Embracing collaborations between festivals and higher education: A case study of the ‘Decolonising film festivals and curating African cinemas’ networking event at King’s College London

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Abstract
In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the social responsibility of Higher Education, encouraging knowledge exchange initiatives and impact. This often involves the collaboration with the industry, embracing a curatorial turn in the pedagogic approach. This self-reflexive case study shares the learning, challenges, and opportunities offered by the organisation of a networking event named ‘Decolonising Film Festivals and Curating African Cinemas.’ In so doing, it seeks to offer insights into one such forms of collaboration between Higher Education and the Industry. Through an analysis of the feedback by participants and the discussions at a round-table on decolonising, it highlights the horizontalism and distended environment of the experience, fostering a safe and fruitful discussion that engages in a call to action towards sought change. In public facing events hosted at the university, the classroom becomes a brainstorming exercise in collaboration. The curatorial turn adopted through collaboration bridges theory and practice. Ittulifies voices in the learning and teaching experience, and collaboratively rehearses potential creative solutions to real life scenarios. It promotes social justice, engaging all participants in the process.

Keywords
Collaboration, decolonisation, exchange, festival, higher education, industry, knowledge, networking

Introduction
In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the social responsibility of Higher Education, encouraging knowledge exchange initiatives and impact. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) foster “creative human capital,” enabling graduate students to contribute meaningfully to the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) through their acquired skills, including specialist knowledge of the sector, critical thinking, innovation, leadership and problem-solving skills (Comunian and Gilmore, 2016: 4). This is often the result of critical and radical pedagogic approaches where education is understood as “the practice of freedom” (Freire 2018/1970, hooks, 1994), in that students are not passive recipients of knowledge deposited directly from lecturers, like in the banking education system criticised by Paulo Freire (2018/1970: 72). They are critical and creative thinkers, who situate themselves nearby tutors, rather than vertically, as class members, with the power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (Freire 2018/1970: 83).

Critical and radical pedagogy understands students as “transformers of the world” (Freire 2018/1970: 27-29). This involves a “curatorial turn” in teaching, where both tutors and students become, through respectful dialogue, co-curators of the knowledge development and exchange that happens in and beyond the classrooms of HEIs (Dovey, 2018). The curatorial turn is informed by both theory and practice, but also an understanding of the classroom, and the HEI more broadly, as a caring and engaged community. Film festival scholars have highlighted the difference
between the programming and curating, emphasising the degree of multi-dimensional care involved in the latter (Bosma 2015; Dovey 2015). Similarly, in the context of education, curating entails a greater awareness of the social responsibility and horizontalism between class members – tutors and students – than designing modules to be delivered to a mass of students.

The curatorial turn does not remain at the theoretical level of ‘what if.’ Instead, it bridges theory and practice, rehearsing potential creative solutions to real life scenarios. That is, it is informed by praxis, by action that can promote social justice (Freire 2018/1970, Giroux, 2007) and move towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The curatorial turn further entails and embrace-ment of multiple voices, which, in collaboration, can dialogue about the future of CCIs, based on past and present experiences. Collaboration is a key component of a caring community; in that it fosters an environment of mutual support and valued interdependence (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Yet, what does this collaboration look like? How can they increase understanding of the SDGs and the direction forward in CCIs? As the care collective notes in their Care Manifesto, published during the pandemic, “we need conditions that enable us to act collaboratively to create communities that both support our abilities and nurture our interdependencies” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020: 45). In HEIs, these conditions can take multiple shapes. In this self-reflexive case study I share the challenges, learning and opportunities offered by the organisation of a networking event named ‘Decolonising Film Festivals and Curating African Cinemas.’

The event offered the opportunity to present the research project ‘Decolonizing Film Festival Research in a Post-Pandemic World,’ supported by the Government of Canada’s New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF). This is a research project that seeks to contribute to the decolonisation of research methods through the collaborative design and pilot implementation and analysis of two-part decolonial test. This aims to increase self-reflexivity among researchers and practitioners and broaden knowledge of diverse understandings and practices of decolonisation in African film festivals, which can then be applied to further festivals and disciplines, within arts, humanities and social sciences.

The event offered an opportunity to acknowledge of project participants and researchers, by giving them visibility, bringing them in front of the scenes, in an exchange with students, academics and wider audiences in a public-facing networking event at KCL. It was conceived as a mutually beneficial opportunity for all parties involved. For researchers and practitioners in the project, it was an opportunity to meet in person – for the first time, in several cases – widening their reflection on their curatorial practice, and expanding their network. For students and audience members alike, it was an excellent chance to meet film festival managers, curators and researchers, and listen to their experiences first-hand. The programme also brought three short films, as a sample of the work curated by the partner festivals. Audience feedback provided after the event showed that this was the first time they had seen a film by a filmmaker of African heritage. Some students would also ask questions or chat informally with speakers in some of the social moments curated along the programme.

The enthusiastic engagement at the event illustrated the important role of collaborations between industry speakers and HEIs. Class members learn from the experience, whilst, at the same time, share their ideas and concerns with practitioners, thus engaging in a mutually beneficial knowledge exchange. It contributes to crowdsourced forms of knowledge exchange, where students are welcome to bring questions and themes not necessarily precurated by lecturers, but rather, emerging from a live horizontal exchange.

Despite the interest in knowledge exchange and public engagement, empirical research on what this may look like remains scarce (Virani and Pratt, 2016: 41). This is why here the aim is to share an analysis of a case study that illustrates a form of collaboration between the industry and Higher Education: the curation of practice and research-led public facing events that promote knowledge exchange and social impact that addresses the SDGs. Due to the focus on research methods and decolonisation in the hosted event, as well as the curation of an all-female panel, the specific SDGs targeted are “high-quality education” (4), “gender equality” (5), “reduced inequalities” (10), and “sustainable cities and communities” (11).

I start by sharing some insights on the curatorial process of this 2-day event, to them examine the ways in which the event contributed to fostering creative human capital, broadening understanding of decolonizing research and curatorial practices, informed by experienced researchers and practitioners. I focus on the fruitful collective production of knowledge that emerges from this collaboration thanks to the affective dimension of this live encounter. In other words, at a time when research is often constrained by times established by [neo]colonial institutions and regulations, public facing events can enhance sociability and collegiality between practitioners and researchers in collaboration. This fosters a safe space where further narratives in relation to the research are shared, adding complexity and nuances to the research, which are beneficial for the larger university community participating in the event. The case study here is also based on textual analysis of the last roundtable at the event, entitled ‘Decolonising Film Festivals and Curating African Cinemas’, as well as audience feedback from participants in the 2-day event.
Curating ‘decolonising film festivals and curating african cinemas’ at KCL

‘Decolonising Film Festivals and Curating African Cinemas’ was conceived as “a networking event sharing practices and methodologies in film festival research and practice.” The event was inevitably inspired by over a decade of festival research and practice in the field of African film festivals, as an educator with an interest in festivals and CCIs in Senegal, and work experience as a festival organiser, curator, jury member and media officer. However, it was more specifically inspired by some recent engagement with research projects on decolonisation, and collaborations with African film festivals. The event was curated as an extension of these initial conversations and events in collaboration (see, for example, Feal and Sendra, 2021). It sought to create a space, where collaborators and research participants involved could meet each other, network, share curatorial and managerial practices, understandings and performances of and engagements with decolonisation, and participate in the reflection on the research method being designed and trialled through the NFRF. There were three main aims: (1) to strengthen and broaden existing and new collaborations between African film festivals, researchers, and students; (2) to offer a collaborative and productive performative and discussion space, through the co-curation and co-organisation of a series of film screenings followed by discussions, with the presence of curators and researchers of each of these festivals; and (3) to transfer knowledge to pedagogy and research, extending the impact of the research project ‘Decolonizing Film Festival Research in a Post-Pandemic World.’ Through these objectives there would be a further achievement, sharing what often happens behind the scenes, that is, the research process, with fellow researchers, educators, students and wider audiences. As mentioned in the last roundtable, the event would perform, to some extent, the research project, in that it would showcase some short films and engage in a discussion on understandings of decolonisation with festival researchers and practitioners. The funding application further expressed the hope to encourage students to think about their research design in a self-reflexive way from the very beginning. Guest speakers unanimously stated that the aim of bringing them together as an opportunity to further exchange and network with each other was very clear.

The event was divided into 2 days across different spaces at KCL, selected with help from Justyna Ladosz, the Events and Engagement Coordinator at the REACH Space. I would have loved to host the event over there, due to the warm environment it has, but it had already been booked for those dates, and due to the UCU national strike and the various agendas of our international speakers, there were no other options. The programme included the following events:3

- Presentation of the NFRF project ‘Decolonizing Film Festival Research in a Post-Pandemic World,’ guest speakers: Dr Estrella Sendra (KCL), Dr Ana Camila Esteves (KCL), Prof. Sheila Petty (University of Regina – joining online)

- Short Film Programme: a co-curatorial experience by Film Africa in London, Leeds International Film Festival, Festival Films Femmes Afrique, and Mostra de Cinemas Africanos de Brazil [Desta Haile (Film Africa, UK), Molly Cowderoy (LIFF), Amayel Ndiaye (FFFF, Senegal), Dr Ana Camila Esteves (Mostra de Cinemas Africanos, Brazil)]

- Roundtable: ‘Decolonising Film Festivals and Curating African Cinemas’ Molly Cowderoy (LIFF), guest speakers: Prof. Lindiwe Dovley, Dr Ana Camila Esteves (Mostra de Cinemas Africanos, Brazil), Desta Haile (Film Africa, UK), Dr Rachel Johnson (University of Leeds), Amayel Ndiaye (FFFF, Senegal), Dr Robin Steedman (Copenhagen Business School)
director of Film Africa in London, also provided the opportunity to meet with the person behind the organisation of the festival that some undergraduate students at KCL had attended. Film Africa was the selected festival for a guided study fieldtrip for all class members of the third-year undergraduate core module ‘Events and Festivals: From Conception to Realisation,’ convened by me. Students had already engaged with one of the curators, Nadia Denton, who had been a guest lecturer in Week 3 to discuss the role of curators, with reference to her programme Beyond Nollywood, to be showcased at Film Africa. This shows us the multidirectional dimension of collaboration between Higher Education and the industry in initiatives supported by small grant schemes like the one which funded this event. Research on practice that informs teaching and conversations within HEIs that also inform practice and research.

Decolonisation in practice and conversation: an analysis of the roundtable

As Lindiwe Dovey and I noted in our book chapter-manifesto ‘Towards Decolonized Film Festival Worlds’ (2023), a great source of inspiration of the research project which I co-lead at the moment, decolonisation has become a buzzword. This terminological ubiquity has fostered the encounter between anti-racist activism moved by similar missions (Dovey and Sendra, 2023: 275). Aware of the multiplicity of meanings associated to this signifier, we define decolonisation as “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 … particularly black people by white people over the past five centuries” (Dovey and Sendra, 2023: 275). Such informed activism can take multiple shapes and is reflected and approached differently by researchers and practitioners alike. The roundtable presented then an excellent occasion to reflect in collaboration and conversation on these meanings and practices associates to decolonisation.

The collaboration among the people sitting around the table became evident in the introductions. Instead of reading biographies that had already been shared in a handout and the online information about the event, what was shared as a brief affective account of what linked all speakers around the table, and the various ways in which their pathways had intersected in the past. As the chair, I also pointed out to my own relationship with them all.

This initial interdependent introduction to all speakers and overview of some of the collaborations between them was followed by an invitation to speakers to introduce themselves with reference to their own stories in relation to their festivals. This was a deliberate act of speaking nearby rather than about them, since we were privileged by their presence, but also, to emphasise the important role of active listening, as part of the process of decolonisation (Feal and Sendra, 2021). The question sought to encourage self-reflexivity, to think about positionality and how this shapes the research – an action considered as key to decolonising research methods (Smith, 2021: xiv).

The distended environment at the event led to the creation of different narratives about the self than the ones shared in the written text previously distributed. The ones shared in class, with students, colleagues and audiences external to KCL of diverse backgrounds (including a number of participants of African heritage who had never entered KCL), were informed by affect. They were contextual, aware of their partiality, in that, they were sharing a personal journey that took them to the festival. Desta Haile described herself as a fan of Film Africa, first, recognising its unique access to African cinema: “it was the only festival I knew of in London where I could go and just see tons of African films from all over Africa over the course of a week.” She then continued as a volunteer to later integrate as the Deputy Director of the Royal African Society which hosts the festival. Amayel Ndiaye, who I had previously met and interviewed, shared an unprecedented story about how she motivated her mother to resume the organisation of the FFFA in 2016 (after 13 years of interruption) once she retired. Ana Camila Esteves spoke about the influence that Prof. Mohamed Bamba, who passed away 7 years ago, has in her personal and professional life. He was described as “the first person who brough African films to the library in Brazil.” To Esteves, everything she does is a tribute to him, “to honour him.” Lindiwe Dovey referred to her upbringing in South Africa “during the apartheid in a family who was opposed to apartheid,” and the “terrible oppressions” she became aware of from an early age, having a long-term impact. She further spoke about the first time she had access to an African film, Yeelen, and how that was the beginning of a research and practical career on African cinema and film festivals, as the co-founding director of both the Cambridge African Film Festival and Film Africa, in the UK, where there are two mean issues, the misrepresentation of the continent and the lack of access to their films. This personal account served as a way to share a pointer towards decolonisation: “if we’re talking about Decolonising, it’s always about looking at our local context. What is the problem? What are we trying to deal with?” To conclude then that decolonisation, as informed activism, needs to be “an ongoing conversation or practice” beyond the events.

The event was described as “thought-provoking” and “inspirational” by a large number of audience members, as the word-cloud below shows (Figure 1). Audience
members really appreciated “the open and informed conversations,” “the vast knowledge shared,” “the variety of perspectives raised,” “the variety of experience,” the “nuanced, varied researched responses.” They stressed the “multiplicity of layers involved in decolonisation” highlighted at the event, and the importance of thinking how to “give back” and engage in reciprocity practices. 90% of the audience members who filled the form (12), suggested the event made them more self-reflexive and to think about how to do research and work in the cultural sector.

The first and only question asked by the chair, to then open up to questions to a very keen and engaged audience, was: “How can the focus on curating African cinema make us think more deeply about decolonisation? Is there a point on putting Africa at the very centre?” The answer was a resounding yes, with a focus on one main aspect: access; on the one hand, to African cinema, in a context of renown exclusion, and, on the other hand, to the multiplicity of views around the same topic by diverse people and places within the vast repertoire of cultural heritage in Africa and the diaspora. Amayel Ndiaye, the only guest speaker representing a film festival based in the continent, spoke about how in Senegal, where cinema venues had disappeared – a situation increasingly changing since 2017 – it was important to them “to bring cinema back” and to do so by “offering different points of views on the same subject,” revolving around the curated annual theme, stating: “It’s interesting to have different point of views on the same places and on the same stories on the same not stories, but on the same theme, so that people can actually realise where they are, think themselves about themselves and about their own lives and, just for themselves, think things true and think where am I? Where do I fit?” Films operate, in the words of Amayel Ndiaye, as “a point of entry of understanding things.”

Lindiwe Dovey built on the idea of access by speaking of its implications to identity-building, asking: “what does it mean for people not to have access to their own cultural heritage?” Or “what if American filmmakers had only or mostly had access to East Asian films? Or if Indian film makers hadn’t had access to Bollywood but had only had access to Australian films? What does that mean for people’s imagination in terms of the way that they’re going to make films?” She then concluded with a note on the localisation that must be embedded within decolonisation when this is understood as informed activism, suggesting that “when curating African cinema in Europe, it is very important that Africa is not treated as some region over there, but that we’re delving into the historical links and oppressions, looking at those nuances,” for instance, like in the emblematic 1966 film by Ousmane Sembène, Black Girl, rooted in the colonial relationship between Senegal and France. There was an emphasis made both by Robin Steedman and Desta Haile on the way in which the whole ecosystem – very often precarious – matters, and thus the need to create sustainable ecosystems where African directions can create sustainably what they want.

The classroom became a brainstorming exercise in collaboration. Questions included: How do talk about decolonisation and trust the narratives offered by various initiatives and institutions? Or, how far do we go in terms of practice, since many filmmakers may not have access to the means to making films? What is the role of power and control in some of the streaming platforms that are emerging and supposedly contributing to the distribution of African cinema? What are the criteria for appreciating a film in Senegal, where taste varies across places? How to decide a festival theme that both talks to African audiences yet does not fall into stereotypes about the region? As some of the feedback noted, the event raised more questions than offering fixed answers (Figure 2). Yet, if there was an aspect being highlighted throughout, was the commitment to dialogue and collaborate with one another in what is a collective responsibility. In Lindiwe Dovy’s words, “If we don’t find solidarity with the like-minded people, we’re going to struggle.”
One of the most significant moments of this event happened actually outside of the event. It was almost impossible to leave the classroom where the discussion had taken place. Attendees started to form smaller groups, keen on prolonging the conversation, asking further questions, or sharing lived experiences slightly daunting to share out loud in the classroom. As we evacuated it due to the imminent arrival of another group who had booked the space, the conversations continued in the lobby, all the way to the exit. Participants were exchanging contact details, expressing interest in being notified of similar events.

These endless conversations demonstrated the ongoing nature of decolonisation, as a process, as “informed activism,” as referred to explicitly by Lindiwe Dovey, during the roundtable and in the aforementioned co-authored manifesto which had also inspired the research project and event, ‘Towards Decolonized Film Festival Worlds’ (Dovey and Sendra, 2023), and of the central role of collaboration in the needed process of self-reflection. One of the guest speakers suggested: “there were so many insights about film festivals, curation and decolonisation that I now want to go away and ponder.” Another one claimed: “The event has definitely put more light on the work we do with the festival and allowed me to take a few steps back and see it in a more objective way.” Another guest speaker emphasised the importance of contact and collaboration to build and maintain an already existing network.

There were instances of impact in the theoretical and practical engagement with decolonisation from guest speakers, stating: “the event was very valuable to my thinking and will no doubt influence my practices around curating and decolonising activism in the future.” One of the speakers shared an idea inspired by the event: “I will suggest to my team that we ask each other a series of questions, like the one that were asked before a researcher interviewed a festival representative, in order to have a clearer mindset before we meet with new potential partners. I will also start a new conversation with the other members of the festival about what we could improve.” Others stressed the inspiration emerging from the event, and the need for collaboration, for instance through the connection with other festivals with a similar mission, enquiring about the submission methods and other aspects in the organisation.

These situated self-narratives and insights, nearby practitioners, proved the possibilities of bringing an affective and self-reflexive dimension to knowledge through exchange and collaboration between HE and the industry. They also demonstrated the opportunity in HE, through knowledge exchange initiatives, to keep the discussion going, to implement and embrace activism over the course of a longer time, extending both the lightening experiences at the festivals and the classroom.

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Notes
1. The event took place on 6 and 7 March 2023 with support from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Small Project Scheme for Early Career Development at King’s College London (KCL), total value £1500. More information about this event can be found in the King’s Events Website: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/events/series/decolonising-film-festivals-and-curating-african-cinemas
2. The project is supported by the Government of Canada’s New Frontiers in Research Fund [NFRFR-2021-00161], led by Professor Sheila Petty (University of Regina), and myself, as the co-principal investigator (CO-PI). The project relies on the collaboration of nine researchers and practitioners: Dr Ana Camila Esteves, as the postdoctoral research associate (King’s College London, UK), Dr Ben Akoh (Mantioba African Film Festival, Canada), Dr Gabriela Almeida (Graduate Program in Communication and Consumption Practices, PPGCOM ESPM, Brazil), Prof Lindiwe Dovey (SOAS, University of London), Laura Feal (Hahatay Association, Senegal), Dr Rachel Johnson (University of Leeds), Dr Robin Steedman (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark). These include the Festival Saint-Louis Docs’ (Senegal), the Mostra de Cinemas Africanos (Brazil), the African Movie Festival of Manitoba (Canada), Film Africa in London (UK), the co-curated strand ‘Women, Creators of the Future’ by the Leeds International Film Festival and Festival Films Femmes Afrique (LIFF-FFFA, UK-Senegal), and Vues d’Afrique (Canada).
3. Full details about this event can be found in the King’s Events Website: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/events/series/decolonising-film-festivals-and-curating-african-cinemas
4. The agenda shared with the guests can be accessed here: https://emckclac-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/k2256255_kcl_ac_uk/EBcNQ3Tb-1Gv7GnnpZVd0BiTYP-xcrtFE4OMmD3459-Q?e=E5Zv0Q
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