

NEH Application Cover Sheet

Digital Humanities Start-up Grants

PROJECT DIRECTOR

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Field of Expertise: Humanities

INSTITUTION

Trustees of Indiana University
Bloomington, IN UNITED STATES

APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *Representing Early Black Film Artifacts as Material Evidence in Digital Contexts*

Grant Period: From 5/2013 to 4/2014

Field of Project: Humanities

Description of Project: The study of ???race movies,??? the early motion pictures produced for black audiences in the first decades of the 20th century, presents an ideal humanities context for framing important questions bearing on the digital representation of film artifacts as material evidence: How must we reevaluate and amend current best practices for digitization of motion picture film which by design omit or obscure physical attributes of the original artifact?; And how might this representation of film as a material object offer a conceptual bridge for integrating audiovisual media within a wider network of related visual and textual documentation? The Black Film Center/Archive (BFC/A) at Indiana University proposes in this Level I Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant to explore these questions by convening an interdisciplinary group of scholars, moving image archivists, and technology specialists in digital humanities for a two-day conference and workshop to be held in November 2013.

BUDGET

Outright Request	\$26,400.00	Cost Sharing	\$28,999.00
Matching Request		Total Budget	\$55,399.00
Total NEH	\$26,400.00		

GRANT ADMINISTRATOR

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Bernstein, Matthew - Emory University
Cowan, William - Indiana University Bloomington
Field, Allyson - University of California, Los Angeles
Francis, Terri - Yale University
Graney, Brian - Indiana University Bloomington
Horak, Jan-Christopher - University of California, Los Angeles
Kerr, Leah - Independent Archivist
Klinger, Barbara - Indiana University Bloomington
Lupeck, Barbara Tapa - Independent Scholar
Martin, Michael T. - Indiana University Bloomington
Mashon, Mike - Moving Image Section, Library of Congress
Muhammad, Khalil - Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library
Regeister, Charlene - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Stewart, Jacqueline - Northwestern University
Stoeltje, Rachael - Indiana University Bloomington
Waller, Gregory - Indiana University Bloomington
Walsh, John A. - Indiana University Bloomington
White, Dana - Emory University

ABSTRACT AND STATEMENTS OF INNOVATION AND HUMANITIES SIGNIFICANCE

Abstract

The study of “race movies,” the early motion pictures produced for black audiences in the first decades of the 20th century, presents an ideal humanities context for framing important questions bearing on the digital representation of film artifacts as material evidence: How must we reevaluate and amend current best practices for digitization of motion picture film which by design omit or obscure physical attributes of the original artifact?; What digital tools might be turned to unconventional uses in representing original film artifacts as static images for close examination and study?; And how might this representation of film as a material object offer a conceptual bridge for integrating audiovisual media within a wider network of related visual and textual documentation? The Black Film Center/Archive (BFC/A) at Indiana University proposes in this Level I Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant to explore these questions by convening an interdisciplinary group of scholars, moving image archivists, and technology specialists in digital humanities for a two-day conference and workshop to be held in Bloomington, Indiana, in November 2013.

Statement of Innovation

Even in light of new scanning systems capable of more fully representing film’s materiality, published digitization guidelines have not addressed this as a goal of surrogation, maintaining an emphasis on cinematic information independent of its physical carrier. The project proposed by BFC/A, by redefining how the film object is represented, opens exploration of how this shift in conception might drive extension of existing tools for media study towards development of a more fully integrated framework for the presentation and analysis of moving images and related documentation.

Statement of Humanities Significance

The conference and workshop will engage participants in articulating the new methodologies and questions emerging through scholarship in black-audience film studies; in establishing the technological groundwork necessary to enact these modes of inquiry through representation of critical material evidence; in setting a course for development of tools supporting research and pedagogy; and in promoting the broader application of these approaches to other humanities disciplines—in particular to other marginalized media cultures with rich histories of material practice.

NARRATIVE

Innovation in the Humanities

In a 2011 article, Jacqueline Stewart proposed a challenging new avenue for the study of early black-audience motion picture film—an area marked by its scarcity of extant documentation—by identifying unmined evidentiary value in what “we can learn from the singularity of each print...and what any existing print might teach us about the circulation, exhibition, and content of movies in this under-documented film culture. Indeed, when we think of each print as a unique artifact, we are encouraged to reconsider what we think of as a film’s ‘content.’”¹

Reconsidering how we define the content of a film print beyond the audiovisual information recorded within the frame, encompassing all of its physical characteristics, markings, and structures as a material artifact, introduces a series of questions bearing on the representation of film as a digital object:

- How must we reevaluate and amend current best practices for digitization of motion picture film which by design omit or obscure physical attributes of the original artifact?
- What tools, such as tiled, multi-resolution image processors, might be turned to unconventional uses in representing original film artifacts as static images for close examination and study?
- And how might this representation of film as a material object offer a conceptual bridge for integrating audiovisual media in digital platforms within a wider network of related visual and textual documentation?

The study of “race movies,” the early motion pictures produced for black audiences in the first decades of the 20th century, presents an ideal humanities context for framing these questions. The many independent producers and distributors, often regional in scope and short-lived, left behind little documentary evidence from which to reconstruct the terrain of the race movie circuit. Of the hundreds of black-audience films produced since 1905—most notably by Oscar Micheaux—only a small percentage of original film prints are known to exist. Those that survive are often in fragmentary form or in markedly different versions, demanding close comparative analysis against other prints and documents widely dispersed across various institutions, including local censorship records, film scripts, newspaper accounts, and promotional images. Further, historians of black-audience film have a strong record of engaging with its material culture, and of observing the unintended influence on critical thought of past technologies for film reproduction.

The Black Film Center/Archive (BFC/A) at Indiana University proposes in this Level I Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant to explore these questions by convening an interdisciplinary group of scholars, moving image archivists, and technology specialists in digital arts and humanities for a two-day conference and workshop to be held in Bloomington, Indiana, in November 2013. The conference program will engage participants in discussing and articulating the new methodologies and questions emerging through recent scholarship in early black-audience film studies and their broader application to other marginalized media cultures with rich histories of material practice, such as early cinema and experimental film. The workshop will continue the previous day’s agenda by establishing the technological groundwork necessary to enact these modes of inquiry, through reevaluation of existing best practices and capture technologies for digitization of original motion picture film artifacts; through demonstrations and assessments of existing open-source tools for presenting and analyzing moving image materials online; and through experimental approaches to integrating film among other forms of documentation in dynamic structures for discovery, presentation, and analysis.

Environmental Scan

The identification of original motion picture film prints as bearing significant material evidence for study and analysis is found in Paolo Cherchi Usai’s *Burning Passions: An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema* (1994) and Harold Brown’s *Physical Characteristics of Early Film as Aids to Identification* (1990), which reproduce short lengths of film as still images to document the information revealed on the film surface and beyond the frame. This understanding of film is

¹ See Appendix: References

common among archivists who work routinely with original artifacts, but has not been embraced by film historians to whom access to original prints is rarely granted.

Even in light of widely-adopted scanning systems capable of representing original film artifacts more fully in their materiality, recent guidelines for digitization of motion picture film published by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA, 2012) and by the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF, 2012) do not address this as a goal of surrogation, maintaining traditional emphasis on the pure cinematic information within the frame, independent of the physical media. Further statements of best practices are in development by the Audio Visual Working Group of the Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiatives, offering an opportunity through this project to develop and present alternate strategies for their consideration.

The emphasis on the cinematic information within the frame has also prevailed in the recent development of digital platforms and tools supporting film and media scholarship, including important work in automated content analysis and visualization by Yuri Tsivian at University of Chicago; Lev Manovich at University of California, San Diego; Mark Williams and Michael Casey at Dartmouth College; and Adelheid Heftberger at the Austrian Film Museum. As Heftberger (2012) noted of her experience on the Digital Formalism project, “film scholars and computer scientists are rarely interested *enough* in a film’s material qualities and production context. There seems to be a pervasive tendency to regard film as pure content.”

Other recent developments in film and media study online include tools to segment moving images into meaningful units, enriched with annotations (EVIA Digital Archive); and platforms to unify the presentation of moving images with related documentation (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign’s “Re-Framing the Online Video Archive”). The project proposed by BFC/A, by redefining how the film object is represented in digital form, opens exploration of how this shift in conception might drive extension of existing tools for media study towards development of a more fully integrated, relational framework for the presentation and analysis of moving images and related documentation.

History and Duration of the Project

While the current project is a new initiative and has no history of prior funding, the approach it outlines is a product of recent work with the Richard E. Norman Collection at BFC/A. Norman, a black-audience film producer and distributor active in the first decades of the 20th century, left behind a comprehensive body of textual and visual records documenting his activities and those of his colleagues in the race movie circuit, along with an array of surviving film prints and negatives, many fragmentary. With significant recent interest in the collection, BFC/A prioritized enhancing research access and began discussions with interested scholars. Inspired by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill project, *Going to the Show*, which took an innovative approach to encoding and mapping data about early African American moviegoing, we considered how a digital initiative rooted in the Norman Collection might take its direction not from established practice in digital library building, but from the complex questions posed by scholars working most closely with this and related resources. When considering the multiple versions and incomplete fragments of film prints; the clues they bear through edge and frameline annotations, physical cuts and breaks, traces of human and mechanical actors on the artifact; the context established through related documents such as distributor field notes and local censor reports; and the obstacles to understanding present in standard representations of these works in digital contexts, we recognized the need for a more comprehensive assessment of the scholarly and technical issues underlying such a project. As priorities for amended best practices, tool extensions, and new software development emerge through the reporting phase of this project, BFC/A and our partners within Indiana University and across institutions will seek funding for continuing work under a Level II project.

Work Plan

For the 2013 conference and workshop, BFC/A seeks funding to support travel, accommodations, and honoraria for 12 participants; event planning; website development; and, videography and transcription services. The proposed agenda, including the names of confirmed participants, is attached in **Appendix B**. (Note: NEH funding will not be applied to support the participation of Mike Mashon, Head, Moving Image Section, Library of

Congress; funding for Mr. Mashon will be arranged independent of the grant budget, either by Library of Congress or by Indiana University Libraries.)

Beginning in May 2013, the Project Director and BFC/A staff will begin planning for the conference and workshop: reserving venues on campus, consulting with participants, coordinating travel and accommodations for visiting presenters, and contracting videography and other event staffing services. Working with a contracted website developer, the Project Director will oversee the creation of a conference website, including a wiki for program planning and an Omeka installation for later use in disseminating conference presentations. Through the spring and summer, the Project Director and BFC/A staff will configure the wiki for conference and workshop planning, providing advance readings and engaging participants in discussion under the direction of the Lead Scholar and the Project Advisory Board. Following the conference in November 2013, these parties will continue to use the wiki for evaluation of the conference outcomes and for drafting the project white paper. BFC/A staff will obtain transcriptions from the video recordings of the conference proceedings and conduct video processing and descriptive work in the Annotator's Workbench (AWB) open-source application. Upon completion of this work, the Project Director and website developer will upload and map conference content from AWB to Omeka for public access.

Staff and Advisory Board

As Project Director (10%), BFC/A Archivist and Head of Public and Technology Services Brian Graney will oversee all aspects of project management, conference planning, and website development. He will conduct this work with support from independent contractors for website development, videography, and transcription; and from BFC/A's student and hourly staff, including the Assistant to the Archivist (10%) and the Programming Assistant (5%). The project's Lead Scholar (5%), BFC/A Director and Professor of American Studies and Communication & Culture Michael T. Martin will work with the Project Director, Project Advisory Board, and conference participants to develop the program, guide advance research and discussion, and report on project outcomes and recommendations. Other university staff at the Office of Research Administration and the College of Arts and Sciences will assist with grant management, conference planning, and technical support for website administration.

The role of the Project Advisory Board will be to oversee the development of the conference program and workshop design; to recommend resources and tools for review and assessment; to guide discussions with participants in advance of the conference; and to oversee the evaluation of project outcomes and make recommendations for ongoing work. A list of Project Advisory Board members is included in the **Biographies** section.

Final Product and Dissemination

The proceedings of the first day of the conference will be videotaped, transcribed, indexed for subject access, and made available through a dedicated public website hosted by BFC/A. This web publication will enhance discoverability and use of program video by employing an open-source Omeka plugin for segmenting and annotating video online, newly-developed at IU by Associate Director of Digital Library Software Development William Cowan through a previous NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant. Select presentations from the conference will also be published in a special section of *Black Camera*, an academic journal published by BFC/A and IU Press.

Project staff and participants will pursue opportunities to disseminate the project results and to continue discussions of the core issues at conferences including the annual meetings of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the Association of Moving Image Archivists, the Society for American Archivists, the Association of College and Research Libraries, and the Digital Library Federation Forum.

A white paper on the project, to be made available through NEH, on the BFC/A project website, and through IU ScholarWorks, will include a summary and analysis of conference proceedings; a detailed account of the workshop activities and discussions, including assessments of relevant open-source tools; recommendations for development of extensions to existing tools and of new tools as required; recommendations for best practices in the digital representation of motion picture film artifacts for material study; and an outline of priorities for undertaking limited-scale proof-of-concept projects.

BIOGRAPHIES

Principal Project Staff

Project Director Brian Graney is Archivist and Head of Public and Technology Services for the Black Film Center/Archive at Indiana University Bloomington. He has specialized in audiovisual preservation and access issues at archives including the UCLA Film & Television Archive, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, and Northeast Historic Film, where he served as lead project staff on the development of a digital audiovisual collection and interface based in a custom configuration of the open-source CollectiveAccess platform. He is a co-founder and current President of the Board of the independent non-profit, The Center for Home Movies, and a former Director of the Board (2005-2009) of the Association of Moving Image Archivists.

Lead Scholar Michael T. Martin is Director of the Black Film Center/Archives, professor of Communication and Culture and American Studies and adjunct professor of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Indiana University Bloomington. He is the editor-in-chief of the film journal, *Black Camera*. His publications include editor/co-editor of *Redress for Historical Injustices in the United States: Slavery, Jim Crow, and Their Legacies*; *Studies of Development and Change in the Modern World*; *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*; and a two-volume work, *New Latin American Cinema*. His work has appeared in *Film Quarterly*, *the Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Research in African Literatures*, *the Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies and Framework*. He also directed and co-produced the award winning feature documentary on Nicaragua, *In the Absence of Peace*.

Project Advisory Board

Working with the Project Director and Lead Scholar, the Project Advisory Board will oversee the development of the conference and workshop agendas; recommend resources and tools for review and assessment; lead discussions with invited participants in advance of the conference; oversee the evaluation of project outcomes; and recommend priorities for ongoing work.

Will Cowan, Associate Director for Digital Library Software Development, IU Libraries Digital Library Program, Indiana University Bloomington

Allyson Nadia Field, Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies, University of California, Los Angeles; Co-Chair, Oscar Micheaux Society, Society for Cinema and Media Studies

Jan-Christopher Horak, Director, UCLA Film & Television Archive, University of California, Los Angeles

Leah Kerr, Independent Archival Consultant; Former Director of Collections, Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum

Jacqueline Stewart, Associate Professor of Radio/Television/Film and African American Studies, Northwestern University

John A. Walsh, MLS Program Director and Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science, Indiana University Bloomington

DATA MANAGEMENT PLAN

Expected Data and Period of Retention

Principal data to be produced over the course of this project includes audiovisual recordings of conference and workshop proceedings, transcriptions from those recordings, and the project white paper. All project data will be made publicly available within six months of the 2013 conference and workshop and retained permanently at Indiana University.

Data Formats and Dissemination

Event proceedings will be recorded to DVCAM tape and transferred to H.264/MPEG-4 standard files in accordance with ISO/IEC 14496, *Coding of audio-visual objects*. Both the text transcriptions produced from the recordings and the project white paper will be written to PDF/A-1 file format in accordance with ISO 19005-1:2005, *Document Management – Electronic document file format for long term preservation – Part 1: Use of PDF 1.4 (PDF/A-1)*.

For wide dissemination of the event proceedings and for enhanced discoverability of individual presentations, BFC/A will employ the open-source Omeka platform and the Annotator's Workbench (AWB) plugin recently developed at Indiana University by project advisor Will Cowan. The project MPEG-4 files will be uploaded to AWB; divided into segments according to presentation; associated with descriptive metadata to include the corresponding text transcriptions for each video segment; and ingested for delivery through the Omeka installation hosted at the dedicated event website. (AWB work files will be exported and saved as METS-compliant .awx XML.) This approach will enable video browsing by presenter and topic, and full keyword access to presentation content. The Omeka database of presentations and transcriptions will be shared as open content through an ODC Public Domain Dedication and License (PDDL).

The project white paper will also be disseminated online at the dedicated event website and shared as open content through the IUScholarWorks digital repository (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/>).

Data Storage and Preservation of Access

Following the completion of video digitization work by the Education and Production Services unit of the Indiana University Radio & Television, the original tape-based DVCAM masters will be stored on-site in the BFC/A's environmentally-controlled archival vault.

All MPEG-4, XML, and PDF/A-1 files generated through the project will be stored using the Indiana University Scholarly Data Archive (SDA; <https://pti.iu.edu/storage/sda>), a distributed storage service capable of holding up to 15 petabytes of data that is centrally supported across mirrored tape silos in Bloomington and Indianapolis. All data will be indexed in the IUScholarWorks repository, which provides a user-friendly interface for the organization, context, and discoverability of data stored in SDA. This combination of IUScholarWorks and SDA provides mirroring, redundancy, media migration, access control, file integrity validation, embargoes, and other security-based services that ensure the data are appropriately archived for the life of the project and beyond the project if necessary. As experts on research preservation and access, the IU Libraries manage this service on a day-to-day basis.

APPENDIX A: REFERENCES

- Casey, M. & Williams, M. (n.d.). *ACTION: Audio-visual cinematic toolbox for interaction, organization, and navigation*. Retrieved from <http://bregman.dartmouth.edu/~bregman/innovate.html>
- Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (2012). *Technical Commission digital technology guidance papers*. Retrieved from <http://www.fiafnet.org/uk/publications/fep.html>
- Hamilton, K. (2012). *Re-framing the online video archive: A prototype interface for America's nuclear test films*. Retrieved from http://complexfields.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Hamilton_UIUC_summary.pdf
- Heftberger, A. (2012). Ask not what your web can do for you – ask what you can do for your web! Some speculations about film studies in the age of digital humanities. *Frames Cinema Journal*(1). Retrieved from <http://framescinemajournal.com/asknotwhat>
- Österreichisches Filmmuseum. (2012). Digital formalism. Retrieved from http://www.filmmuseum.at/en/research_education/research_projects/digital_formalism_1
- Stewart, J. (2011). Discovering black film history: Tracing the Tyler, Texas Black Film Collection. *Film History*, 23(2), 147-173.
- Trustees of Indiana University. (2012). EVIA digital archive: Ethnographic video for instruction and analysis. Retrieved from <http://www.eviada.org>
- Tsivian, Y. (n.d.). Cinemetrics. Retrieved from <http://www.cinemetrics.lv>
- U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (2012). *Digital moving images from film-based source material*. Retrieved from <http://www.archives.gov/preservation/products/reformatting/mopix-digital.html>
- University of California, San Diego. (n.d.). Software Studies Initiative. Retrieved from http://lab.softwarestudies.com/p/research_14.html

APPENDIX B: PROPOSED CONFERENCE AND WORKSHOP AGENDA

All listed speakers are confirmed except as noted.

DAY ONE - Conference

8:30 AM-9:00 AM: Coffee

9:00 AM-9:30 AM: Welcome and Introduction

9:30 AM-11:00 AM: **Panel One: Generations of scholarship in the study of early black film**

Histories of early black-audience film scholarship and the observed influence of past technological developments in access and presentation.

Moderator:

Greg Waller, Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University – Bloomington

Panel:

Matt Bernstein, Department of Film and Media Studies, Emory University

[Unconfirmed historian]

[Unconfirmed media archivist]

Dana White, Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts, Emory University

11:00 AM-11:15 AM: Break

11:15 AM-12:45 PM: **Panel Two: Reconceptualizing the film artifact as an object for study**

Examining the character of film works significant to early black-audience film as they exist as fragments, versions, and variants, and how they constitute material evidence apart from their time-based moving image essence and within a network of related visual and textual documents.

Moderator:

Rachael Stoeltje, IU Film Archive, Indiana University – Bloomington

Panel:

Jacqueline Stewart, School of Communication, Northwestern University

Mike Mashon, Moving Image Section, MBRS, Library of Congress

Leah Kerr, Independent Archivist

J. Christopher Horak, UCLA Film and Television Archive, University of California – Los Angeles

12:45 PM-2:45 PM: Lunch

2:45 PM-4:15 PM: **Panel Three: The Race Movie Circuit and the Web of Evidence**

The race movie circuit as a network of performers, producers, distributors, investors, theaters, and audiences; requirements for establishing relationships between bodies of extant materials held across archives; means of presenting and discovering linked data geographically, chronologically, and thematically.

Moderator:

Barbara Klinger, Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University – Bloomington

Panel:

Allyson Field, School of Theater, Film, and Television, University of California, Los Angeles

Barbara Tapa Lupack, Independent Scholar

Charlene Regester, Department of African and Afro-American Studies, University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

[Unconfirmed digital humanities specialist]

4:15 PM-4:30 PM: Break

4:30 PM-5:30 PM: **Closing Roundtable**

Moderator:

Michael T. Martin, Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University Bloomington

8:00 PM: **Evening Keynote**

Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library

DAY TWO - Workshop

Workshop Co-Chairs:

Will Cowan, Digital Library Program, Indiana University

John A. Walsh, School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University

Brian Graney, Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University

8:30 AM-9:00 AM: Coffee

9:00 AM-9:15 AM: Welcome and Introduction

9:15 AM-10:30 AM: **Motion Picture Capture and Representation**

Presentation and evaluation of existing frame-integrity motion picture scanning systems, best practice documents for image capture, raw and processed file formats, and tools for representing digital content.

10:30 AM-10:45 AM: Break

10:45 AM-12:00 PM: **Tools and Platforms for Analysis, Annotation, and Contextualization**

Demonstrations of existing tools under consideration for application and extension, including TILE 1.0 Text-Image Linking Environment and Annotator's Workbench; and reviews of relevant digital humanities projects including Going to the Show and Digital Formalism.

12:00 PM-1:00 PM: Lunch

1:00 PM-2:00 PM: **Closing Discussion**

Revisiting the methodologies and humanities questions examined throughout Day One to more closely assess the current technical landscape and its capacity to support research and teaching in this area; enumerating and prioritizing needs for continuing research and development.