

# Decolonising film festival research

African film festivals showcase the diverse wealth of cinematic talent from the continent. However, researchers who study these festivals are often influenced by colonial practices. **Professor Sheila Petty**, from the **University of Regina** in Canada, and **Dr Estrella Sendra**, from **King's College London** in the UK, are exploring how to contribute to decolonising film festival research.



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## Fields of research

Film studies, creative industries studies

## Research project

*Decolonizing Film Festival Research in a Post-Pandemic World*: developing a methodology to free film festival research from colonial practices

## Funder

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... Talk like a ...

## film researcher

**Colonisation** — the subjugation and exploitation of one nation or people by another

**Cultural sovereignty** — having ownership of your culture

**Curator** — someone who carefully selects which films to show at a festival, and presents them both individually and as a coherent programme to festival participants

**Decolonisation** — freeing

something (e.g., an institution, activity or mind) from the effects of colonisation

**Positionality** — the social, cultural, and political context and lived experiences that define your identity

**Reciprocal** — giving back

**Self-reflexivity** — the critical examination of your own beliefs, perceptions, lived experiences and how they affect your actions

**F**ilm festivals are inspiring cultural events, typically involving live screenings of cinematic works alongside discussion panels, workshops and parallel activities such as live music performances. However, like many aspects of society, film festivals are commonly influenced by the impacts of colonisation. This can affect how festivals are organised and framed, what films are shown and who is invited to speak during discussions. In addition, film researchers studying film festivals may have colonial biases which impact how they conduct their research.

Addressing these issues are Professor Sheila Petty, from the University of Regina, and Dr Estrella Sendra, from King's College London. They are leading a project that has developed a methodology to acknowledge colonial influences in film festival research and, importantly, to move away from them. "Our research is centred on African film festivals, not only due to our shared love of African cinema, but because we believe that all film festivals can learn from African film festivals," explains Estrella.

## African film festivals

It remains rare to see films from the



Amina Niang chairs a Q&A with Maïram Guisse, director of *La vie de ma mère* (*My mother's life*), at a school in Saint-Louis, Senegal © Estrella Sendra

African continent in mainstream cinema. “And yet, African films contain stories that resonate with the lives and dreams of so many people,” says Estrella. “African film festivals expose us to stories that are rare to find in other spaces.” The dearth of these stories on the global stage means that African people and communities are under- and mis-represented in cinema, and that the global community has limited opportunities to learn about and value African cultures.

“Senegalese writer and filmmaker Samba Gadjigo often says, “When I watched the films of Ousmane Sembène, I felt proud of being an African.” To me, this emotion-filled statement summarises what African films can do,” says Estrella. “African film festivals promote culture and heritage and enable people to see themselves represented onscreen.” In addition, film festivals act as an important stepping stone for independent films, providing them with the exposure needed to be shown in commercial cinemas or on streaming platforms.

In recent years, film festival organisers have started to question how festivals could be more representative of the different film cultures that exist around the world. “We noticed that some of the solutions were already present in smaller film festivals in places like Senegal,” says Estrella. “What if, instead of suggesting that Africa has to catch up with the so-called West, we did it the other way round?”

### Colonisation and decolonisation in film research

“Researchers who study foreign film festivals by observing them, gathering data and then returning to their own country without ‘giving back’ or meaningfully participating in the festival are using colonial practices,

even if they don’t realise it,” explains Sheila. The same is true of filmmakers who, for example, document a community’s cultural events without giving anything back to the community.

Breaking free of this trend involves being open to learning new ways of doing things. “Decolonising film festival research involves listening to and learning from the communities we work with,” says Sheila. “It means building relationships and looking to communities to decide how they express their cultural sovereignty.” Sheila points to the twin attributes of positionality and self-reflexivity – researchers must acknowledge their privilege, account for this in the research process, and work to create inclusive environments that promote cultural diversity. “It takes time and commitment to decolonise systems that were not originally built for everyone,” she says. “The process should be based on mutual respect and accountability.”

### Decolonial tests

In collaboration with film festival organisers and researchers, Sheila and Estrella have designed two decolonial tests, one for researchers and one for festival organisers, to encourage reflection about their practices and possible unconscious biases in the context of decolonisation of film festivals. “We have been privileged to immerse ourselves in different contexts which shape how decolonisation is interpreted, discussed and put into practice,” says Estrella.

The test for festival organisers reflects on the strengths and limitations of the organisational process. “It provides the opportunity to discuss the social impact of festivals in the communities where they are located,” says Sheila. For example, what insights can

festival managers, curators, journalists and community leaders provide? What justice, equity, diversity and inclusion issues exist in the festival management and curatorial process? The test for festival researchers integrates self-reflection into the research process, helping researchers to question how their research is influenced by their own position within a colonial system. “It asks whether their practices are respectful and reciprocal, or whether they extract knowledge without giving back,” says Sheila. For example, how do researchers communicate with festival organisers and the communities where festivals are based before, during and after the research process?

The team has been trialling their decolonial tests at African film festivals around the world: StLouis’ DOCS (Senegal), the African Movie Festival in Manitoba (Canada), Vues d’Afrique (Canada), Mostra de Cinemas Africanos (Brazil), Film Africa (UK) and ‘Women Creators of the Future’, co-curated between the Festival Films Femmes Afrique (Senegal) and the Leeds International Film Festival (UK). Along the way, the questions are being refined and translated into multiple languages, providing a flexible toolkit for students, researchers and film festival organisers.

“Everyone involved in film festivals should develop respectful listening skills and be open to new ideas and experiences,” says Sheila. “This is critical for understanding the goals of artists and artworks. Creating diverse and respectful spaces is a first step in decolonising practices.”

# About *film studies*

**W**hile many films are created for our entertainment and enjoyment, they can also be powerful agents of change. Films introduce viewers to new ideas and have the potential to change perspectives and opinions.

Film is a form of art and an expression of culture. To make or study film, you therefore need to learn about art and culture. "It is especially important to learn about other cultures," says Sheila. "The best filmmakers are open-minded people with a deep knowledge and appreciation of the world around them that they attempt to represent through their films."

The study of film investigates how films are made, the artistic and creative techniques used, and their effects on the viewer. Studying film will give you a historical and contemporary understanding of all aspects of cinema and allow you to critically analyse films. "Develop your analytical skills by considering the role that film and cinema play in our lives," advises Sheila. "And develop media literacy. The ability to effectively analyse screen-centred content is critically important in today's globalised society."

## Pathway from school to *film studies*

If your school offers classes in media or film studies, take these to learn how to read and deconstruct a film. In addition, study languages, literature and creative writing to learn how to read and write critically.

At university, pursue a degree in film, media or cinema studies. These will cover aspects of film such as film analysis, screenwriting, filmmaking technology and international cinema.

Sheila recommends taking any available courses in creative technologies, popular culture and creative writing. "Writing is an indispensable skill in the film industry," she says. "If you can write well, you can work in any aspect of the industry."

## Explore careers in *film studies*

"Career options in the film industry are vast," says Sheila. "You could teach the history and theory of film, manage film archives, write film reviews as a critic, edit film magazines, organise film festivals or direct your own films."

Volunteering at local film festivals is a great way to gain practical experience and connect with people in the industry. For example, the Department of Film at the University of Regina in Canada hosts the student-run Living Skies Student Film Festival: [www.livingskiesstudentfilmfest.com](http://www.livingskiesstudentfilmfest.com)

Participate in film-related internships and summer schools to learn new skills. For example, in addition to promoting decolonial approaches to film and offering grants and equipment to student filmmakers, the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative in Regina hosts a free summer youth programme: [www.filmpool.ca/yfair](http://www.filmpool.ca/yfair)

The National Film board of Canada ([www.nfb.ca/education](http://www.nfb.ca/education)) and the British Film Institute ([www.bfi.org.uk/learning-training](http://www.bfi.org.uk/learning-training)) offer a wealth of film-related opportunities for young people.

The University Film and Video Association is an international network of people interested in the film industry, including filmmakers, researchers, librarians and students. Student membership will enable you to connect with film professionals and attend events: [ufva.org](http://ufva.org)



A discussion panel at the African Movie Festival in Manitoba, Canada © Babatunde Onikoyi



## Meet Sheila

**As a teenager, I enjoyed art and media.** I liked reading, watching classic black and white movies and painting landscapes.

**I took a course on African cinema during my graduate studies in French-language African literature.** I fell in love and never looked back! The creative, artistic and cinematic potential of the African continent is immeasurable. I am constantly discovering new films and directors with incredible stories to tell.

**I loved attending the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso during the 1980s and 1990s.** The festival was a gathering place for filmmakers, critics and industry professionals at a time when many African filmmakers were exploring new genres and styles. The festival's atmosphere was very friendly, and I made many connections with people from all sectors of the film industry who have remained lifelong friends and colleagues.

**My favourite film is *Do the Right Thing* (1989) by Spike Lee.** Lee's work explores controversial social and political issues, especially race relations. I consider Lee a film 'auteur', an 'author' of films who successfully moves between genres and between fiction and documentary, and is a brilliant screenwriter.

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### Sheila's top tip

Happiness in life comes from following your passion!



Q&A with Kofi Ofori-Yeboah, as part of the Dine & View of his film Amansa Tiafi (*Public Toilet Africa*) at The Africa Centre during Film Africa in London, UK © Estrella Sendra



## Meet Estrella

**I've always loved live performances, such as festivals, theatre shows and music concerts.** This interest inspired me to study cinema, but in five years of university, I was never shown a single African film. When I took a course on African cinema with Professor Lindiwe Dovey during my master's degree, it changed my life. I grew up in southern Spain, just a few kilometres from the African continent, but when I first watched *Black Girl* (1966) by Ousmane Sembène, it felt like I had found something that was missing from the portrayals of Africa I had seen in the media.

**As a filmmaker, I produced the documentary *Témoignages de l'autre côté/Testimonials from the other side* (2011) about the experiences of Africans who had travelled to Spain in search of a better life.** Most were Senegalese, so I co-directed a follow-up documentary, *Témoignages... «waa suñu gaal»* (2016), with Senegalese journalist Mariama Badji which we produced with a Senegalese crew. My research is also focused on Senegalese films and film festivals. I feel very inspired when working with Senegalese artists – they are generous, approachable and humble, and have such a philosophical and mystical approach to art.

**I've had many amazing experiences at film festivals around the world as an organiser, curator, jury member and researcher.** Film Africa, in London, was the first African film festival I attended, and it was there that I realised the passion behind festivals and how they bring people together.

**I love the work of Alain Gomis, and his film *Félicité* (2017) in particular.** It is led by such a strong female character and has an unbelievable soundtrack and aesthetic approach. The first film of his that I watched was *Tey* (2012), so it holds a special place in my heart. Gomis has a fascinating sensitivity. His cinema is just magical, full of nuances for us to perceive and engage with.

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### Estrella's top tips

Do everything with your heart, be humble and acknowledge what people give you. Take time to think about what you want to achieve in life. Then it's a matter of figuring out how to make it happen. Changing our world is possible!