



Toward Decolonized Film Festival Worlds

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I would like to see festivals decolonized. I would like to see more women, and people of color, and younger people directing and curating film festivals. I would like to see less of a Western canon at film festivals and more of an exploration of the undervalued and underexposed. I would like to see festivals push toward the future of cinema, whatever that may be, rather than investing in conservative models from the past. I would like to see an end to the word ‘film’ in festivals if festivals are never showing anything on celluloid. I would like to see an end to festivals using a rendition of a strip of celluloid as their brand logo. Maybe I would even like to see an end to using the word ‘festival’. In short, I am ready for something different! Greg de Cuir Jr (pers. comm. 2021)

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AFRICAN SCREEN WORLDS: DECOLONIZING FILM AND SCREEN STUDIES

This co-authored chapter has developed out of, and thus needs to be contextualized within, our collaboration on the “African Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies” project (2019–2024), funded by the European Research Council, for which we are, respectively, the Principal Investigator (Dovey) and a key participant and contributor to many of the project’s diverse written and creative outputs (Sendra).¹ The project’s *raison d’être* is to contribute to making Film Studies, and the film industry, more globally representative of the diversity of our planetary populations, films and filmmaking cultures, with a specific focus on centering Africa, the most marginalized region when it comes to the international film economy and the academy. The project proposes the term “screen worlds” as a heuristic device to take us beyond the concept of “world cinema,” which has dominated Film Studies and the curation of film festivals for the past two decades and which often instills an inherent difference and hierarchy between the “West” and the “rest” (Dovey and Taylor-Jones 2021). The emphasis on “screen” rather than “cinema” shares de Cuir Jr’s interest in how we can all “push toward the future of cinema” in our current era, in which the forms of filmmaking, and film distribution, exhibition, and spectatorship, are changing so rapidly. In turn, the emphasis on “worlds” as a plural noun, rather than as a singular adjective, is intended to highlight the rich complexity of our planet rather than reduce ourselves to singular or binary narratives. As will become evident in this chapter (part manifesto, part reflection), our thinking is informed by the authors of *A World of Many Worlds* (2018), who cite a Zapatista manifesto that argues: “In the world of the powerful there is room only for the big and their helpers. In the world we want, everybody fits. The world we want is a world in which many worlds fit” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 1). We are also significantly guided by the thinking of decolonial scholar Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who argues that the problem is “taking ideas from a singular ‘province’ of the world and making them into universal” truths (2020, 40). In addition to engaging with theory we also strongly believe that our scholarship needs to be informed by practice, as well as conversation with practitioners, and we are thus

¹ See www.screenworlds.org for all outputs as they are completed.

indebted to the 22 film professionals who have shared their recent experiences with us (see List of survey participants).

To decolonize Film Studies and the film industry, it is vital that we all speak openly about our positionality and lived experience to understand how that affects what we think and do. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region that we both have mostly engaged with in our research and film festival direction and curation (Dovey is originally from South Africa, and her research [e.g., 2015] has spanned sub-Saharan Africa, and Sendra's region of focus in her research is Senegal [e.g., 2018, 2021], where she has spent significant time, and learned Wolof). While we are both white people, we have tried to be transparent and self-reflexive about our racialized positionality and privileges and the effects of these on our work (Dovey 2020; Sendra 2020). We feel that there is a need for white film scholars, film festival practitioners, and filmmakers to reject "white fragility" (Di Angelo 2018) and to be willing to engage deeply with how the power associated with our racialized identities manifests itself. There is also a need, however, for us to respect Kimberle Crenshaw's (2017) emphasis on how our identities are "intersectional" in myriad ways (including gender, class, and sexuality), Obioma Nnaemeka's (2003) empowering idea that what matters is not just our intersectional identities but also our actions, and Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann's invitation to reject rigid, externally imposed categories and to embrace the dynamism of our own—and others'—*self*-definitions.²

FILM FESTIVAL FILM (2019)

Many of the complex questions surrounding how to decolonize filmmaking and the film industry are explored in the 48-minute, provocative, docu-fiction film *Film Festival Film* (2019), particularly in relation to the current constitution of film festivals and related film funding structures, which is why we chose to launch the "African Screen Worlds" project with a free, public screening of this film at SOAS University of London (where the project is hosted), followed by a Q&A with co-directors Perivi Katjavivi (who is Namibian-British) and Mpumelelo Mcata (who is South African) and producer Anna Teeman (from the UK).³ This was also the UK

² See Ndisi-Herrmann in conversation with Dovey here: <https://screenworlds.org/films/beside-the-scenes-a-conversation-with-director-philippa-ndisi-herrmann/>.

³ The filmed Q&A can be accessed here <https://screenworlds.org/resources/film-festival-film-screening-and-panel-discussion/>.

premiere of the film, and we appreciate that the filmmakers entrusted us with this as part of our public seminar series, rather than reserving the premiere for a prestigious film festival. Similarly, not many filmmakers have been courageous enough to turn their cameras onto the film festival world itself, and this is the first film—to our knowledge—that does so in a way that raises the critical question that we also want to pose here: if film festival organizers and curators recognize that there is a need for decolonization, how can we all work together toward decolonized film festival worlds? We recognize that not all film festivals will necessarily embrace the idea of decolonization—in fact, some may contest it—however, the fact that, as we complete this chapter, the 2021 Berlinale made the focus of its World Cinema Fund Day “Decolonizing Cinema” (5 March), suggests that even the most established film festivals are seeing this as a priority.

Film Festival Film demythologizes film festivals, showing their mundanity and micro-aggressions rather than their glossy surface glamor and cozy multiculturalism. It does this in several ways—both via the radical, improvisational, and non-hierarchical process the filmmakers used to make the film,⁴ and through what it focuses on—a fictional protagonist, Fanon (played by South African actress Lindiwe Matshikiza), and her private, personal struggles as she tries to navigate the uncomfortable spaces of the (actual) 2018 Durban International Film Festival to try to realize her dream of being awarded development funding for a film that she wants to make. A significant portion of the film is taken up with her nervous, solo rehearsing for her pitch session in her hotel room, as in the following monologue which she delivers while silhouetted against the sky and sea standing at her hotel window:

It’s a tale of one woman’s struggle for self-determination with a tragic conclusion, frustrated dreams ... there’s race, class, sex. ... It’s the right time for this kind of story. We’re all talking about Woman’s things, I’m a Woman. ... The NFVF [South African National Film and Video Foundation] is looking for that kind of thing, right now. And the Ford Foundation would jump on this, and so, it looks right, the optics are good.

⁴On the radical potential of collective, non-hierarchical, low-budget filmmaking, Mpumelelo Mcata said during our Q&A: “It was really free, and it really opened the space for ownership ... mutual [ownership] ... like even the person holding the sound thing could ask anybody we were asking a question, or stop at any moment. It wasn’t just our voices on set. ... It was more like a ten-piece combo jazz band jamming, you know, live, running through the hotel, and this as a model to make film, with that improvising element, is kind of like making film as sport or as a music jam.”

It is radical of the (male) directors of *Film Festival Film* to imagine how a young black female filmmaker might experience a mainstream film festival (the Durban International Film Festival, which is one of the most established film festivals on the African continent, and arguably the one with the most connections to “elite” international festivals, such as the Berlinale). But what is also radical is that the film that Fanon wants to make is about Marijke de Klerk, the murdered wife of former South African president F.W. de Klerk (who won the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with Nelson Mandela). And why should Fanon not want to make a film about a white woman just because she is a black woman? Why should we assume that she only wants to make films about black women?

This is one of many ways that the film challenges us as viewers to go beyond the “optics” that it parodies in terms of how film funders and film festivals can make surface, tokenistic decisions that do not address racism and sexism and other forms of oppression. Here we are confronted with what Stuart Hall (1992) has famously called the “burden of representation” that marginalized people carry, where they are expected to (and given funding to) endlessly foreground their “victimhood,” which is then cynically (albeit often unconsciously) used to keep those people “in their place” by the dominant group, which confirms its own subjecthood at the same time.⁵ The character of Fanon, like Hall, seems to want to “absolve” herself of “the black person’s burden,” which is that she be “expected to speak for the entire black race” (Hall 1992, 277). Hall’s antidote to this is to speak “autobiographically” but not in a way that could be “thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity” (ibid.).

Similarly, Fanon’s logline for her own film about Marijke de Klerk could, paradoxically, be used as one possible logline for *Film Festival Film*, showing a different relation to (auto)biography: “It’s a tale of one woman’s struggle for self-determination with a tragic conclusion, frustrated dreams ... there’s race, class, sex.” In the case of *Film Festival Film*, however, the conclusion is left open-ended—we do not know whether Fanon succeeds in her struggle for self-determination—in other words, in making her film. This absence is particularly loaded when contrasted with the fact that the first film screening Fanon goes to as part of her journey through the 2018 Durban International Film Festival is *The Adventures of Supermama* (2019), a film about a black female action hero (played by

⁵ See also Ross 2011, who discusses this “burden of representation” in relation to European festival funding for Latin American cinema.

Nomsa Buthelezi) directed by a white South African female filmmaker (Karen Van Schalkwyk). Fanon's visible dismay with the film, and at the racial dynamics during the post-screening Q&A, in which the white filmmaker speaks with no apparent awareness of the racial hierarchies that are at play, lead Fanon to ask Van Schalkwyk: "Why was this film made?"

The distinction here is very important: Fanon does *not* ask "Why did you make this film?", which implies an interest in what Van Schalkwyk's inspirations were; rather, by asking "Why was this film made?" the suggestion is that the film should not have been made at all. It is a rhetorical question and a statement of refusal that insists that the idea that anyone can make a film about anything is historically myopic. It is well known that the early history of filmmaking, through imperial and ethnographic film production, was dominated by a white Western gaze at non-white, non-Western Others, although less research and critique exists on how these practices are still often evident in filmmaking and film curation today.⁶ This is a topic the filmmakers courageously tackle, not only through Fanon's story, but also through a series of provocative interviews with key film industry players who are, in the process, challenged by the *Film Festival Film* filmmakers to think—among many other things—about how white privilege and male privilege operate in the industry.⁷ For example, the white South African filmmaker Sara Blecher is asked questions about racialized privilege, while the male South African filmmaker Rehad Desai discusses the South African #MeToo movement.

While we do not know whether or not Fanon makes her film, the making of *Film Festival Film* is to be celebrated, as it is filled with ideas and questions about what both decolonized filmmaking and decolonized film festival organization and curation might entail. As Perivi Katjavivi explained during our Q&A: "We were all just really trying to get to the essence of this strangeness that exists in the film world ... These institutions, these systems, these festivals, what are they? And everybody's having this sort of party at these festivals, but no one's really in a position to sort of stop and say 'What are we doing? This is kind of weird.'"

⁶See Dovey 2015 for a critique of this in relation to the curatorial practices of certain European film festivals.

⁷Notably these interviews take place in Fanon's hotel room, and the filmmakers of *Film Festival Film* have cited as a reference point Wim Wenders' film *Room 666* (1982) in which he interviewed filmmakers in the Hotel Martinez at the Cannes Film Festival about the future of cinema. However, the filmmakers were also quick to point out that the decision to shoot a lot of the film in Fanon's hotel room was also due to financial considerations, as they made the film on a shoestring budget.

FROM COSMETIC APPROPRIATION TO DEEP DECOLONIZATION

If this is, in part, a manifesto for decolonized film festival worlds, then we need to define what decolonization means to us. In our view, decolonization is informed activism that seeks to address and redress the complex, racialized legacies and ongoing institutionalized racism that is a result of the forced political, economic, and cultural domination of people of color (and particularly black people) by white people over the past five centuries. This domination has primarily occurred through imperialism, colonialism, and the Transatlantic slave trade, although we also have to take into account how these unjust systems have frequently overlapped with heteropatriarchalism and capitalism. Decolonization has been critiqued by some for becoming a buzzword, particularly as it has been taken up across so many areas of society since it was resuscitated as part of the RhodesMustFall movement in May 2015 at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. The ubiquity with which the word is now used can, indeed, make it very difficult to define, but we need to distinguish cosmetic appropriation of it and deep, lasting action in relation to it. The positive aspect about how pervasive the term has become is that it has empowered many, dispersed people to find solidarity and strength with like-minded, anti-racist activists from whom they were previously separated, due to disciplinary boundaries (in academia) or physical distances (something that Covid-19 has helped us to overcome to some extent through the shift online—although we acknowledge that digital inequalities make it impossible to speak in absolutes here). When we call here for decolonized film festival worlds, we are inviting everyone who works at or who has an investment in film festivals, to engage in such anti-racist activism.

As one dimension of this activism, we share Greg de Cuir Jr's views that we desperately need "to see less of a Western canon at film festivals and more of an exploration of the undervalued and underexposed" and "to see more women, and people of color, and younger people directing and curating film festivals." However, as Themba Bhebhe, Diversity & Inclusion director of the European Film Market at the Berlinale, warns in relation to the need for festivals to transform their recruitment practices:

I would by way of a caveat for future hires express that the essential condition for the meaningful inclusion of such staff is that they and their perspectives are not marginalized, [that they] receive equal treatment, pay,

decision-making power and financial security. Otherwise they simply become the so-called diversity hires in a tokenistic, disingenuous exercise of due diligence and “color washing” with no structural or transformational depth. (in Vourlias 2019)

Perivi Katjavivi’s first film *The Unseen* (2016), for which we held the UK premiere at the Cambridge African Film Festival, also critiques some of the problems around (white) assumptions that an increase in surface visibility—for example, through simply screening more films by people of color at film festivals largely attended by white people—will result in deep-rooted, political change. One of the questions that also needs to be asked is: what do we *do* with what we see? Visibility is complicated terrain—sight is where racial, gendered, and other classification/assumptions often begins, and, as many film scholars have taught us, there is a wide diversity of ways of looking at, and doing things with, films. In other words, decolonial, anti-racist activism at film festivals has to include a diversification of films and core staff, but it also has to go beyond this to engage in much broader and deeper questioning about what decolonization means and how to enact it.

REORIENTING FILM FESTIVALS

Decolonization means different things in diverse contexts and there is no one-size-fits-all model. Each film festival in each specific location needs to embark on its own process of soul-searching and self-reflexivity to determine what exactly decolonization and anti-racism would mean in *that* context, so that concrete actions can then be identified and embarked on. Although this chapter is partly a manifesto we do not want to be prescriptive, for that would fall into the (colonial) trap of dogmatically telling others how they should act and behave from a position that is not cognizant of local cultures and experiences. This is precisely why we are arguing here not for a decolonized film festival *world*, but rather for decolonized film festival *worlds*—a shift away from the competitive, capitalist “world of the powerful” (in this context, a hierarchical, white film festival world that seeks to maintain its privilege), toward a “pluriverse” of film festivals which would involve “the negotiated coming together of heterogeneous worlds (and their practices) as they strive for what makes each of them be what they are, which is also not without others” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4).

Moving toward decolonized film festival worlds thus necessarily entails a reorientation toward each festival's local context and scrutiny in relation to *how* each film festival interacts with other film festivals on the transnational and global scale. This reorientation is one that has of course been forced upon all film festivals due to the Covid-19 pandemic—in ways that we explore below—but how this reorientation can align with the principles of decolonization is our concern here. In particular, we want to emphasize the indigenous origins to much contemporary decolonization philosophy (e.g., Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018) and the insistence, in Indigenous practices, on the fundamental inextricability of natural and human life to the extent that if we are not addressing “the ecological crisis that threatens to eradicate life on Earth” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 2), and which disproportionately affects people in the Global South, then we cannot be said to be involved in decolonization at all. This is because full attention to this crisis means

an engagement with the current fate of the planet that takes stock of the colonial destruction of worlds as the destruction that the culprits of the Anthropocene imposed on its victims. The peculiarity of this destruction is that, waged in the name of progress ... it has never been recognized as such. Paradoxically, the end of the world as we know it may mean the end of its being made through destruction: facing destruction at an unprecedented rate, the collectives that colonialism—in its earliest and latest versions—doomed to extinction emerge to publicly denounce the principles of their destruction, which may coincide with the assumptions that made a one-world world. (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 16)

Blaser et al. then ask, more optimistically, “Could the moment of the Anthropocene bring to the fore the possibility of the pluriverse?” (ibid.) Ndlovu-Gatsheni similarly argues that it is “the decolonial turn” that offers the “discursive terrain of liberation and a foundation for pluriversality” (2020, 18). He thus puts out a “revolutionary call” for us all to “turn over a new leaf ... abandoning the ‘European game’ on the grounds that it is dehumanizing and dismembering other human beings” (2020, 5).

While recognizing the many negative impacts of Covid-19 on groups of people who were already marginalized before the pandemic, on a more positive level, it has forced us to question accelerated globalization and its environmental destructiveness as a *fait accompli*. It would be disingenuous

for all of us involved in festivals not to acknowledge how pleasurable it is to travel to different festivals around the world and meet and spend time with people from elsewhere. But the pandemic has compelled us to see more clearly some of the deep problems with these practices—their deleterious effects on our planetary environment (through long-haul travel for short-term events); their ongoing entrenchment of hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South in terms of *who* is able to travel; and their exclusivity (in that they are only accessible to those who can afford to travel to/enter them).

Many of the film festival practitioners who we surveyed for this chapter (see List of survey participants) acknowledged both the possibilities and problems wrought by the pandemic, and many felt that a “blended” or “hybrid” model of embodied and online activities would now inevitably be how film festivals run in the future, expanding our ideas of what constitutes festival “liveness.” Many were especially excited—as we are—by the larger and more diverse audiences, greater accessibility, and more ecologically friendly practice that comes with offering film screenings, masterclasses, and panel discussions online. Clearly, it is the most “elite,” industry-oriented film festivals that have felt the effects of the pandemic most dramatically, due to their stakeholders being more international than local, and due to the stakes being higher in terms of film premieres, and their relationships with cinema-owners and public and private funders. As Frida Fan Jingwen, curator at the Shanghai International Film Festival, notes, “A category” festivals would struggle if the pandemic continues unless they can “successfully persuade all the world premiere films to be screened online” and if they can make do with “a less international jury.” She says there are “enough” large festivals and that we need “more lovely smaller ones” that are more “creative.” Indeed, it is important to note that the majority of the film festivals in the world are audience-oriented, smaller festivals—however, it is the large festivals that continue to attract the most attention from filmmakers, the media, and scholars, due to their prestige. These stakeholder groups (including those of us who are academics) thus *also* need to take responsibility for helping to usher in decolonized film festival worlds through turning our attention elsewhere.

Many of the participants at the 2021 Berlinale’s “Decolonizing Cinema” event made similar arguments. As we watched these conversations from different locations in the world play out through screens, we felt hopeful that global conversation can continue, allowing film festivals, curators, and filmmakers to learn from one another, while each group that

is passionate about film becomes more invested in its own immediate context, shifting power to “small, grassroots communities” that might not even hold festivals (as Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, a filmmaker from Lesotho, said) or that might not even use cinemas to screen films (such as The Nest Collective in Kenya, which designs a specific screening strategy for each film, or the Sunshine Cinema venture in South Africa, known as “Africa’s First Solar Powered Cinema Network”). It felt as though, through this online event, we were witnessing a reorientation in terms of hierarchies—with the participants from different African contexts (e.g., South Africa, Burkina Faso, Sudan) speaking from their own locations on their own terms about their inspiring work, thereby situating the Berlinale as a somewhat parochial interlocutor on the margins. As Sydelle Willow Smith, co-founder of Sunshine Cinema, said: “Whose knowledge is privileged? European knowledge production being the baseline, determining the quality of something, is part of the thing that needs to be dismantled. ... And I think countries in the Global South are very tired of this notion of always being viewed in those categories of world cinema, world music, this notion that we are still developing, that we are still catching up to something of the Eurocentric standard and that is really part of that process of decolonization.”

In the second half of this chapter, we would like to delve deeper into specific examples of festival/curatorial work that have taken place before and during the pandemic and which we find inspirational and which we feel can serve as models and inspiration for other film festivals and curators interested in decolonizing their work. Many of these examples come from festivals/curators/filmmakers based in the Global South or from those celebrating the Global South in the Global North.

BLUEPRINTS FOR DECOLONIAL FILM FESTIVAL/ CURATORIAL PRACTICE

As Bhebhe says, this “future [decolonial] vision is neither factitious nor fictitious: it is already in operation in certain spaces of the industry (in identity-based festivals, public funders, capacity-building and talent development organizations, interest-group organizations), and embodies a blueprint of best practices that we can strive towards” (in Vourlias 2019). In Senegal, where I (Estrella) have been working and/or conducting research for the past decade, film festivals and cultural festivals more broadly have been experimenting with various formats in a search for

sustainability. Since 2000, Senegal has witnessed the foundation of over 100 festivals beyond the capital city, Dakar. These festivals are characterized by the way their leaders engage with their local communities, who in this way become co-authors of the festivals rather than mere “spectators.” While there is a shared aspiration of internationalization at these festivals—with their names often using the word “international”—their participants are predominantly local and their directors are often “rooted cosmopolitans” (Appiah 2015, 241), Senegalese people with international mobility but with a strong sense of commitment toward making their local regions better places to live (Sendra 2018).

Let us take the example of the Banlieue Films Festival in Dakar, which I (Estrella) have analyzed at length in previous work (Sendra 2021). This festival was founded by Abdel Aziz Boye, who returned to Senegal after being based in Paris for 22 years, where he studied and made films. The festival was preceded by a film school in the outskirts of Dakar, the *banlieue*, the area where the Senegalese population was displaced during centuries of French colonialism. It provided free access to cinema training, where films emerged from the lived experiences of young Senegalese people from the *banlieue*. The small number of cinema venues in Dakar and the difficulty of accessing them motivated Boye—with limited institutional support—to create a festival to be able to screen and celebrate these films locally.

Decolonizing film, according to Bhebe, “necessarily poses the question of the formation of alternative circuits of distribution in Africa and among the peoples of the global south” (in Vourlias 2019), and here too there are positive examples to explore. Many film festivals and curators in Africa have engaged in horizontal forms of collaboration, “building reciprocity practices” (Peirano 2020, 64) with each other. One of the most remarkable examples of such collaboration during the pandemic can be credited to the Centre Yennenga, a filmmaking hub located in Grand Dakar, founded by the acclaimed Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis. On 30 April 2020, as film festivals all over the world were grappling with how to proceed in light of the first wave of Covid-19, and with many canceling their 2020 editions, the Centre Yennenga was a pioneer in offering an online film program. The program did not have a fixed set of dates or films announced in advance. Rather, details were communicated spontaneously, and films were shared through a link and password, available for streaming internationally for 48 hours. As Farah Clémentine Dramani-Issifou, deputy director of Centre Yennenga, reflects: “It was a way for us to continue the work that we had already started to do: to

support filmmakers, mainly from the continent, in the exhibition of their films and to try to create links with the audience in Dakar, but also, regionally, and internationally” (pers. comm. 2021).

It was not easy for the Centre Yennenga to undertake such a venture. They had to convince African filmmakers to let them share their films online, which “can raise issues of copyright, piracy, etc” (ibid.). But, through the care Centre Yennenga took with their programming, and through the generosity of African filmmakers in agreeing to share their films, this pioneering online “event” respected Greg de Cuir Jr’s call of moving beyond the word “festival” to something entirely new and exciting, motivated by a collaborative and activist spirit. For film curators, Dramani-Issifou says,

it is about the way in which our heart can be in the center of our reflection and activity. It is about how we commit to take care of our community. ... No matter what happens we need to continue to give voice to those filmmakers whose work we are interested in. (pers. comm. 2021)

One of the films they screened was celebrated Mauritanian-Malian filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006), which was made available online for free through their Facebook page on 16 May 2020, and geo-blocked to the African continent (with a few exceptions), followed by a live streamed Q&A the following day on Facebook. The Centre plans to keep testing “new ways of doing things,” through hybrid formats combining physical and online events to create “spaces of encounter.” Having to move online quickly during the pandemic has also inspired the Centre Yennenga to “use social media better” and to develop its own archive to keep a record of its community-building process and events (ibid.).

Examples of such collaboration and the creation of alternative circuits can also be seen at African film festivals outside of Africa, which thereby place a region often marginalized in the mainstream film circuit at the very center of attention. These festivals have fostered a peripheral circuit, with a shared aim of showcasing African films to international audiences. This commitment was sealed at FESPACO 2013, when the five UK-based African film festivals (Africa in Motion, Afrika Eye, the Cambridge African Film Festival, Film Africa, and Watch Africa) signed the Ouagadougou Declaration. This is how the TANO (Swahili for “five”) network came into existence, “committing to [work] together to promote African cinema throughout the UK through sharing films and touring African film directors, joint publicity and funding applications, promoting the

screening of African films on all platforms and formats by all means possible” (Africa in Motion website). This has been accomplished through shared film seasons, such as “South Africa at 20” (for the twentieth anniversary of the country’s democracy) and “From Africa, with Love,” with a thematic focus on love. During the pandemic, these festivals joined forces once again to curate WE ARE TANO—an online film season that ran from 1 to 21 October 2020, screening ten of the best African films curated at the five festivals over the past decade. As Sheila Ruiz, then director of Film Africa, says: “One of the interesting or very satisfying things to see was that a lot of the titles that we had screened back in the day that did not have distribution at the time, or maybe did but did not get a long theatrical run, were now on Netflix, on the BFI Player, on Amazon Prime.” She thus concludes that a collaborative rather than competitive approach has helped with “mainstreaming African cinema in the UK” (The F-Show online, 2020). Such unity “is the nerve centre of decolonization ... There is ‘*amandla*’ (power/strength) in unity. There is revolutionary spirit in unity. There is relationality in unity. There is future in unity (pluriversal-ity)” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 15).

Many of the measures proposed as “Curating a Pandemic Recovery Plan for UK Distribution and Exhibition” (hosted online only to participants with an industry accreditation as part of the 2020 BFI London Film Festival) have long been practised by festivals in Africa and African film festivals outside Africa (Dovey 2015; Sendra 2018). Alison Gardner, co-director of the Glasgow Film Festival, described the actions of film festivals in times of pandemic as “the revolution of people over profit.” Melani Iredale, interim director of Sheffield Doc/Fest, stressed how “despite everything we have never been so connected with peers.” Festivals have had to engage in resilient curatorial practices, innovating and responding rapidly to changes. As Kenyan filmmaker and Executive Founder and Creative Director of Docubox Judy Kibinge puts it, “festivals have been thrown into complete confusion ... The quick collapse of Tribeca [film festival] was a very clear sign that whoever did remain in the game really rolled up their sleeves and committed to continuing” (pers. comm. 2021). Sara Fratini, co-founding director of the Guarimba International Film Festival in Italy, says that “it felt like organizing a whole new festival” (pers. comm. 2021). And José Luis Cienfuegos, director of the Seville European Film Festival (SEFF), emphasizes that “many of us are considering re-evaluating and clarifying our goals, rethinking deeply who we are and what we are doing for our environment” (pers. comm. 2021).

The move toward online film festival formats has translated into a decentralization of festival space (Sendra 2018) and, consequently, more democratic access to festivals. As Ana Camila Esteves, director and curator of the *Mostra de Cinemas Africanos* in Brazil, says about her experience of running this festival during the pandemic:

The festival circuits are far from democratic in terms of access to our population ... For the first time I saw a very democratic way of building a festival. The main festivals in Brazil are located in the south of the country, which means people from other regions could never attend, and loads of them don't even have a venue in their towns. To me it was amazing to have feedback from people from everywhere in Brazil, telling me they were watching an African film for the first time, or celebrating the fact that they could finally attend my festival. (pers. comm. 2021)

Mane Cisneros, Marion Berger, and Federico Olivieri, director, curator, and organizer, respectively, of FCAT, the African Film Festival in Tarifa-Tangier, similarly argue that the impact of online programming from an audience perspective was remarkable, since it allowed many people who had never been able to attend their festival to watch African cinema (pers. comm. 2021).

Film festivals across the world during the pandemic have also decentralized festival time (Sendra 2018). Many festivals extended their dates, spreading their screenings across longer periods of time. For instance, the *Mostra de Cinemas Africanos* ran from September to November 2020, hosting one film screening per week. Africa in Motion, in Scotland, was hosted over a month, from 30 October to 29 November 2020, with two to three events per day. While audiences were encouraged to watch the films “live,” which was defined on its website as “at the time and date listed on the event page,” all films were available for 48 hours after their scheduled screening time. Jozi Film Festival, in Johannesburg, was initially programmed for just four consecutive days. However, following audience feedback, they decided to extend their festival for an extra weekend. These decisions demonstrate openness to new formats and curatorial strategies which will no doubt redefine the shape of festivals in the future and—we hope—will make them far more accessible and inclusive.

Festivals have often been associated with the creation of a festive time-space “*separate* from everyday routines” (Gibson and Connell 2012, 4). Considering what online festivals mean within the context of people’s

quotidian lives thus requires innovation, empathy, and imagination. Esteves explains how spreading out the *Mostra de Cinemas Africanos* program was aimed at providing enough time for people to watch all the films, as well as avoiding competition with other festivals that had moved online. This allowed them to reach an average of 3000 viewers per week from all over Brazil. However, even when spreading out a film program, there is the risk of audience exhaustion with the “ceaseless international stream of online content” (de Cuir Jr., pers. comm. 2021), leading to the audience being “overwhelmed by choices and eventually opting out” (Etzo, pers. comm. 2021). Judy Kibinge reflects on how difficult engagement has been for film audiences in Kenya during the pandemic:

Initially it felt very novel and interesting to sign in to some of these festivals online, and it has just somehow become exhausting. First of all, it is not that we were not already watching many films online, with Netflix and all these other streamers. ... You are not immersed in the buzz of what to watch and when to watch. The more time goes on and the less novel that an online film festival becomes, it really just starts to feel like you are streaming something online, because you are not part of a bigger community. (pers. comm. 2021)

Spanish film critic Manuel Lombardo and Greg de Cuir Jr suggest a solution based on quality rather than quantity programming—“to do less, but to make each intervention more impactful and meaningful” (de Cuir Jr, pers. comm. 2021). Similarly, de Cuir Jr notes how online curation cannot be a mere translation of curation of films for “embodied” screenings. Rather, it involves “crafting programs and exhibitions that could not live anywhere else except online” (ibid.). Nashen Moodley, the South African director of the Sydney Film Festival in Australia, suggests that the pandemic compelled his team to localize their program more in terms of their online offering and deepened their understanding of how reliant they are on their local physical venues. Since their 2020 festival had to be canceled, they “looked at alternate ways of connecting with [their] audience”—which involved a “Virtual Edition and Awards in which [they] presented predominantly Australian films online ... and also presented a selection of films through the Australian television channel SBS’s On Demand service.” They also, however, collaborated with other major international film festivals on “We Are One: A Global Film Festival” (an online festival of free films from 29 May to 7 June 2020)—a remarkable display of collaboration rather than competition by many of the world’s “elite” film

festivals. But Moodley also notes that the “pandemic has shown ... that the future success, viability even, of festivals and cinemas is inextricably linked” (pers. comm. 2021)—in certain contexts, we would add.

As we suggested earlier, it is the major, “elite” film festivals that face the most significant challenges in relation to decolonization, given that they are more invested in their position within a “one-world world” international film festival circuit which reifies hierarchy. Another significant challenge is how such festivals—if, like the Berlinale, they are confirming their commitment to decolonizing film—can ensure that they support the work of film professionals in the Global South who often rely on the resources provided by these wealthier film festivals, but in a way that does not reinforce (post)colonial hierarchies. As Kibinge points out, for film professionals in the Global South, the shift to online festivals during the pandemic has been problematic in some respects. For example, her Docubox team in Kenya found that they simply could not engage properly online with IDFA, the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, and limited physical participation in festivals has made it challenging for filmmakers to “shop for their next projects” (pers. comm. 2021).

As Ruiz says: “One cannot replace the magic of those moments when people connect and mingle, and new projects or partnerships are formed based on a positive exchange of ideas” (pers. comm. 2021). Etzo adds that “there is a whole ecosystem made of encounters and interactions that cannot be replicated online” (pers. comm. 2021). Kibinge says that she foresees a wave of nostalgic film-going in the future, when things open up and “people ... remember how much they loved being together in cinemas, discovering new waves and new authors, new films” (pers. comm. 2021). Watching films together in an embodied way can also increase the identification with the stories on screen, particularly when these are showcasing unknown cultures and followed by live Q&As or discussions. The question then becomes, how can we ensure that the *best* of both embodied and online film festivals is preserved in the future, but with the principles of decolonization firmly in mind?

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

Capitalism hasn't worked for Africa. Right now cinema is capitalism. So what I'm raising here is that the whole concept of cinema today, including the one of public funding, is following the Hollywood model.—filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo, in *Film Festival Film* (2019)

I don't see that vision [of decolonization] as utopic. In the first instance, it's an attainable goal on the proviso that the dominant groups show a real willingness to be self-critical and, above all, self-aware. Such willingness, if it is to be truly effective, necessarily has to translate into sharing the power.—Themba Bhebhe (in Vourlias 2019)

The practices of certain festivals before the pandemic, as well as the self-reflexive transformation that many festivals are undertaking during the pandemic, provide models toward decolonized film festival worlds. But this is a process in which festivals' differences from one another—as diverse worlds in specific socio-political contexts—have to be celebrated and valued, as much as festivals' ability to work collaboratively with one another to create the kind of unity that is the “nerve centre of decolonization” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020, 15). “Turning over a new leaf”—as Ndlovu-Gatsheni encourages us to do (2020)—will entail a great deal of humility and vulnerability, the giving up of certain power, privileges and pleasures, and embracing “the practice of a world of many worlds, or what we call a pluriverse: heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4). It will also mean finding ways in which to form relationships outside of the frame of white neoliberal capitalism so as to encourage more dynamic interactions that result in real social change, rather than the kind of competitiveness that has blighted the international film festival circuit to date.

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- Cienfuegos, José Luis. 2021. *Director of the Festival de cine Europeo de Sevilla (Seville European Film Festival)*. February 17. Conducted via email.
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