could not make enough films to learn and improve their craft. It took them so long to get one film completed, if at all. In the past I have watched Black fellow filmmakers take two to five and sometimes even ten years to get a film made because of the cost of a large production crew, expensive rental equipment, and raw film and film

processing. This study shows that taking advantage of the new digital technology is a viable answer to this problem.

This is not an original concept. However, for me, the original idea for this study began when I came across a curious phrase in a book entitled, *The Men Who Would Be King* (Laporte, 2010). The book is the story of how three entertainment industry giants, filmmaker Steven Spielberg, former Disney studio executive Jeffrey Katzenberg, and record company owner David Geffen came together in partnership to build a new film company they named DreamWorks.

In the book's description of the company, it was mentioned that unlike most major Hollywood studios such as Paramount, Warner Brothers, or the Walt Disney Studios, DreamWorks did not own the usual sound stages, acres of land to build movie sets, or possess warehouses full of costumes and movie props, but rather leased or rented what they needed from other companies. DreamWorks itself was described as a *virtual company*, a term which caught my attention and ignited my curiosity.

Upon further research I found that DreamWorks, using Hewlett-Packard computer power, was able to link its production group in its Glendale, California, production facility, to its other production facility in Redwood, California. This virtual infrastructure meant that actors like Jerry Seinfeld, did not have to leave New York and travel to California in order to add voiceovers for a Dreamwork project, but could, from New York, voice and send the material needed over a high-powered virtual computer network. By 2016 this CGI or computer-generated imagery (animation) virtual work group configuration allowed DreamWorks to join with Mainland China's State-run Shanghai Media Group to coproduce *Kung Fu Panda 3*.

Learning of this, my immediate question was, if the big guys can do this, then why can't I do this on a much smaller level? After doing some initial research I discovered that it was

already being done by Carlton Smith and Michael Williams, who not wanting to deal with Hollywood industry culture produced their own documentary using a virtual team in the production of *The Black Miami* (2014). We now know that they later found an independent distributor who worked a deal for them with Amazon Prime, giving the directors the global exposure that a small, Black, two-man film production team, would rarely have gotten from major white controlled companies twenty years ago. As my journey began, I first created a seven-member virtual radio production group in 2015, and then for predissertation work a small three-person virtual film production team in 2016-2017, thereby laying the groundwork for this study.

At the conclusion of this research, it should also be pointed out that this study's results are transferable. This new digital access is not only available to Black filmmakers, but *anyone* who may not be able to afford or have access to the traditional production film process with its large crews, expensive rental equipment. and tightly controlled distribution channels.

Women could use virtual teams and digital technology to produce their own films to resist the sexist and misogynistic narratives often found in movies produced in a male dominated film industry, both Hollywood and independent. A Muslim virtual production team could use the technology to produce films with counter-narratives to Hollywood films and other popular culture, which intentionally associates anyone who happens to wear a Hijab or follows Islam, with radical terrorists.

Both middle and high school systems could utilize cheap virtual teams to train their students in basic film production while at the same time creating the opportunity to teach good citizenship by visiting topics such as teamwork and leadership, respect for cultural diversity, and problem solving through critical thinking. The Asian community, which at the moment is under

siege and has been experiencing brutal physical attacks since the appearance of the Covid-19 Virus, could use this new technology to produce short films to address the misguided prejudice against them, which has resulted in the beatings and murders of innocent citizens. A virtual team comprised of educators, social workers, and law enforcement could form small virtual teams to produce short digital films specifically aimed at elementary and middle school students, covering topics such as body shamming, teenage suicide, Internet bullying, and Internet safety.

For me the most exciting result of this study is the realization that the use of virtual teams to produce digital films can be used with multiple age groups and skill levels, from the aspiring young filmmakers like Jake our Digital Tech Specialist who was just out of high school when he began working with me, to someone like our producer Mimi who specifically works with young children in special workshops and classes on filmmaking, to myself, an industry professional who is transitioning from the older analogue electronic technology and the use of real film emulsion, to the new digital electronics, and digital film.

Visionary leadership was the type of leadership strategy used to operate the AfroAM team. As was mentioned earlier, visionary leadership is a style that works well with decentralized loosely-coupled virtual entities. The team's vision statement was that *AfroAM is a social justice film production group, who will give a voice to those who don't have a voice*. In the near future AfroAM will continue to produce real-world digital programmatic content, and combine it with scholarly research to hopefully leave a legacy and give a hand-up to future filmmakers.

We plan to continue in the traditions laid down by William D. Foster of Foster Photo Play, The Johnson Brothers of Lincoln Motion Pictures, Oscar Micheaux of Micheaux Films and Books, and Actor/Director Spencer Williams who wrote and produced films for Jewish owned Sack Amusement Enterprises. We hope that others will also continue to do practitioner research

in this area, to further promote the democratization of knowledge, and enhance civilized behavior toward each other.



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**APPENDIX**

**Appendix A: Permissions for Archival Film and Music Tracks in Documentary Film**

Wed, Feb 26, 2020 at 1:36 PM Christley Jean <##### > wrote:

Hello Taylor,

Thank you for your email!

In our content license agreement, you will see that section 3 speaks to a "Digital Only" license. In your case, that license does not apply. The licensing that you are purchasing from the site is the "All Media" license, which gives you access as its name implies to all media. You can use any media format to create using our Pond5 Stock assets. So you putting this on the school server should not alter anything associated with the licensing purchased. If you have any additional questions, please reach out to me directly.

Best,

Christley