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# Decolonising Through Co-Curation? *Women Creators of the Future*, Festival Films Femmes Afrique and Leeds International Film Festival

Rachel Johnson

***Abstract:*** *Amidst calls from Decolonise and Black Lives Matter movements, several film festivals are engaged in the beginnings of a "reorientation," a shift in their understandings of, and relationships to, colonial power structures. Considering decoloniality as a plural process rather than a singular endpoint, this article examines a recent example of such reorientation: Women Creators of the Future is a programme of films made by women of African heritage, co-curated by Festival Films Femmes Afrique (Senegal) and Leeds International Film Festival (UK). Taking its inspiration from a previous Films Femmes Afrique programme of the same name, this initiative constitutes a meeting of festival "worlds" that tells us much about burgeoning processes of decolonisation in cultural organisations. Combining fieldwork with interviews and self-reflexive analysis, I trace the complex relationships between curation, funding, placemaking and labour that underpinned the collaboration. I argue that this meeting of two contrasting festivals illuminates emerging practices of decolonising through co-curation, yet also invites us to reflect on the need for practices that more fully address both epistemic and economic injustice.*

## Introduction

Decolonising and Black Lives Matter movements have inspired renewed calls for more equitable arts cultures. These have often been directed towards hegemonic "centres" of economic and cultural power such as major arts institutions in the US and Europe. Responses to such calls have ranged from the British Film Institute's updated Diversity Standards (2022) to the World Cinema Fund's Decolonizing Cinema Days (2021) to the "Strike MoMA" protests (2021).[1] These initiatives vary widely in motivation, position and scope, and may even run counter to one another other.[2] In the world(s) of film festivals, Lindiwe Dovey and Estrella Sendra argue that we are witnessing a "reorientation" (277): some festivals are seeking to acknowledge their imbrication in and reproduction of colonial power structures.[3] This has opened possibilities for self-reflection as well as alternative curatorial and material practices. Vital among these is a move towards greater collaboration, the formation of "relationships outside of the frame of white neoliberal capitalism [that] 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" (Dovey and Sendra 286).

The relationship between this reorientation of cultural institutions and projects of decolonising bears scrutiny. For example, what might constitute film festival relationships "outside

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of the frame of white neoliberal capitalism?" Or, to ask the question another way: how might film festivals foster equitable partnerships that challenge the numerous matrices of colonial power, from economic relations to those of identity and knowledge?[4] Furthermore, when does inclusion become "tokenistic" (Bhebhe qtd. in Vourlias, para. 16) or "elite capture", the appropriation of grassroots struggles to benefit an "elite" and their institutions (Táíwò, *Elite Capture* 1)? For example, would Cannes' and the Berlinale's elevation of French-Senegalese director Mati Diop to the status of auteur—widely reported as the "first" black female director to receive such an accolade—offer a genuine challenge to the colonial underpinnings of those festivals and their canons, or does it reinforce their power as gatekeepers of cinematic legitimation, and the entire system of auteurism through which they operate?[5] How can film festivals practice a decoloniality that goes beyond "metaphor" (Tuck and Yang 3), toward a material justice that dismantles not only the epistemic but economic infrastructures that undergird present-day cultural imperialism?

This article approaches such questions through a study of the co-curatorial initiative between a UK-based, medium-sized international film festival, Leeds International Film Festival (LIFF), and a Senegalese activist film festival, Festival Films Femmes Afrique (FFFA). I argue that this collaboration constitutes a meeting of festival "worlds" that tells us much about burgeoning processes of decolonisation in cultural organisations (Dovey and Sendra 270). An example of festival collaboration, and of a North–South partnership in particular, the festivals' relationship can help us to understand what is at stake in calls for film festivals to decolonise, which forms this may take in practice, and the benefits and challenges of such an endeavour. Drawing on fieldwork, interviews and a focus group with the festival's programmers, I discuss the curatorial, spatial and economic dynamics that characterised the initiative and the resulting film strand, *Women Creators of the Future*, exhibited at LIFF in 2022.

## Approaching Decolonisation Through Pluriversal Research

I conducted fieldwork with these festivals as part of an international research project, *Decolonizing Film Festival Research in a Post-Pandemic World*, led by Sheila Petty and Estrella Sendra and outlined in their contribution to this special issue. This article shares the project's aim of expanding definitions of decolonisation through dialogue with researchers and practitioners. I therefore do not attempt to offer a strict model of decolonial co-curation. Rather, I share coordinates that emerged from the debates that *Decolonizing Film Festival Research* inspired, my own reading on the topic, and the conversations between myself and Sendra as well as with the coordinator of FFFA, Amayel Ndiaye, LIFF programmer, Molly Cowderoy, and LIFF programme manager, Alex King.

I consider these conversations pluriversal, and this ethos characterised the project overall. Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser discuss the potential for ethnography to study and create pluriverses, "heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together" (4). The plurality of "worldings", the raw matter of pluriversality, emerges from each participant's situatedness in a given context, or rather the messy combination of contexts that constitute our positionality. Ethnographic research is a "worlding tool" that can construct a "crossroads" between different places, traditions and positions (de la Cadena and Blaser 5). Crossroad conversations are pedagogic: each participant engages in an encounter that

exceeds their own knowledge as well as the sum of the knowledge of all participants. We not only learn (and unlearn) from each other's contributions, but collectively create experiential knowledge of how to negotiate meanings, pleasures and discomforts, knowings and not-knowings together.

Situating oneself and one's research is an important first stage in projects that aim at pluriversality. The research we conducted interviewed academic collaborators as well as festival practitioners. As a partner for the project's study of *Women Creators*, I participated in an interview that encouraged me to reflect on the decolonial dimensions of my contribution. Sendra asked about my background and relationship with the festivals, how the research might "give back" to the communities involved, and how it might foster dialogue across continents and between researchers and practitioners.[6] This multifaceted approach to discussing a person's relationship with the festivals they research transcends narrow understandings of positionality. The interview's line of questioning resonated with Nnaemeka's definition of positionality as "an active subject location of shifting reciprocity where meaning is made [rather than] an essentialized location where meaning is discovered" (361). Rather than essentialising my position through static identity markers (in my case, white, female, queer, British…) the interview's first questions focused on my "story" before moving on to interrogate my modes of communication and collaboration with programmers from FFFA and LIFF, as well as my "positionality and lived experience in relation to the festivals" (Decolonial Test 1). I share an updated and condensed version of my responses to give a sense of the test, and as an alternative positionality statement for this article.

My research is situated by my experiences and relationships, conditioned in part by my ethnicity as white British and my upbringing in the UK. I grew up, was educated, and have conducted most of my research between Kent, London and Leeds, and I consider my academic background as entangled with the well-documented Eurocentrism of the UK's education system. My Master's degree, for example, was in "European Culture and Thought". It focused largely on European social and cultural theory, or rather that which Sara Ahmed calls "white men as an institution" (*Living* 15). (The course was structured around thinkers such as Karl Marx, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault, with a brief foray into Chantal Mouffe's and Ernesto Laclau's work.) The theoretical "ground" on which I stood was, in short, a sedimentation of white thinkers from ancient Greece through the Enlightenment to contemporary European social theory. Meanwhile, almost the entirety of my post-secondary education took place during the height of media reporting of a so-called "refugee crisis"—such discourses' Eurocentrism and racist spectacularisation of suffering black bodies being a topic on which I have written extensively (Johnson, "Brutal Humanism" and *Film Festivals*; O'Leary and Johnson).

I instinctively approached "Africa" from a white European perspective: in the educational and media discourses I have been exposed to, the continent was either absent, a site of European colonialisation or a departure point for people migrating to Europe. Such frameworks can give rise to that which Walter Mignolo has called the "Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism": well-intentioned attempts to dismantle the capitalist and colonial structures of the present that, paradoxically, rely solely on European intellectual and political perspectives ("Geopolitics" 90). Mignolo is writing about what happens when we critique colonialism without stepping beyond the institution of white men I mention above. If his concern is with the erasure of global Southern thought, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò in *Against Decolonisation* asks us to consider on what terms "Africa" has been permitted to appear in recent years. Táíwò has critiqued decolonisation discourses that

frame Africa, its inhabitants and its diasporas *solely* through the lens of colonisation. Thus, even writing that claims a decolonial ethos may risk further essentialising European power (as coloniser) and African victimisation (as colonised), if African agency is not sufficiently centred. Collaborating on *Decolonizing Film Festival Research* was an opportunity to move beyond some of these frames and their shortcomings through dialogue with researchers and curators of African film festivals on the African continent as well as in Brazil, Canada and the UK.

It was a fortunate coincidence that *Woman Creators* took place during this research, given its resonance with the transnational and polycentric ethos of the project itself. Our decision to study the festival programme was also influenced by own proximity to Leeds and Sendra's to Dakar (and Senegal more broadly). Since 2015 I have transitioned from audience member and volunteer at LIFF to academic partner, jury member and researcher. Sendra's specialism in Senegalese cinema attuned her to LIFF's collaboration with Films Femmes Afrique, a festival she has attended, participated in, and with whom she has conducted ethnographic research. It also became clear that my relationship to FFFA was mediated by my situation in Leeds, and my history with LIFF. While I hope to attend FFFA in Dakar in coming years, my first introduction to the festival was through *Women Creators*, a programme based in and thus viewed from Leeds—a position that this article reflects.

My situated approach to research recognises that both my and Sendra's relationships to these festivals also changed and were expanded by the project. Our "stories" in relation to the festivals evolved through the interviews and focus group, and our own participation in *Women Creators*—for example my co-organisation of a roundtable discussion on African cinephilia as part of the strand.[7] Our involvement offers a challenge to the trope of "the distanced, detached, neutral observer" that Skadi Loist contrasts with film festival research undertaken from an "insider position", permitting us to "evaluate processes differently" ("Film Festival Research" 47). This proximity also affords a sense of responsibility toward LIFF and FFFA. As participants in the festivals and the film cultures of which they are part, Sendra and I have a stake in how they develop. This article thus reflects on the potentialities and limitations of *Women Creators* from "nearby" the festivals rather than attempting to speak "about" them from a (fantasy) position of objective detachment (Feal and Sendra 263; Chen 82).




**Figure 1: "African Cinemas and Cinephilia" roundtable at *Women Creators of the Future* screening of *Neptune Frost* (Anisia Uzeyman and Saul Williams, 2021). Featuring Stephanie Dennison (left), Rachel Johnson, Mosa Mpetha, Amayel Ndiaye and Estrella Sendra (right).**

**Decentering and Dehierarchising Festival Influence**

In tandem with the notion of pluriversality, my understanding of decoloniality draws on theories of the colonial matrix of power elaborated by Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo (*Darker Side*). This emphasises the interconnectedness of economic and epistemic injustice, and the need for decolonial film practices to challenge both. As Usha Iyer argues, decoloniality entails both redressing structural absences in representation—such as the neglect of African, indigenous, and Dalit filmmaking in curricula—and material reparation—dismantling structures that undergird the accumulation of wealth and power by a global minority. Film festivals exemplify the interconnectedness of material and cultural power: their presentation of films, even taxonomies of cinema, are the product of a complex negotiation of stakeholder interests, underpinned by flows of both symbolic and financial capital (Johnson, *Film Festivals* 18). Moreover, film festivals participate directly in such flows: as I discuss below, their practices can challenge or reinforce land appropriation, funding regimes and labour dis/empowerment.

The meeting of festival worlds instantiated by *Women Creators* highlights the possibility of upturning the hierarchy of the so-called film festival "network" in which European competitive festivals accumulate economic and epistemic power through a "short circuit" of attention and legitimation (Nornes 245). The potential for reversal has been suggested not only in studies of African film festivals (Petty and Sendra 3), but system-level approaches to the global festival phenomenon. Aida Vallejo and María Paz Peirano highlight the complexity of relationships between film festivals of various sizes, types and locations. Drawing on Minerva Campos's World-Systems approach to festivals, they describe how these "ecosystems" encompass the globally uneven distribution of power and agency, yet remain open to shifting hierarchies and multiple, dynamic "centres" and "peripheries" (234–35). This exemplifies the "porosity" and plurality of film festival configurations that Papagena Robbins and Viviane Saglier (5) oppose to hierarchical taxonomies and the universalisation of a single festival "network".

FFFA is arguably becoming one centre of a constellation of Francophone women's festivals—an ambition suggested by their hosting of the first *Rencontre internationale des festivals de films de femmes / International Meeting of Women's Film Festivals* in 2022 (Sendra 317). Collaborating with LIFF sees its influence extend beyond festival language and type, and Ndiaye highlighted this as one of the key motivations for FFFA's involvement (Focus Group). Meanwhile, *Women Creators* offers an example of international film festivals such as LIFF seeking to decolonise through exchanges with their African counterparts, centring African film practitioners' knowledge and reversing traditional hierarchies among global festival networks.

In positioning FFFA as a centre of curatorial knowledge, the collaboration promised a shift in LIFF's programming practices too. LIFF can be considered a representative example of medium-sized international film festivals in the UK and Europe, combining the prestige of major competitive film festivals with a local audience focus. LIFF hosts international and regional film competitions as well as several audience awards. Programmers select films through paid submissions and scouting, the latter characterising the event as a "festival of the festivals" which seeks to bring the "best" of major European festival programming to Leeds audiences. LIFF typically curates annual strands such as the *Official Selection*, recently renamed the *Constellation Features Competition* (LIFF's main showcase of feature films), *Cinema Versa* (documentary

films), *Fanomenon* (cult and genre films), and various short film competitions. These are often accompanied by heavily curated thematic strands that change each year. *Women Creators* was one such strand, co-curated with FFFA and, in fact, translating its name from the theme of FFFA's 2022 edition, *Femmes Créatrices d'Avenir*.

The centrepiece of LIFF's programme is, like many international film festivals, its feature film competition, which purports to showcase "the top prize-winners and most acclaimed new films of the last year", often drawn from the prevailing centres of curatorial power such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin (LIFF *2022 Catalogue*). The exclusion of African cinema from European "A-list" festivals is well-documented, as are the regimes of quality that condition the instances in which African films are selected (Diawara, "On"; Dovey). The influence of such regimes extends beyond competitive sections, shaping the very taxonomisation of films into specific programme categories or genres. For example, the framing of films from the Global South in relation to documentary realism or human rights struggles, and thus programming in sections devoted to such modes and narratives, risks reproducing neocolonial, "brutal humanist" assumptions of Southern societies as sites of underdevelopment and upheaval above all else (Halle; Johnson, *Film Festivals*).

In the focus group discussion, LIFF programmers King and Cowderoy acknowledged the festival's reproduction of tendencies common among international film festivals yet pointed to *Women Creators* as a conscious project to counter these. King stated that, while diversity has been a "motivating force" for the festival, "if you compare the numbers of African films with the numbers of films from other continents […] it's still very uneven, and that is not entirely because of a lower production capacity in that continent." King underscored the hierarchies of film distribution reinforced by "top tier" festivals such as Cannes, which "prioritise certain kinds of films." While his comments refer to LIFF's programming overall, the "unevenness" is particularly clear through the festival's features competition, where the influence of the European international film festival model, and the canons reproduced at such festivals, is most pronounced.

In our interview, Cowderoy highlighted the documentary strand, *Cinema Versa*, as the key section in which LIFF shows films from regions typically marginalised in international distribution and exhibition. This strand, Cowderoy explained, is "filled with films that are human rights stories, about underground voices and activism and people rising up to overthrow regimes and political situations" and "giv[es] audiences a chance to see insights into different cultures and countries and things going on in the world that they haven't heard about in the news" *Cinema Versa* addresses some of the "unevenness" in LIFF's feature programming and contributes to audiences' exposure to "underground voices" and "different cultures." Yet our conversation made clear the need for a greater variety of African cinematic modes and narratives that could traverse, even undo, the associations between African stories and brutal realism that LIFF, among other film festivals, perpetuates.

In the focus group, Ndiaye underlined the context of neocolonial film funding that both *Women Creators* and FFFA address: "it's usually the ones [films] that speak about the misery of Africa that get funded because [...] it's an image that perpetrates a certain system and a certain view of Africa around the world." Such tendencies in film funding have clear implications for festival programming: the two are entwined in the same "system" of neocolonialism. In contrast, *Women Creators* "was a great way to show African cinemas in other places [...] with a co-curated selection that would actually show Africa the way we want to see it and the way that African

filmmakers see it" (Ndiaye, "Interview"). The strand sought to overturn the neocolonial gaze of Europe on Africa, presenting instead an African gaze founded on the perspectives of the FFFA curators and African filmmakers.

This led to a collaborative project involving extensive research and discussion between Cowderoy, Ndiaye and other film practitioners based on the African continent. The programme was strictly curated: films were sourced solely through scouting rather than through paid submissions. The initial stages of curation followed a standard approach in the industry, yet also expanded Cowderoy's, and by extension LIFF's, points of reference. FFFA offered a gateway to other networks of African film distribution and exhibition: the partnership acted as a spur to opening dialogues with "distributors and sales agents across Africa" and other African film festivals (Cowderoy, "Interview"). Cowderoy's description of the second phase of curation highlighted the openness and negotiation that co-curation can bring. She shared suggestions of films which "would be a good fit for Leeds" with Ndiaye and the FFFA programming team so that they could assess which would be "a good representation of [their] festival"; unrepresentative films were "vetoed" by the FFFA partners (Cowderoy, "Interview"). This exemplifies the power sharing and self-awareness that practitioners such as Themba Bhebhe have suggested is vital to decolonisation efforts in film festivals (qtd. in Vourlias para. 19). FFFA were central to programming decisions, the festival's presentation being on equal footing with the consideration of films' fit within LIFF. This resulted in a selection of films that went beyond the original *Femmes Créatrices d'Avenir* programme while maintaining its ethos.

## Co-Curating African women's Cinemas

Reflecting on FFFA's inclusion of films by filmmakers "of all genders based in or beyond Africa," Sendra (312) adopts Nnaemeka's terminology to define FFFA as a "nego-feminist" festival. She argues that it expresses a "no-ego feminism" or "feminism of negotiation" (Nnaemeka 378) that allows it to provide a variety of perspectives on the same subject. A broad definition of both *films femmes* and *films Afriques* allows the festival's programme to enact the continual negotiation of an evolving African women's cinema that is, to quote Nnaemeka, "as diverse as the continent itself" (361). FFFA's curation extends yet further, interrogating the meaning of Africa and its equation with "the continent". We might also consider FFFA's approach through a "post-African feminism" that explicitly seeks to query the "African" in African feminisms both in relation to modernity and gender fluidity (Mekgwe 194–95). In doing so, it suggests that which Achille Mbembe defines as Afropolitanism: a "poetic" of "worlds in movement" that resists binaries of here/there, native/non-native, and domestic/unfamiliar ("Afropolitanism" 60). This poetic is underpinned by a "cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity" that understands the ways in which Africa is plural and mobile, multilingual, racially diverse, temporally fluid, transnational and "borderless" (Mbembe, "Afropolitanism" 60; "Idea").

*Women Creators* built an anti-canon of African women's cinema that emphasised plural definitions of both "Africa" and "woman" in a manner that largely reflected FFFA's approach to film selection for its own festival.[8] In our conversations, it was clear that the idea of Africa that Ndiaye and Cowderoy sought to curate was polycentric and cosmopolitan, transcending binaries such as native or continental and non-native or diasporic in terms of identities, languages and aesthetics:

> We talk about African cinema but we actually have African cinemas [...] the ways of addressing modernity is different from one culture to another. (Ndiaye, "Interview")

> We wanted a modern feel to the films [and] we wanted to have films from as many different African countries as possible. [We were] trying to show that films from Africa cover a lot of different themes, cover a lot of different stories, are very unique. (Cowderoy "Interview")

The programmers limited their definition of women's cinema to films directed or codirected by filmmakers self-identifying as woman or nonbinary. A central component of their curation was also the exploration of situated women's agency: "women being active and not passive […] having real reflections about their lives and their places and actually acting on it" (Ndiaye, "Interview"). *Youth* (*Dhalinyaro*, Lula Ali Ismaïl, 2018), for example, focused on the friendship between three women from different socioeconomic backgrounds navigating their late teens in Djibouti. *One Take Grace* (Lindiwe Matshikiza, 2021)—a collaboration between the filmmaker and part-time actor/migrant domestic worker, Mothiba Grace Bapela—examined the nexus of womanhood and class in South Africa. Other films, such as *Fig Tree* (Aäläm Wärque Davidian, 2018), *Blue Caftan* (*Le Blue du Caftan*, Maryam Touzani, 2022) and *Neptune Frost* (Anisia Uzeyman and Saul Williams, 2021) foregrounded women's agency in narratives that traversed religion, sexuality and gender binaries—from *Fig Tree*'s civil war romance between a young Jewish girl and Christian boy in Ethiopia, to *Blue Caftan*'s tender, tactile representation of a wife's support for her closeted queer husband in Morocco, and finally *Neptune Frost*'s celebration of gender-bending Neptune's role in local resistance to coltan mining in an Afro-futurist space loosely identifiable as Rwanda.

The plurality of films' settings and protagonists' identities were complemented by linguistic plurality. The women in these films spoke languages such as Somali, Arabic, Sotho, Fula, French and English. Several films combined languages, further underscoring the multilingual dimension of African societies and cinemas. *Neptune Frost* was again exemplary in this regard: the film combined Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Swahili, French and English, reflecting the film's use of a Rwandan and Burundi cast and crew, its thematic re-evaluation of the meaning of connectivity within contemporary regimes of digital technology founded on material extraction, and its wilfully abrasive international address.

The strand followed FFFA's approach of blurring distinctions between documentary and fiction as a means of countering taxonomies of realism (Ndiaye, "Interview"). Critically acclaimed fiction features such as *Blue Caftan* appeared alongside films that combine documentary and semiautobiographical film, such as *Fig Tree, Above Water* (*Marcher su l'eau*, Aïssa Maïga, 2021) and *No Simple Way Home* (Akuol de Mabior, 2022). The strand's shorts programme, *A Sense of Home*, intensified the mixing of fiction, autobiography and documentary. It combined films that utilised a range of modes and narratives—such as the political realist depiction of shamanistic resistance to the Rwandan genocide (*Bazigaga*, Jo Ingabire Moys, 2022), or the use of animation to offer a mystical, ancestral history of Ethiopia (*My Love, Ethiopia* [*Yene Fikir Ethiopia*], Gabrille Tesfaye, 2019) and to share a woman's reflections on motherhood while swimming in the Icelandic sea (*On the Surface*, Fan Sissako, 2021).

*Women Creators* shows the promise of co-curation as a means of recalibrating, even transforming programming practices, shifting a festival's points of reference and its curators' understandings of cinematic traditions. While one could argue that the impact of the collaboration was contained within a single strand, both Cowderoy and King described the process as a pedagogic one aimed at creating a wider-reaching transformation. Cowderoy described the partnership as "an opportunity [to] do some learning and research and work with Amayel [Ndiaye]" ("Focus Group"). Speaking about the possible impact on LIFF more broadly, King said that "this has been an opportunity to take a different approach […] it's something that we want to internalise and continue into the future" ("Focus Group"). If, as King suggests, such changes are internalised for future editions, the collaboration could represent an emerging reconfiguration of festival hierarchies, with more reciprocal arrangements emerging not only across specialised or regional festivals, but across festival types and places. Doing so offers a first step toward decolonising festival infrastructures—challenging regimes of influence across festival networks—and representation—facilitating the circulation of a plurality of African cinemas.

**Funding and Festival Agendas**

To evaluate the decolonial dimensions of festival phenomena, one must also consider the material contexts and agendas in which they are entwined. The collaboration between LIFF and FFFA responded to LIFF's own context as a festival organised under the aegis of, and primarily funded by, Leeds City Council. *Women Creators* was in part supported by LIFF's reallocation of such funding. Yet the ties between the strand and council agendas are stronger than this: the partnership was suggested by city councillor Henriette Mahamane who, at the time, was coordinating the council's Leeds Migration Project and Lincoln Green Film Festival (Cowderoy, "Interview"). The latter focused on culture as a tool for social cohesion and afforded a trip to Senegal during which Mahamane attended FFFA. *Women Creators* was instigated through and framed by Leeds City Council priorities such as social cohesion as well as the influence of local policy actors such as Mahamane.

Manthia Diawara has warned of the instrumentalisation of African film exhibition outside the continent for local multicultural agendas which do not benefit African (continental) practitioners ("On" 49). However, *Women Creators* can be seen as instantiating the meeting and expansion of each festival's aims. In our interview, Cowderoy and Ndiaye articulated a shared objective of widening the circulation of African films and addressing African audiences from the diaspora. While this enabled LIFF to contribute towards city council priorities of social cohesion and the cultivation of a cultural sector that addresses Leeds's diverse communities (*Leeds Culture Strategy 2017–2030*), it also enabled FFFA to expand its influence globally. Ndiaye considered working with Leeds a first step towards a wider circulation of the festival's films, the realisation of the FFFA team's plans to begin collaborating with other festivals around the world ("Focus Group"). This marked an augmentation of the festival's project of democratising the dissemination of African women's cinema in Senegal (Sendra 306). Working with LIFF not only achieved this aim in a tangible way, producing a programme of films that screened in Leeds, but in intangible, affective ways too: "This experience made us think further, and more widely about what we could do" (Ndiaye in "Focus Group"). *Women Creators* supported the aims of both festivals through the programme itself and its promise of FFFA "think[ing] further" about the festival's transnational potential.

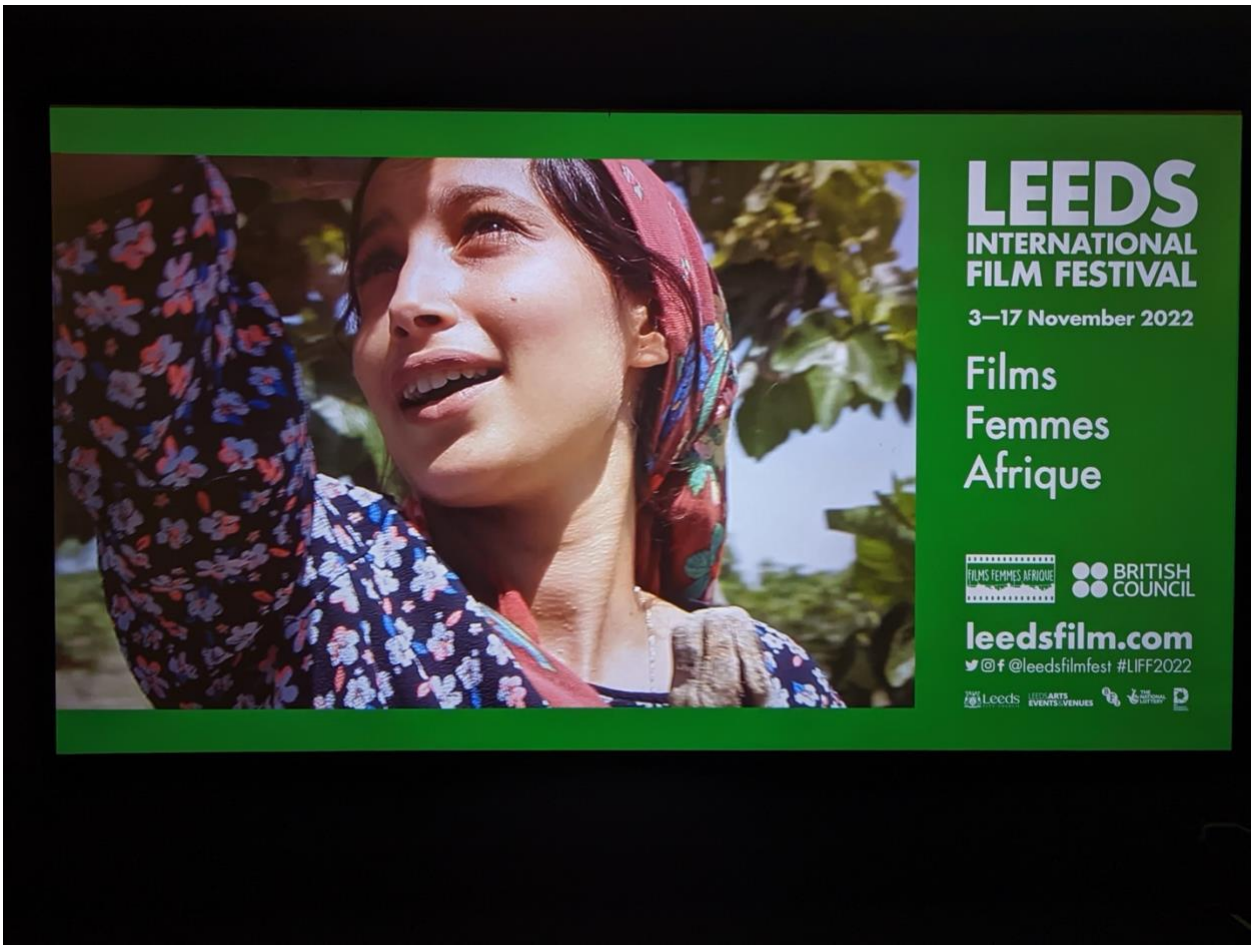



**Figure 2: *Women Creators* promotional image showing supporters, including the British Council.**

As well as city council funding, *Women Creators* was supported by the British Council, and LIFF's allocation of project-based funding it had received from the British Film Institute (BFI, the UK's national film funding body). While I discuss the influence of BFI project-based funding in relation to hiring practices below, I would like to pause on the implications of British Council support here as it is most pertinent to discussions of the tensions between cultural organisations' efforts to decolonise and the material infrastructures they must negotiate. Moreover, the British Council's involvement extends beyond the individual strand: not only is it one of FFFA's regular partners, but it has a long history of involvement in colonial and postcolonial film cultures, including in Africa (Ritter; Nanbigne).

The British Council was established in 1934 with the aim of "promoting abroad a wider appreciation of British culture and civilisation [by] encouraging cultural, educational and other interchanges between the United Kingdom and elsewhere" (Fisher 49). It continues this mission today through the fostering of "mutual understanding" between nations (50). For many, this translates to a project of anglicisation that quashes linguistic and cultural plurality (Phillipson; Brouillette; Ndlovu-Gatsheni).[9] Meanwhile, the Council continues to participate in regimes of securitisation and extraction, brokering deals with multinational arms manufacturers such as BAE Systems and oil companies such as Shell, and has previously framed its pursuit of cultural

diplomacy in terms of "modern defence" (Tyrrell qtd. in Fisher 59).[10] Such factors give credence to Caroline Ritter's characterisation of the body's present-day activities as the continuation of cultural imperialism through the promotion of a global Britishness and—I add—reinforcement of material infrastructures of war, apartheid, and oil extraction (1).

As Lindiwe Dovey has argued, it is reductive to assume that film practitioners' works, be they films or film programmes, "will *necessarily* reflect the values of the funders" (57). At stake here is not the direct contamination of *Women Creators*' curation but, rather, the festivals' reliance on neocolonial funding regimes as such. To fully realise a material decoloniality, organisations' relationships with culturally imperialist funding bodies must be addressed, and above all, the imperialism of such bodies themselves. This process may appear insurmountable from the perspective of a single organisation, precisely due to its dependence on such funding. Decolonising film festivals requires us to work together to pursue this radical horizon, even while enacting smaller-scale changes; to "start then with the humility of working toward one step on the path to transformative epistemic justice, to the continuous process of decolonization" (Iyer 184).

**Placemaking: Decentralising Space and Audience Address**

Another vital aspect of festivals' material impact is their relationship to space: how they contribute to creative placemaking by privileging certain exhibition sites and audiences. Creative placemaking refers to the role of public, private, nonprofit and community sectors in shaping the "physical and social character of a neighbourhood" (Markusen and Gadwa 3). This can serve cities' self-marketing as part of "intense competition […] for global capital for infrastructure, housing and production" or it can contribute to democratic efforts to afford inhabitants their due "right to the city" (Freidmann 150, 159). The global proliferation of film festivals has, in part, been due to cultural policymakers' perception of their value to city branding and tourism (Strandgaard Pedersen and Mazza 159). However, alternative models of festival placemaking are emerging—for example, Junkanoo festival's curatorial collaboration with community leaders in the Bahamas, which Kelley McClinchley cites as "providing local agency, self-reliance, and home-grown solutions for decolonizing heritage and community" (609).

Here, the differences between the two festival worlds that met in *Women Creators* is most pronounced. FFFA is a decentralised, mobile film festival whose approach to audience and space resonates with McLinchley's appraisal of Junkanoo above. Holding screenings in nineteen different neighbourhoods in Dakar before travelling to ten other cities in Senegal, FFFA exhibits in schools, cultural centres, cinemas and outdoor venues. This mode of festival practice was the basis for Sendra's research with FFFA, leading her to characterise the festival as "*engagé* mobile cinema" that emulates the postindependence exhibition practices of African filmmakers (Sendra 319). The politicised character of FFFA's decentralised programming lies in its implications for the democratisation and accessibility of African film. Ndiaye spoke passionately about FFFA's approach to audience and its implications for accessibility in a country that is home to people of many different economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds: "the idea was to bring back cinema to the people [...] every screening is free and we try to go where the people are" ("Interview"). Ndiaye explained that travelling to different neighbourhoods in Dakar enabled the festival to cross the class geographies that make up the city. The result is a series of situated screenings that address

diverse communities in a variety of contexts, and is organised through collaborative co-curation with community organisations and audiences.

In contrast, LIFF typically takes place in venues in Leeds's city centre, in a manner common to many international film festivals and in line with the city branding agendas which condition their organisation. LIFF's city centre venues are the Leeds town hall—a colonial-era building in which the festival's largest screenings took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—two national chain multiplex cinemas, Vue and Everyman, and some city centre arts venues such as the Howard Assembly Room. The festival also uses two heritage cinemas in popular student areas outside the city centre, Hyde Park and Headingley: Hyde Park Picture House and Cottage Road Cinema. The use of these venues is largely due to their historic status—Hyde Park Picture House represents a tradition of repertory programming, even being considered a site of origin for the kind of curation that LIFF typically prioritises.[11]

LIFF retained this model for *Women Creators*, though the festival sought to bring more diverse audiences to its venues. The majority of films were shown across five screens in the Vue multiplex in the city centre and via LIFF's online player. *Women Creators* was predominantly housed in one of the multiplex's smaller screens, though the shorts programme was shown in Everyman, the festival's main venue for short films. The African communities to which *Women Creators* was relevant predominantly live in areas outside the city centre, such as Chapeltown, Little London, Gipton and Harehills. African community centres are based in the same neighbourhoods. To reach these audiences, the LIFF team emphasised curation—showing films considered more relevant to African diasporas—and marketing outreach—for example working with partners such as Mosa Mpetha (Black Cinema Project, Cinema Africa!) for word-of-mouth promotion and offering free tickets to one screening, *Youth*, to members of the Leeds African Communities Trust (Cowderoy, "Interview").

The strand's approach to reaching audiences was conditioned by LIFF's history as a city centre based, international film festival, as well as its operational capacity. Cowderoy cited logistics as a limiting factor: a previous edition took place across thirty venues across the city, but this was "too much" for staff and volunteers due to difficulty travelling across Leeds ("Interview"). However, the festival has since taken small steps towards the decentralised model suggested by FFFA. Building on the success of *Women Creators* and other collaborative programmes in 2022, subsequent editions have seen the festival hold free-of-charge screenings in partnership with community venues outside the city centre, such as The Old Fire Station in Gipton (Conaghan). It is unclear whether such programming is an extension of the festival's "outreach" model rather than an attempt at decentralisation, however; the majority of LIFF's screenings continue to take place in the city centre and at the heritage cinemas mentioned above. If developed further, for example through a gradual shift towards holding the festival across a wider range of venues and co-curating screenings with local partners and residents, LIFF could transform its making of the city. The festival would address Leeds and its film culture as polycentric, rather than contrasting a singular centre with peripheries in which underrepresented audience groups are similarly marginalised (i.e. as "peripheral" groups to which one must "reach out").

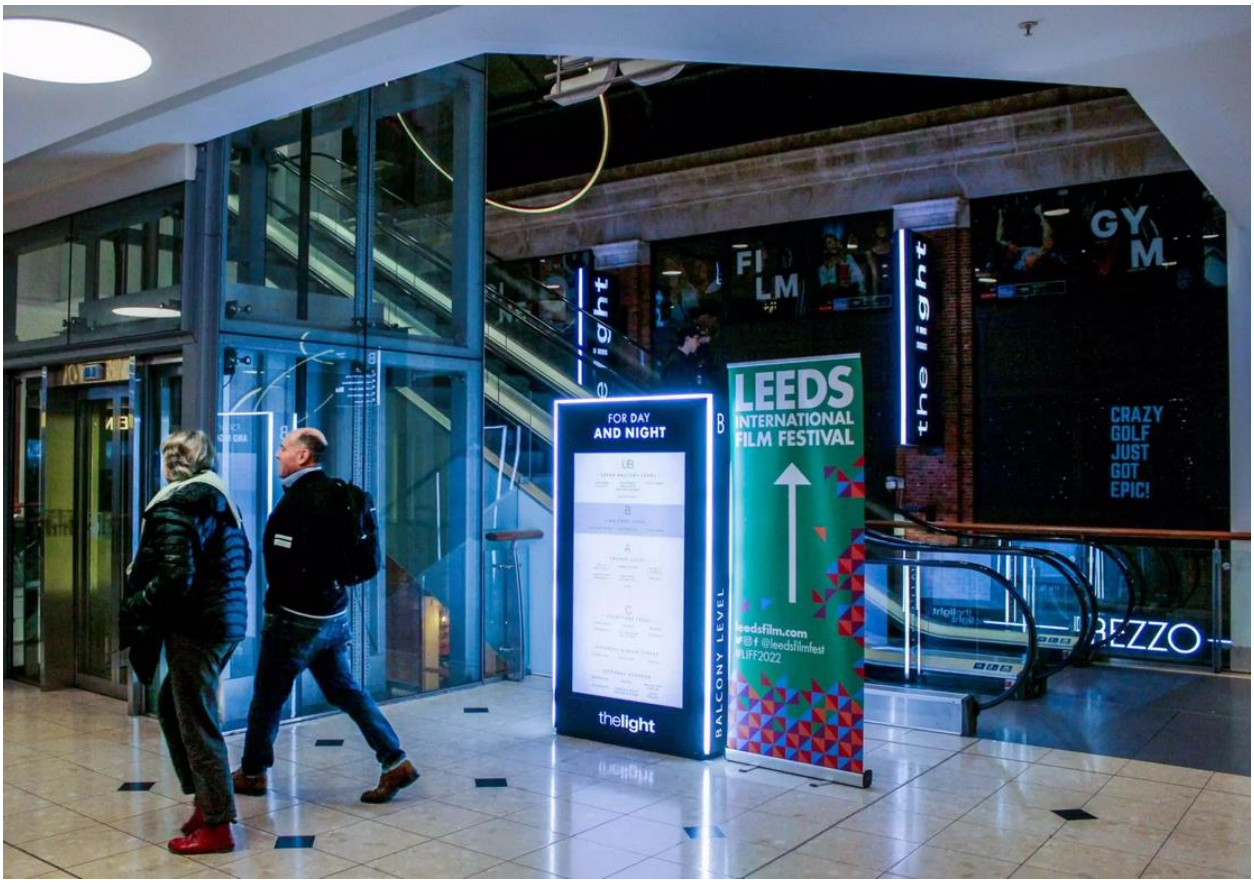



**Figure 3: Vue cinema, the main venue for LIFF 2022. Image credit: Estrella Sendra 2022.**

Crucially, the diversification of LIFF's venues in 2023 was facilitated by its receipt of BFI Audience Project Funding. The relationship between LIFF's approach and operational capacity (funding and labour) speaks again to the material realities that influence curation and decolonisation, as well as the ways curation may or may not be harnessed as a mode of material (re)possession and (re)distribution. Decentralised programming and collaboration with communities offer ways for international film festivals like LIFF to address dynamics of "internal colonisation [...] modes of control—prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing—to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite" (Tuck and Yang 5–6). In the UK cultural sector, this includes addressing the spatial dispossession faced by prospective audiences outside major cities or city centres. This, in turn, would help such festivals to realise a decolonial placemaking that powerfully expands policy priorities for social cohesion and cultural democracy, such as those out of which *Women Creators* emerged.

## Remuneration and Hiring

Funding and hiring practices remain complex issues that shaped *Women Creators* and continue to mediate the curatorial possibilities of LIFF and FFFA. The strand was enabled by Cowderoy's paid, though precarious, labour and a combination of voluntary and paid labour from

Ndiaye. LIFF allocated its resources in a way that directly enabled the curatorial practices discussed above, for example paying for three of Cowderoy's working days to be dedicated to the strand:

> I spent a lot of time looking at African festivals and seeing what was out there, and I might not have had that time previously because I would just be reading reviews of the larger festivals like Cannes at Berlin [...] having the time and resources to do that is really important. ("Focus Group")

Ndiaye was paid for the graphic design for the programme and provided with travel and subsistence to attend and deliver talks during the strand, as well as participating in networking events at LIFF. Ndiaye's role as co-curator was not directly remunerated by LIFF, though it was unclear if she was paid through her role at FFFA. This nonetheless raises questions about how expertise is remunerated in the cultural industries, where much cultural work is done for intangible benefits such as the promotion of one's organisation, the realisation of a common good (such as widening the exhibition of African cinema), and the opportunity to cultivate new relationships. In this sense, the collaboration was characterised by LIFF deploying its resources for the exhibition of the co-curated programme (e.g., payment for venue hire and promotion), while FFFA's involvement was reciprocated predominantly through intangible benefits.

The sustainability of such collaborations is conditioned by material resources. King suggested that co-curation, though beneficial, is resource-intensive: "it required quite a lot of special work to set up and approach properly and that's not something we're able to repeat in each edition of the festival in future" ("Focus Group"). Meanwhile, Cowderoy was hired as a freelance programmer and, between the time of our interview and focus group, was no longer working for LIFF "due to funding constraints" ("Focus Group").[12] As is commonly acknowledged in the UK cultural sector, these hiring practices are a result of arts funding being almost entirely project based. Natalie Wreyford and others have emphasised that such funding models "intensify inequalities" and inhibit cultural organisations from addressing structural issues (38). As Lizelle Bisschoff has discussed in relation to the Africa in Motion film festival in Glasgow, aspirations to end precarious and voluntary labour are often undercut by festivals' reliance on project-based grants offered by funding councils such as the BFI (145; Vogel). This indicates once again the ways in which funding practices that go beyond individual festivals impact decolonial, or even modestly progressive, material practices.

It is crucial to consider whether collaboration with partners outside an organisation risks covering over the structural exclusions that have made the need for festivals to decolonise so urgent. *Women Creators* was, in part, a way to "acknowledge and work to challenge" the absence of diversity in LIFF's programming team: at the time of our conversations, it was exclusively white, with the most secure roles held by men (Cowderoy in "Focus Group"). In 2024, LIFF hired twenty-one new curators with the goal "to support the professional growth of emerging programmers while reinforcing our commitment to fostering inclusivity in film curation" (LIFF 2024, "New Programmers"). Most of these new programmers self-identify as women, nonbinary or trans (seventeen of the twenty-one). Among these is Liz Chege, Africa in Motion's previous festival director (2020–2023), her recruitment as Lead Programmer for LIFF's Louis le Prince International Short Film Competition possibly suggesting a continuation of LIFF's turn towards African film festival practitioners.[13]

The impact of this scheme, both on the careers of the programmers and on LIFF's curatorial practices, remains to be seen. It does not, however, present a radical change in the festival's hiring practices: the roles last for two years, their longevity likely dependent upon BFI project funding. More senior, secure roles continue to evade women, nonbinary and trans curators, and curators of colour. The sheer number of positions, the focus on career development, and the identity positions of those hired does suggest a shift towards addressing a lack of diversity in the sector and at LIFF in particular. Moreover, both Cowderoy and King commented on the role of our conversations in highlighting distinctions between diversity and decolonisation. King explained that framing our conversations through decolonisation expanded his thinking: "It's only through this collaboration that I've started to really think about how to apply [decolonisation] to what we do [...] and I think that's a valuable process that takes things beyond just thinking about diversity ("Focus Group").

Indeed, backsliding into diversity without decolonisation poses clear risks. Sara Ahmed has warned that diversity can in fact be instrumentalised against radical decolonial projects: diversity, when pursued alone, can impede the transformation of institutional hierarchies, containing dissent through tokenism (*On* 13). Hiring a diverse team can offer a step towards decolonisation, provided that "such staff [...] and their perspectives are not marginalized, receive equal treatment, pay, decision-making power and financial security" (Bhebhe qtd. in Vourlias para. 16). Diversity may also contribute towards decolonisation if organisations remain attentive to definitions of positionality as active, rather than relying on static identity markers. Finally, diverse hiring should remain part of a wider constellation of actions aimed at rupturing colonial power structures.

## Conclusion

This article has explored what such a constellation of practices might look like. In our conversations, Amayel Ndiaye, Molly Cowderoy, Alex King, Estrella Sendra and I sought out the complex relationships between curation, funding, placemaking and labour that constituted *Women Creators*. Pursuing decolonial initiatives in a world system undergirded by colonial and neocolonial infrastructures gives rise to contradictions—from using culturally imperialist funding to support transformative co-curatorial approaches to African film exhibition, to navigating the terrain of diversity and precarity in a sector marked by an absence of the former and abundance of the latter. While necessarily imperfect, *Women Creators* offered a meeting of two different festival worlds, each with the potential to influence the other—for example by extending the circulation of African cinemas through contexts from which they have historically been excluded and challenging the distribution of power across film festival networks by centring the curatorial expertise of African, activist festivals such as FFFA.

The *Decolonizing Film Festival Research* project afforded a further meeting between these worlds and a world of film festival research. This research was, in my case, situated in Leeds but expanded further thanks to collaboration with the curators and academics that the project brought together. In this article, I have attempted to restage such a meeting, sharing the words of curators Amayel Ndiaye, Molly Cowderoy and Alex King alongside my reflections and those of other scholars and practitioners who influenced my thinking. This too has been an imperfect process, whereby the structures and norms of academic writing, as well as my security as a tenured academic, have resulted in a restaging in which I have remained the director. This article bears, then, the traces

of power imbalances which traverse educational and cultural sectors. In so doing, it demands that academics, practitioners and activists continue to work together to redress such imbalances. Above all, I hope this article has shown, just as it has taught me, that decolonisation is a process which can be joyous, humbling and frustrating. It does not offer easy reprieve yet, in doing so, ensures that questions of material and representational justice continue to guide research and practice.

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**Notes**

[1] AKA The Strike MoMA Working Group of International Imagination of Anti-national, Anti-imperialist Feelings (IIAAF).

[2] I note here the irony of MoMA's *The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia* exhibition following its management's banning of Strike MoMA protestors from the institution. This irony raises the vital distinction between curation as a form of "culture washing" problematic institutions and the structural change that decolonisation asks of such institutions.

[3] On film festivals, coloniality and/or Eurocentrism see Diawara, *African Cinema*; Nornes; Dovey; Vallejo; Saglier; and Johnson, *Film Festivals*.

[4] In Aníbal Quijano's formulation, the matrices entail control over economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity. Walter Mignolo adds that such controls are supported by two "legs": "the racial and patriarchal foundation[s] of knowledge" (*Darker Side* 8).

[5] On the dangers of "firsts" and festivals' canonisation of *some* African directors, see Ciecko.

[6] For a full list of questions included in "Decolonial Test 1", see the project website (Petty and Sendra).

[7] The roundtable, co-organised between LIFF, FFFA, *Decolonising Film Festival Research* and another research project, *New Voices in Cinephilia* (Johnson and Dennison, 2022–23), featured me, Estrella Sendra, Amayel Ndiaye, Mosa Mpetha (a leading curator of Black cinema in Leeds) and Stephanie Dennison (a professor of Brazilian Studies at the University of Leeds and co-investigator of *New Voices in Cinephilia*).

[8] Monica Mastrantonio uses the term "anti-canon" in opposition to the literary exclusion of "non-standard women's voices" (111). See also "uncanon" as filmic practice which resists canonisation (Nair ix). The meaning I adopt here combines these concepts.

[9] Brouillette contextualises the British Council's role within the wider context of UNESCO's cultural policies.

[10] I note the need for universities to similarly divest of fossil fuel and arms funding. On anticolonial struggle and reparations in UK universities, see Gopal.

[11] On LIFF's relationship to venues, and the city's history of migration, see Kalkan.

[12] A common experience in film festivals, where precarious work is endemic: see Colta; Czach; and Loist ("Precarious Cultural Work").

[13] Chege has also curated for Cinema Rediscovered and Encounters Short Film Festival, as well as founding Come the Revolution, "a collective of creatives committed to exploring Black life and cultural expression through cinema" (LIFF 2024, "New Programmers").

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