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## Commentary

# Perspectives: a round-table discussion on decolonial pedagogies

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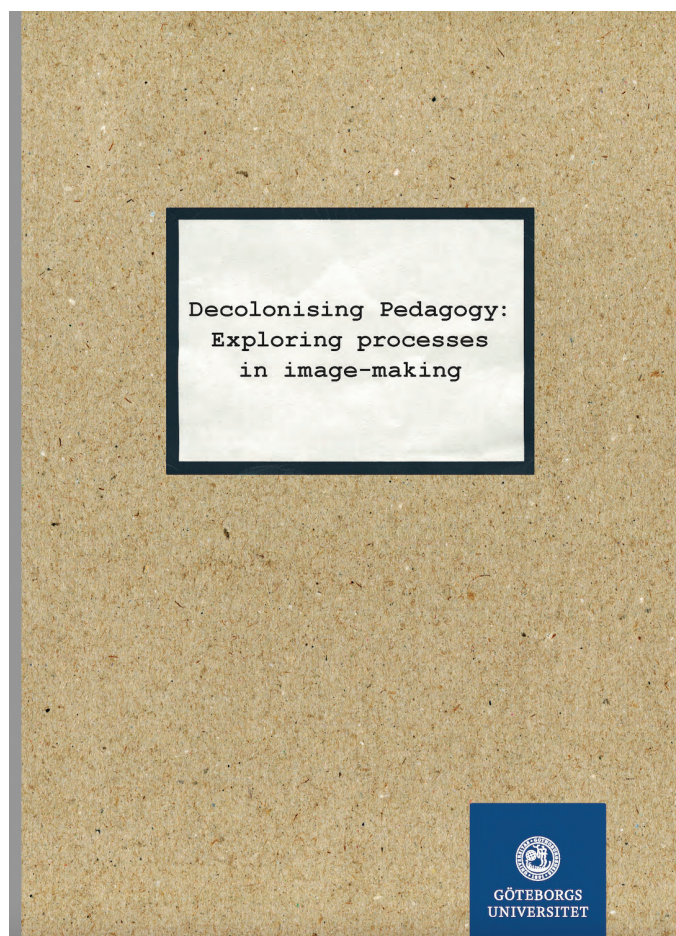
## Abstract

Three practitioners – a film-maker, a photographer and a film curator, all working in higher education, teaching film production, photography and film studies – discuss their reflections on co-convening a decolonising pedagogy workshop–conference hosted in May 2019 at HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. They draw from their unique geographical positions – South Africa, Sweden and the UK respectively – to reflect on the nuances and differences of how race and subjectivity shape classroom interactions with the curriculum, and the institutional challenges in developing transformational pedagogy practices. The conversation uses as its impetus this shared experience of co-convening and facilitating the 'Decolonising pedagogy: Exploring processes in image-making' workshop–conference, and leads to discussion of broader issues of historical conditions and the geopolitical contexts that have determined the subsequent impact and outcomes in their different universities.

**Keywords** institutional contexts; teaching toolkits; image-making practices; student protests; student involvement; transformational pedagogy

From 23 to 25 May 2019, the workshop–conference 'Decolonising pedagogy: Exploring processes in image-making' was hosted at HDK-Valand at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and brought together film

**Figure 1. Cover of programme: materials in the notebook included resource materials for the workshop and references (Source: Jyoti Mistry)**



and photography educators to confront not just the content of curricula but also pedagogical methods. My role (Jyoti Mistry), as the then newly appointed Professor of Film at Valand Academy was two-fold: first, to develop the research environment for film; and second, to revitalise film education and its curriculum with a restructuring of the master's film programme towards international student recruitment. The opportunity to convene a workshop–conference was to establish a space for internal dialogue within the newly established Unit of Film, Photography and Literary Composition, and to expand an external reach towards international partners interested in similar topics and pedagogic concerns. Nina Mangalanayagam, a photographer, and Senior Lecturer at HDK-Valand, focused on the history of Sweden's colonial past as an inception-proposition for an exhibition with film and photography students, to make visible representations of this history that had previously been occluded in film and photography education at HDK-Valand. Professor Lindiwe Dovey, a film scholar and curator from SOAS University of London, conducted a pedagogy workshop that foregrounded students as co-creators and co-curators of content in her approach to teaching African cinema. This round-table discussion reflects on the political and institutional impetus for this 2019 workshop–conference, the consequences of this initiative and some afterthoughts:

Our approach is to suggest processes for decolonising to imply that there are no given certainties of what decolonising might be in image-making practices. Processes suggests working through historical and contemporary power relations in the representation of images and image-making and to encourage collaborative understandings of what the 'decolonial' might be beyond its metaphoric meanings.

We have worked together to try to create a programme that works on different levels to be thought-provoking and to inspire further exploratory possibilities in a way that foregrounds practice.

(From 'Decolonising pedagogy' programme introduction, May 2019)

**Jyoti Mistry:** Both of you work with curriculum changes in two radically different contexts, Lindiwe at SOAS in the UK and Nina at the Arts Faculty in Sweden. This environment is central to how your approach is received by students and the institutional support it receives. Can you describe how context shapes your approach to curricula?

**Lindiwe Dovey:** The issue of institutional context is an important starting point. It's very difficult to talk about what it means to decolonise film and visual arts curricula without taking our specific working locations into account. Since collaborating on our 'Decolonising pedagogy' workshop, dramatic changes have taken place within higher education institutions globally, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. At SOAS (like at many other institutions), we went through a major restructure during 2020 due to the financial impact of the pandemic. This had a direct impact on my own curriculum and teaching, since we had to close our Global Cinemas MA and a film module I teach called *The Story of African Film* – the very module that I used as the basis for my pedagogy workshop at HDK-Valand, and which formed the 'case study' for my contribution to the Decolonising SOAS (2018) 'Learning and teaching toolkit' (co-produced by members of our Decolonising SOAS working group). Paradoxically, just at the moment when my *PARSE* article (Dovey, 2020a) that grew out of this 'case study' was published in June 2020, I was told that *The Story of African Film* was not attracting enough students to be financially viable. This raised significant questions for me about what decolonisation means in an era of neoliberalism, the corporatisation of higher education, and a general devaluation of arts and humanities. I asked myself at that time: what does it mean to be leading the project *African Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies* (<https://screenworlds.org/>) – one of the aims of which is to centre African film-making, both within higher education and within the film industry – but no longer to be able to offer an African film module at my own institution? Thankfully, in 2021, the situation at SOAS began to improve, and more attention is being given to African degrees, modules and epistemologies again, but this experience reminded me that it is impossible to divorce the idea of decolonising education from discussions of institutional contexts.

**Nina Mangalanayagam:** I would like to respond to this with a discussion I witnessed while I was travelling back from Stockholm to Gothenburg on the train, sharing a carriage with a basketball team. One young adult speaks to his teammates about how he is the only Black guy in his university class at Chalmers (a technical university in Gothenburg). He explains that he tried to check the classes in the years above him, and concluded that he is the only Black person in three years of study. This is telling of the location I am speaking from and work in. As a non-White Swede, I constantly check the racial (skin colour) constellation at conferences, events, art openings and staff meetings to see how many others might identify as other than White. Often, I am the only one, or one of very few. As a result, when I started working at HDK-Valand, I instinctively said hello to others that might share my experience. My experience comes from this position, and it is hard to explain or even admit to those in the (White) majority. I start with this because I think it is important. The work we did in 2019 started from this place. You (Jyoti) and I started with a workshop with students using historical facts about places in Gothenburg where people were oblivious to the colonial history of where they reside. Material from the archive of a particular location in Gothenburg, 'the French plot' – given to the French in exchange for the colony St Barthelemy – was used as a spatial starting point, to invite students to make work from this political position. The students incorporated these ideas into their own research and creative projects to reflect on their own positions and subjectivities. Working in institutions is slow, but this workshop felt like an exception when we conceived and convened it, and put it together on a shoestring budget and with very limited time. The proposition was to test something that we were already engaged with in our practices, in our thinking and our teaching.

**Jyoti:** In your practice and teaching, Nina, you address colonial history and race from a marginal position (in that you are mixed race) in a predominantly White classroom. How do you work with this situation and what kind of support is there? And how does this compare with your experiences at SOAS, Lindiwe?

**Nina:** The institutional context in Gothenburg is one where I experience an anxiety among students regarding how to deal with complicated questions of authorship and 'permission to represent' in artistic work. For the workshop we did with students, I started with research on hybridity and how to represent 'White' and former 'colonisers' using artistic methods and strategies to address postcolonial trauma. I was keen to encourage students to think about (colonial) history from the perspective and position of Europe, rather than the 'elsewhere' of colonial violence.

Although many colleagues support this work, and work alongside us, we did not have the financial support or management mandate to involve the majority of the teachers from our own school. There is a feeling that topics regarding decolonising are not directly 'relevant' to teaching, even though we are all implicated in this history and its politics. In subsequent staff meetings, we were given the task to summarise the event, and it felt like we were expected to neatly package the labour of the workshop and the conference into something easily consumable for the rest of the collegiate – a way of having access to and using the 'outcomes' without participating in the rethinking necessary for pedagogy in image making. This does not facilitate the transformational shifts needed in the institution or in the curricula, and without the financial support, resources or infrastructure, the necessary labour of this process is driven by the capacities of individuals rather than by a collective responsibility.

**Figure 2. Summative drawing by Christiane Büchner from introduction session with Lindiwe Dovey, Nina Mangalanayagam and Jyoti Mistry (Source: Jyoti Mistry)**



**Lindiwe:** In the module Global Film Industries (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/courseunits/15PARH098.html>), which I co-developed and co-designed with my colleague Dr Estrella Sendra Fernandez during the pandemic, we used the opportunity to create a broader, global film module attentive to decolonial methods from syllabus content, to pedagogical style, to assessment methods. Because SOAS focuses on African, Asian and Middle Eastern studies, it attracts many students from these regions, and the 'global' in this module thus foregrounds film-making practices in the so-called 'Global South' and applies a critical lens when analysing mainstream Western film industries (such as Hollywood and the European film festival circuit), particularly in relation to race, gender, class and sexuality. The module particularly focuses on African film-making, since African film continues to be the most marginalised in higher education and the film industry, and since Estrella and I (while attentive to the fact that we cannot be experts across such a vast, diverse continent) have researched and curated African film for many years. However, 'decolonising' the content of a syllabus is clearly not sufficient; one also needs to ask *how* one can teach film practices from diverse places with very different cultures and languages that the teachers themselves do not know. One of the ways we have broadened the scope has been to invite paid guests (film scholars and practitioners) who we converse with about their experiences of, and expertise on, specific film practices. These guests enrich the module with their polyvocal positions, and by expanding the examples of film practices. This gives the students more opportunities to contribute to the module, because they find synergies in the content as it resonates with their own experiences coming from different parts of the world to study at SOAS.

**Jyoti:** Lindiwe, you have been involved in the development of decolonising teaching toolkits and consciously working on producing various resources through your Screen Worlds research project. Can you describe what insights have come from creating these resources, and how you imagine working on further such resources in the context of Screen Worlds?

**Lindiwe:** At its inception, our Screen Worlds team decided we wanted to respond immediately to the urgent need for a decolonisation of film syllabuses and curricula. Within the first year of the project, we thus created free, open-access toolkits (Screen Worlds, 2022a), and Dr Michael W. Thomas and I (Dovey and Thomas, n.d.) wrote an article about our team's reasons for creating these toolkits for a special issue of *ViewFinder* magazine on the theme of decolonisation. In March 2020, we also co-organised a workshop titled 'Decolonising film and screen studies in Nigeria' with the University of Lagos, led by Dr Añulika Agina, our Postdoctoral Fellow in Nigerian Screen Worlds, and Dr Patrick Oloko, our Nigerian Workshop Partner. This workshop convened – in person – 20 participants from across Nigeria, including eminent and early career film professors, and it was a significant forum to work with our Nigerian colleagues to understand what decolonising film curricula in Nigeria means to them, how this relates to other contexts, and what resources are needed to do this work.

What was most illuminating about these discussions was how, again, institutional context became a key theme for us all. In many African contexts (not only Nigeria), there have historically been mass communication and theatre arts departments, but not dedicated film departments, while in Europe and North America, film as a medium has also struggled to gain an institutional foothold, with film studies often being located at the periphery of literature departments or history of art departments (my own department – the School of Arts at SOAS – is primarily a history of art department). Many of our Nigerian colleagues at the workshop were involved in and/or teach both film studies and film production. So, many of us were concerned with ways to facilitate greater rapprochement between disciplines, various modes of teaching, practising and researching to broaden the task of claiming a more permanent and valued space for film within higher education institutions.

Of course, there are significant differences in distinct contexts around the world, and in what students seek from film programmes. While not wanting to draw stark dichotomies, from my experiences I have noticed that, in under-resourced parts of the world, there tends to be more of a desire for

access to resources and vocational skills that will enable students to secure employment from the local film industries. (This is one of the reasons why our Screen Worlds team, in partnership with Chouette Films, decided to create a set of free masterclasses (Screen Worlds, 2022b) about how to download and use the free, professional editing software Da Vinci 17.) In more financially privileged parts of the world, some of the teaching-learning environments are geared towards film-making as part of artistic research, which comes with space for greater experimentation with the film medium. The fundamental question of access is resonant across all film education and was at the heart of our reasons for creating the toolkits. It should come as no surprise that our Screen Worlds call for video essays about African films brought in modest submissions – and all from film scholars based in the West. Part of the reason remains the difficulty with accessing African films – paradoxically within Africa in particular. While global platforms such as Netflix, Amazon and MUBI are licensing more and more African and Black films, and while international festivals are gradually including more African films, there are still hundreds – if not thousands – of important African films that remain inaccessible to African film-makers and researchers. Often it takes a major event for change to happen. For example, it is sadly only after legendary film-maker Sarah Maldoror passed away that her films are being restored and celebrated properly (for example, in the 2021 BFI London Film Festival (BFI, 2021) and at a major exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris from November 2021 to March 2022 (Palais de Tokyo, n.d.). Our team has tried to address some of these issues through collaborating with the June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive, which organised a series of webinars (JGPACA, 2020) focused on the need for the restitution of African art (including film) and the need to decolonise film archives. But this kind of work is unfortunately beyond what our Screen Worlds project can manage. It will require those with power and control over the rights to African films, and African films in archives (many of which still sit in Europe), to take action. Decolonising film is obviously a complex and ongoing task that requires many people in diverse film spaces to participate for it to flourish, and to create a world in which racism is eradicated and in which the film industry and higher education are globally representative, fair and just. As I have argued (Dovey, 2020b), this also means that we need to decolonise not only our curricula, but also our recruitment practices at universities. Estrella and I are working on a book chapter in *Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After* (edited by Marijke de Valck and Antoine Damiens, forthcoming), in which we explore what decolonising film festivals might entail, based on conversations with 22 film professionals in various parts of the world.

**Jyoti:** Nina, with your education and professional training in photography in the UK for over a decade, and then returning to teach in Sweden, you must have encountered some fundamental political and historical differences in how race is addressed (or not) in Sweden. Your work is also grounded in working with inherent sociopolitical experiences of race and racialisation. I have in mind your work on hybridity – how does this translate to teaching?

**Nina:** My own research and practice inform my pedagogical methods. My practice stems from an experience of growing up in Sweden with a father who was classified as Black, other, non-White, Asian, and a mother who is classified as White, European. As a child, I very quickly noticed how they were perceived as ‘images’ and categorised. They were treated differently according to their classification and, as a result, I was treated differently depending on which parent I was with. I adapted accordingly, but also shifted between my own identification at will.

My visual references are often not from the canon in photography, and I bring these perspectives into the classroom. I consciously think about who I am asking students to read – what and who are obligatory in the bibliography. There are some key texts that I am surprised are not read in Sweden. They might seem old, but in the UK they are crucial to image making. Stuart Hall, my most immediate example, is foundational to thinking about images and representation and cultural theory in the UK, and is completely absent from the curriculum in Sweden.

I ask students to make their own annotated bibliography in groups, and then compare these with those of another group to see what they might be missing, and to reflect on their own blind spots. I collaborate with a network called Global Photographies, where institutions from around the world share lectures from their regions in an attempt to steer away from the Western canon and open students' eyes to a wider global photographic context. The challenge is attendance, and not many students show up for the lectures. On the one hand, we get feedback from some to invite 'other' practitioners. On the other, not many students actually attend, and it becomes difficult to justify inviting a broader spectrum of guests when attendance even with 'the usual suspects' is so uninspiring.

The challenge with building in critical theory in photography from perspectives of queer, Black and Brown experiences, is that evaluations show that some students regard the teaching as a vehicle for the political. This is interesting in many ways. What we are doing is highlighting current critical scholars and practitioners like Ariella Azoulay or Hito Steyerl, and current artists who work with subject matters that are informed by contemporary discussions and debates like the Black Lives Matter movement and the decolonising movements. To focus on 'other' and a diversity of voices for many students is considered a political act, whereas to continue the focus on the (White) canon that has been naturalised is not seen as political. This is the depth of how Whiteness remains an unmarked sign in the curriculum, and students cannot see it. So, there is an issue of expectations as well, based on the limitations of their own references.

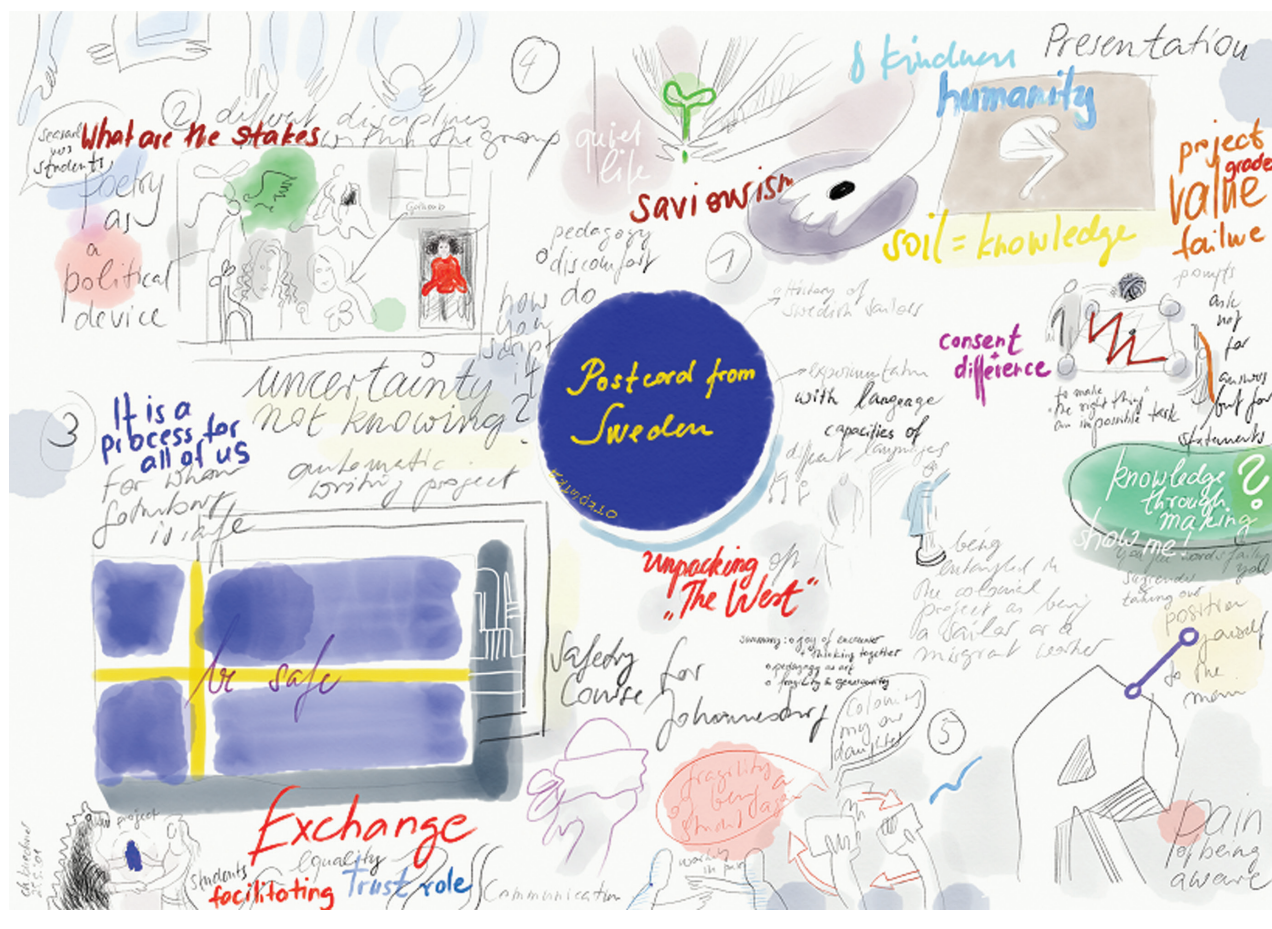
**Lindiwe:** This was the strength of the 'Decolonising pedagogy' workshop–conference, as not only did it bring together teachers from so many different institutions, but also we were involved in creative practice together, which made numerous references visible. This engagement with and through images in the workshop, working creatively together rather than singularly through dialogue, also had a reflexive function – showing how our own teaching and training had shaped our approaches. Furthermore, I clearly remember how at the workshop, we collectively reminded ourselves that we cannot simply point fingers at our institutions as though they are separate from us; we constitute the institutions' actions, and we need to remember that our actions within them can contribute to 'instituting' transformation with the curricula and teaching methods.

**Nina:** Jyoti, you were teaching in South Africa during the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements. There are, of course, so many differences between the place you came from – Wits University in the southern hemisphere – and here in Sweden. It would be interesting to hear you reflect on what the northern hemisphere, and in particular Sweden, can learn from this process in South Africa? What do you find different between the two different institutional contexts and academic environments?

**Jyoti:** I would like to return to the observation you made, Nina, about how students interpret curricular changes and shifts in teaching methods as the politicalising of the curriculum and content. South Africa, with its colonial and apartheid past, is a different historical-political context, and issues of race and topics like 'Whiteness', privilege and access are present in how South African society is conditioned to talk about and confront these issues. The capacity to address race and difficult topics is endemic in South African society. There is therefore less resistance in the classroom to introducing broader frameworks and references, because of the acute awareness of how knowledge has historically privileged Western (White) paradigms over those suppressed through historical power relations (like colonialism and apartheid). This does create a voracious appetite for new modes of teaching that do not replicate rigid structures reminiscent of apartheid, for example. Both the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements were student-led movements, so the perception of separating what happens in the classroom (curriculum and artistic practice, in terms of content) from what happens in the world one lives in is inconceivable in the way Swedish students view this distinction.

In the context of an art education in the northern hemisphere, this is a throwback to the privilege of the artist or film-maker as a creative genius outside of a direct relationship to the world. As Lindiwe

Figure 3. Summative drawing from final workshop session inspired by presentation of feedback methods using image-making practices (Source: Jyoti Mistry)



recalls, us-we taking on the responsibility of being inside an institution and being part of the change through our workshop, this again is palpable in the student-led movements, and the ways in which South African universities across the board responded to the call for decolonising education and institutions – to ensure that students, teachers, administrators and university leadership took and take responsibility for decolonisation: everything from university entrance requirements, curricula, pedagogical approaches to assessments came under review. The stark contrast for me in the northern hemisphere is the fearfulness at various intersections in the institutions: the encounters between teachers and students in the classroom, the leadership and teachers and the administration – the longevity of these institutional histories and their entrenched codes makes it difficult to create an environment for introducing change and enabling effective transformations. The fear inherently is about ‘not getting it wrong’, rather than the openness to try, and recognising that decolonising is a process that requires some experimentation because of the necessary unlearning involved, the reconfiguration of institutional frameworks and redesigning teaching approaches. This concern of a ‘false step’ has been exacerbated by a growing cancel culture that polices the classroom, rather than creating an environment for enquiry, discussion and reflection.

**Lindiwe:** In my article (Dovey, 2020a) I describe my pedagogical practice, where I aim to be as non-hierarchical, dialogical and open as possible. As I write in that article, Ifeanyi Awachie and I co-developed the idea of using the term ‘class member’ rather than ‘student’ to acknowledge the rich, diverse ways that those ‘taking’ a class contribute to its making and to knowledge sharing in that classroom context. As the teacher, one is also a ‘class member’, but of course paid to take on a certain kind of work and



responsibility – a responsibility that needs to be taken extremely seriously, especially in institutional contexts (such as in England) where class members are having to pay significant fees to study. It is all very well to promote the idea of ‘co-creation’ of curricula, but if a paid teacher uses this concept to renege on the work required to design and prepare a course well, then it is in fact destructive. Class members are not paying only to come and hear one another speak; they are paying to get access to materials, ideas, films, resources, and the knowledge and experience of the teacher. As a teacher, rather than seeing myself as an ‘expert’, I see myself as a curator – as someone who has gained a certain amount of knowledge and lived experience of film over a period of two decades now, which I need to draw on in the task of curating the course. Being a curator also means doing the hard work of creating access to difficult-to-access resources – for example, in my case, this has meant creating access to rare African films for my class members. In relation to our Global Film Industries module, Estrella and I have both drawn on our experiences of working practically with film (through running and curating film festivals and making films), which provides us with access to important film practitioners to invite to class. In my opinion, for class members to become willing ‘co-creators’ of a module, they need to see that the teachers – the curators and facilitators of the module – have done their own homework before coming to class to create an environment of trust and personal investment for everyone to come together to share their own knowledge, experiences and perspectives in a fruitful way.

**Nina:** Sometimes, I do feel fearful that time will turn, and that the direction will be fatal. Governmental policies will change, and subjects such as postcolonialism, gender studies and engagements in decoloniality will be considered politically radical and even be dubbed a ‘pseudo-science’. This is already happening in our neighbouring country, Denmark (Goldschmidt Pedersen, 2021), where ministers have decided to cut teaching staff and determine the content in the humanities or art schools. We have seen similar processes in other European countries. I moderated a discussion on decolonial photography in Amsterdam, and asked Rolando Vasquez a similar question, and he gave a rather positive response: that this process has now started with students and younger generations, and it will be too difficult to control this movement. I would like to believe this, although, of course, that is putting much faith in younger generations to have to resist larger state decisions.

**Lindiwe:** Decolonisation of course means different things in distinct contexts and so, to avoid perpetuating colonial practices in which one group of people force their ideas and practices onto another group of people, it is absolutely crucial that people within particular, local contexts decide what positive transformation means to them. As our research in Screen Worlds shows, the word ‘decolonisation’ might not even exist, or might not be a productive term for achieving greater social justice in that particular context. When people in their own locations make decisions about what decolonial approaches to film practice and education mean to them, we can engage in a non-hierarchical dialogue, trying to work cross-institutionally, collaboratively and generously to help one another to transform our work. For Screen Worlds, one of our ‘decolonial approaches’ is ongoing cross-cultural and cross-regional conversation – something that is at the heart of how we are developing many of our Screen Worlds ‘outputs’, such as films, video essays and edited volumes. It is only through conversation, co-authorship and collaboration – the same values that underpinned our ‘Decolonising pedagogy’ workshop–conference – that we can respect diverse positionalities, lived experiences and local knowledge to become alert to our blind spots.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

## Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

## Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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