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**To cite this article:** Isabel Seguí, Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco, Natalia Christofolletti Barrenha & Deborah Shaw (2023) Decolonising and depatriarchalising research cultures: a conversation with RAMA, the transnational Latin American women's audiovisual research network, *Transnational Screens*, 14:1, 37-46, DOI: [10.1080/25785273.2023.2180201](https://doi.org/10.1080/25785273.2023.2180201)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785273.2023.2180201>



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Published online: 20 Feb 2023.



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## Decolonising and depatriarchalising research cultures: a conversation with RAMA, the transnational Latin American women's audiovisual research network

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### ABSTRACT

Conference panels allow for free-flowing conversation with panelists and the audience. They lead to insights that come through thinking together with people that can bring complementary knowledge to the discussion. Yet these exchanges can also be ephemeral with ideas evaporating as we engage with the next paper or panel discussion. We address this in a search for a lasting contribution to debates in this write up of a panel on women and cinema, for the conference 'Women and Cinema in Ibero-America: Politics, Histories, Representations, Intersectionality', at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid in September 2022. We agreed that the topics and the discussion at our panel were of broad interest and provide food for thought for academics wanting to adopt a decolonial feminist approach. Topics that we discussed included, how to approach archival research in women's film and video, and how to 'depatriarchalise' the archives, and democratise access to them, as fundamental to offering a feminist perspective in archival research; how to challenge a Western androcentric paradigm and auteurist perspectives that too often erase women's contribution to film cultures; and, how to challenge epistemological barriers that deny women creators voices. In addition, the panel presented a first-hand perspective of eurocentrism and the experience of European academia for a researcher from Brazil and discuss how a decolonial feminist film curator/programmer can be a gate-opener rather than a gate-keeper.

### KEYWORDS

Decolonial feminist film;  
Latin American women's  
filmmaking; archival research

**Deborah Shaw:** I had the honour to be invited to chair a panel on women and cinema with some brilliant women academics, for the conference 'Women and Cinema in Ibero-America: Politics, Histories, Representations, Intersectionality', at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid in September 2022.<sup>1</sup> We were invited by the organisers, Ana María Mejón Miranda and Elena Oroz. Our panel was made up of myself, Isabel Seguí, Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco, and Natalia Christofolletti Barrenha, all members of RAMA, the Latin American Women's Audiovisual Research Network.

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Conference panels allow for free-flowing conversation with panellists and the audience. They lead to insights that come through thinking together with people that can bring complementary knowledge to the discussion. Yet these exchanges can also be ephemeral with ideas evaporating as we engage with the next paper or panel discussion. We agreed that the topics and the discussion at our panel were of broad interest and provide food for thought for academics wanting to adopt a decolonial feminist approach; for this reason, we wanted to take time to capture and preserve what was said and considered at our panel and translate this into English to reach an Anglophone audience. What follows is a write up of this discussion with additional time taken for us to reflect further.

The discussion was in Spanish and Portuguese and we shared our positions on a series of topics. Topics that we discussed included, how to approach archival research in women's film and video, and how to 'depatriarchalise' the archives, and democratise access to them, as fundamental to offering a feminist perspective in archival research; how to challenge a Western androcentric paradigm and auteurist perspectives that too often erase women's contribution to film cultures; and, how to challenge epistemological barriers that deny women creators voices. In addition, the panel presented a first-hand perspective of eurocentrism and the experience of European academia for a researcher from Brazil (Natalia), and Natalia discusses how a decolonial feminist film curator/programmer can be a gate-opener rather than a gate-keeper.

**Deborah Shaw:** RAMA is the acronym for Red de Investigación sobre el Audiovisual hecho por Mujeres en América Latina, in English, Latin American Women's Audiovisual Research Network. What are the origins and objectives of this group?

**Isabel Seguí:** We can trace its beginnings back to September 2017, when the international conference Latin American Women's Filmmaking was held at Senate House, University of London, organised by Catherine Davies and Niall Geraghty. I remember that you and Deborah Martin were the keynote speakers at the event and presented the edited collection Latin American Women *Filmmakers: Production, Politics, Poetics* (Martin and Shaw 2017). I was also part of the steering committee of the conference and in the coffee breaks I met Minerva Campos, a Spanish researcher who at the time was working at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid with María Luisa Ortega. They proposed that we organise a second Latin American Women's Filmmaking conference in Madrid, which took place two years later, in September 2019. It was during the final assembly/closing remarks of that second event, that we decided that it was necessary to create a transnational research network. The initial goal of the network would be to know who was doing research in the field in a range of countries and disseminate our works via a repository or similar, to be able to read each other. So, Marina, Elizabeth Ramírez-Soto and I took the lead to create the network – eventually named RAMA – which is a non-hierarchical transnational space, open to all, and currently has over ninety members in twenty countries. You can read more about us and join the mailing list on our website [www.red-rama.com](http://www.red-rama.com).

**Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco:** The publications listed on the website are key sources for those interested in Latin American women's filmmaking: <https://red-rama.com/publicaciones/>. The list is organised by country but it has a regional section too. Besides the

website, we have a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ramaRedRAM>), a newsletter, and we have organised some online events that can be found on our YouTube page (<https://www.youtube.com/@RedRAMAvideos/streams>).

**Deborah Shaw:** The members of the steering committee of RAMA are editors of the special issue 'Documents for a Feminist History of Latin American Cinema' in the Intellect journal *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*. This issue seeks to map, systematise, and offer a critical and contextual framework for understanding archival sources about the filmmaking practices of Latin American women who have worked in cinema, video and/or television. Could you, Marina, explain a bit more about this project?

**Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco:** For our first call for papers, we decided to focus on the material situation of the archives we use to rewrite Latin American film history from a feminist perspective. The types of archives investigated range from personal to institutional, and tell stories of women working in different roles (not only directors but also screenwriters, film critics, archivists) nationally and transnationally, from the silent era to today. Our scope is broad. The authors of the articles also range from seasoned scholars, well-known in the Anglo and/or Hispanic scholarly milieu, to early career researchers from traditionally marginalised academic regions. We have tried to balance the issue to open as many gates as possible.

Reflecting on Latin American women film and videomakers archives is fundamental for many reasons. Firstly, there is almost nothing published about many of these filmmakers. Secondly, even when there is something written, there is a great chance that it is done from a patriarchal perspective (we can cite as an example the case of the Brazilian Carmen Santos, who, until the work of Ana Pessoa, was seen as a vain, upper-class frivolous woman, an amateur who ventured into making movies). Moreover, despite important efforts made by the filmmakers themselves, the researchers, and, to a much lesser extent, by preservation institutions, these archives are dispersed and/or disorganised, and, in general, not digitised. This situation ends up putting us in positions for which we are not prepared either in terms of training or roles: that of organisers and even guardians of archives.

I am going to give you an example. When I had the idea to develop a long-term project with Helena Solberg's archive (which at least exists, although it is not catalogued), with the aim of making it available to the general public, I invited Rosa Inês de Novais Cordeiro, my colleague at Universidade Federal Fluminense, who had graduated in Librarianship and Archive Studies to join this endeavour. And what we have realised, in this process, is that Archivology is not fully prepared to deal with women's archives either. Its principles, established more than a century ago, were designed for institutions that worked with the idea of a supposed universal subject which, as we know, does not include women or consider the information needed to understand women's life paths. For instance, they do not take into account events relating to private lives.

Ironically, women filmmakers and videomakers (like practically everyone else) do the same when collecting their files. When they keep files related to their professional activity, they only save documents related to certain public aspects of their work (production and distribution materials, press dossiers). As a result, we find in the

archives, at most, short biographies and relevant supplementary information, because it is not part of the traditional archivist practice to add new documents to those received through donations. However, we argue that it is not possible to understand filmmakers' professional trajectories without looking at their private lives. The gaps in Solberg's career, and absence of documents in her archive, coincide with the periods when she was mothering children. We cite the case of Solberg here because she originated our reflection, but we could mention many, many others.

We understand that it is important that researchers are given the possibility to access the documents without reading directions conditioned by a traditional archivist logic. At the same time, we believe that to 'depatriarchalise' the archives it is necessary to offer a feminist perspective, which is not the most widespread or naturalised, so that the researcher's choices are made apparent. How to do this is a challenge. Our project on Solberg's files plans to make them available through a website. So, we could design an interface that will give access to her documents in the form of a biographical timeline, in which her private and public life will merge. That is for the online access, yet when it comes to the access to the physical documents, the challenge becomes even greater. We are thinking of designing something equivalent to this timeline in a physical format yet to be defined. Those are the paths we've thought of so far, and we're writing about them as the process progresses. Of course, many others are possible.

Another point that I consider fundamental for us to depatriarchalise the archives is the question of promoting the widest access to them. For decades, the first researcher who arrived at a certain archive and received custody of it used it to write and illustrate articles and books and placed them in their own, private archives. Thus, they became custodians, sometimes even owners, of certain themes, filmmakers and films, and everyone who wanted to research later had to resort to their mediation (a situation that is even more problematic when involving US and/or European researchers and Latin American archives). This is an issue that is not easily resolved due to the lack of training and structure that I have already mentioned. But today, digital technology allows thinking about creative and much lower-cost solutions. It is inadmissible, today, that, when we become responsible for an archive, we do not have the question of accessibility as a priority. Democratising access is more important than our academic production.

In our case, we still haven't got the money to work on Helena Solberg's entire archive, let alone put it online on the website with its timeline. But, at least, the documents of her first five films are now digitised and within easy reach. Thanks to this, for instance, the dialogue with Helena Solberg and Christine Burril, held in this conference, could be abundantly illustrated. It's still much less than what we want. But at least it is no longer necessary to go to Rio de Janeiro to do research on these films, and researchers just need to contact the filmmaker (not me or Rosa).

**Deborah Shaw:** Continuing with this theme of the decolonisation and depatriarchalisation of research methodologies, can you tell us a bit, Isabel, about your proposal for what needs to change in the field of Latin American film studies?

**Isabel Seguí:** In addition to the archival work, almost all feminist film historians use oral history. I soon realised that women are very present in the oral history of any film culture you investigate, but they disappear in the passage to the written record or official narrative. So, we have a problem in that transition from oral to written history. If you

consult manuals or canonical texts, it seems that there were no women in a given cinematic culture, yet they are a permanent reference in conversations with the protagonists of the events. So, I asked myself why does this exclusion occur and how do we prevent it? How do we inscribe women in the black-on-white record that will pass to the next generation when the protagonists of these stories die? This implies questioning the Western androcentric paradigm in our approach, and for me, the first move is to challenge auteurist perspectives. Film cultures are often galvanised by women who will be automatically excluded from the narrative if we apply a director-centric approach. And I don't just mean paying attention to those women in the crews who are in roles considered creative (screenwriting, cinematography, editing, sound . . .) but also to those who play roles considered non-creative. Because in an artisanal production process all positions are creative. Being the producer or the assistant producer on a low or no-budget film is probably the most creative role of the crew. Challenging the auteurist paradigm decolonises and depatriarchalises film research very effectively (Seguí 2018).

Production processes are complex, they must be analysed in terms of power, in all its contradictions. To fully understand a film text, we have to inform ourselves about the circumstances of its production. Analysing and writing from our armchairs is very convenient for those of us in the West because we don't have to move or talk to people that are probably going to make our complacent perception of a film text crumble. The model that I and other researchers practise is uncomfortable because it consists of talking to everyone, not prioritising the directors. So, you are going to receive a lot of contradictory information, where the personal and the professional are mixed. That material is the material in which life itself is woven. And you are going to have to organise that complexity and convert it into academic writing – frequently, taking sides and gaining enemies. It is very complex, and it is political work. But we owe it to ourselves to make the effort to turn life into academic writing so that academic writing deals with life. Of course, always humbly taking into account our subjectivity, our limitations, and knowing that what we write today is just provisional and should be challenged in the future too.

The second key point to decolonise would be to revise how we ascribe value to films because 'naturalised' quality criteria must be questioned. It happens that we unknowingly operate under quality criteria that we have inherited from guardians of taste, such as *Cahiers du cinéma*, etc. Often, we affirm that a film is bad, because it would not formally pass the bar to enter a European festival. The saddest thing is that we suffer not only from objective gatekeeping, but unconscious bias too. And this 'quality' filter has meant that many works made by women have been historically neglected. The lack of critical and historiographical attention has dramatic material consequences, such as the disappearance of important cinematographic works that have not been considered worthy of preservation.

In other words, systematically using obsolete and colonised quality criteria produces the irreparable loss of cinematographic products created in fascinating oppositional processes. This is something that unfortunately continues to happen. In order for this not to happen, we must look at films with fresh eyes, questioning technical and formal perfectionism. Because women in addition to working in very poor material conditions, usually, have not had access to technical training. So, they had two options, either do nothing, or do something that they knew would be considered 'bad' by the gatekeepers of

taste. Finally, they made their films anyway because they felt a responsibility to give themselves and other women a voice. And our obligation as decolonial feminist historians is to review our scales and when judging these products give them the value they deserve. Since we have a place of certain power, let's subvert the hierarchies.

To do this job we also need to expand what we consider to be primary and secondary sources. For example, Marina has an excellent article on how the canon of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) was formed (Cavalcanti Tedesco 2020). The male theorists of the NLAC who wrote manifestos did so because they could. They were public intellectuals with a platform and a lot of self-assurance. Women filmmakers at that time did not dare to write manifestos. How could they do it if they were permanently questioned and silenced in their families, in their relationships, at work, and even in left-wing parties and supposedly emancipatory film groups? But just because they scarcely wrote doesn't mean they didn't have ideas and agendas.

The absence of primary sources in the form of essays and manifestos signed by women could lead us to think that they did not make theoretical contributions. However, women contributed their ideas in other formats, in the form of dialogues. So, we can find their theoretical contributions in interviews, recordings and transcripts of conversations, etc. But we, the researchers, have to change our perspective on what is a theoretical contribution by looking for them in other formats (more open, impermanent, and dialogical) and not expecting to find stentorian voices towering over a broad range of readers and listeners. Most women filmmakers did not perform with the kind of gravitas that characterises statements like the ones that the great men of Latin American cinema accustomed us to (ie. Solanas, García Espinosa or Jorge Sanjinés). Searching for theoretical frameworks in the traces left by orality is profoundly decolonising and depatriarchalising. We can find theoretical frameworks in a great diversity of sources. And, the last thing I wanted to say is that in order to decolonise, I recommend investigating public spheres beyond the bourgeois. Film researchers tend to be middle-class centric, as well as Eurocentric.

**Deborah Shaw:** Going back to the issue of Eurocentrism, let's talk about academia. Natalia, as a Brazilian researcher working in Europe, can you tell us a little about your experiences in terms of hierarchies and structures, and what needs to change?

**Natalia Christofoletti Barrenha:** I have developed my career always moving between academia and the 'market' (working in areas such as curatorship, programming, production, criticism, among other things that I have to do to make ends meet); at the same time, I have transited between territories in Latin America (Argentina and Brazil) and Europe (actually, two very different Europes: the United Kingdom and Flemish Belgium, that is, prosperous Europe; and Slovakia, the periphery of Europe, which sometimes has even more structural and financial difficulties than Latin America in the development of its academic research system).

What I am going to talk about may sound very personal because it is based on my recent experiences. I do not want to sound pessimistic or rude, but rather, I want to be optimistic and purposeful. In that sense, I am going to evoke Francisco Huichaqueo, a Chilean-Mapuche filmmaker, who speaks of his practice as 'a loving war with the Huincas,' the non-Indigenous, to make yourself visible and heard, and to get to know

each other to reduce the gap between different worlds, perspectives, experiences (Castro Jorquera 2021).

Since I decided to move to Europe and develop my career here (for personal and political reasons), in the face of dozens of thumbs-down and feedback I have received (some quite violent, others even funny, several frankly absurd), I have been mainly meditating on the lack of flexibility of the 'ways of doing' in academia.

I want to make it clear that I am fully aware that when I go to other countries and try to enter their academic systems, things are done differently in each place: the rules are different, the schemes are structured differently regarding their rankings and evaluation processes, etc. And because I am aware of this (and aware that there is a certain protectionism at play), I do not take personally all the difficulties that I have faced in my movements across the Global North. On the contrary, I have worked hard to understand, learn, reproduce, and be part of this game, which is very different from the game I was used to playing.

At the same time, because I have not taken it personally, some of those issues have deeply resonated with me and bothered me. The lack of flexibility wouldn't seem like a problem if I were in the field of film studies at large. What I do not understand is this lack of flexibility in the area of Latin American cinema, in particular. How things are done in such a restricted, cut-and-dried way that ends up excluding Latin American scholars. For example, we frequently hear that our writing is oblique, in some cases going so far as to say that there is no academic rigour, and other criticisms that show a lack of awareness of Latin American academic traditions and ways of doing things. Or we are asked to use a decolonial perspective when the bulk of the bibliographical references we have used are Latin American and, thus, situated and often decolonial. But it seems that the only decolonial perspectives that interest many reviewers are those from scholars based in the Global North, and in their feedback, they unconsciously disregard Latin American authors. They aren't even aware of the blatant contradiction of suggesting Anglophone 'decolonial' references only.

Again: I understand that one has to meet the requirements to get funds and scholarships to carry out projects, advance in one's career, etc. But many gatekeepers are also responsible for making the rules and perpetuating the asymmetries, and I do not see much effort to change the rules within the field. It seems very problematic to me that a Latin Americanist studying Latin America, that is, knowing Latin America well, does not make any movement to open up the 'ways of doing' and thinking about, let's say, publications. I notice a constant devaluation of our work that furtively manifests itself through an articulation that condescendingly mobilises jargon from the consolidated scientific discourse to justify exclusion.

I interpret from this that there is no intention to dialogue with us and that we continue to be objects and not subjects of our discourse (a horizontal conversation is not sought, from equal to equal), which goes hand in hand with other types of exclusion like the conferences with registration fees that are surreal for us in their lack of affordability. Or when colleagues from the Global North never set foot in our conferences. I perceive this as a lack of interest in taking part in our debates. Because money exists . . . If Latin Americans have money to come to Europe or the US, North Americans and Europeans must have money to go to Latin America. I do not want to generalise since there are several types of institutions in the West with different budget conditions. Still, it looks as



if our academic events were useless or not interesting enough for Western scholars. We make an effort to travel, learn the language, read and cite them, yet the bridge is rarely crossed; there is no reciprocity. The asymmetries only go on and on and multiply.

To subvert this, we have to forge new categories, new criteria, assume blind spots, and have a predisposition to decentering. We should question the capacity of hegemonically consolidated frameworks and recognise our differences, while shifting the parameters of critical judgment, not as a replacement of paradigms but as the inclusion of other paradigms. Recognition instead of judgment, as in the notion of recognition by Judith Butler: self-recognition and recognition by the other; apprehension of the alterity mobilised by desire (Butler 2005). Also, close to what Édouard Glissant calls the 'poetics of relation', and I retrieve these ideas from Amaranta César's beautiful text (César, 2020, 137–156). Or what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls 'reciprocity,' a concept explored by Ramón Grosfoguel (2016) in an article that is very useful in relation to what we are discussing here.

In this sense, I have exercised my practice as a film curator/programmer, a role that is very gatekeeping. Again, inspired by César, how can I look beyond what is legitimised? How can I recognise other 'ways of doing'? How can I displace the notion of judgment, especially universalist judgment, in favour of that of recognition? I'd rather be a gate-opener than a gate-keeper.

Deborah Shaw; final reflections:

These contributions have alerted us to many issues that numerous academics in the Global North may not be aware of, even those of us who believe we are committed to 'decolonising the curriculum'. How many of us have had the clarity to question hegemonic practices and sense absences in academic practices? How many of us have assumed that the absence of written documented evidence meant that women's creative practice did not exist? How many of us have discounted personal lives of creative people as extraneous to 'proper research'? How many of us have privileged male (or female) exceptional filmmakers without examining why women's experience led them to be less valued and to occupy fewer visible spaces within film cultures? How many of us have questioned how and why we ascribe quality in film cultures? How many of us have taken time to consider the experience of our colleagues from the Global South navigating cultural differences, and often on precarious contracts?

Marina, Isabel and Natalia have, through this discussion, led us to step outside of our cultural norms and provide some guidance on how we can address the many gaps that still exist in the spaces between academia and women's filmmaking, with insights for other forms of creative practice. These are three academics who have stepped outside of their institutional structures through their work in the archives, through their fieldwork and through curation and programming, and most importantly through their relationships with women filmmakers.

## Note

1. For more on the event, see 'Women and Cinema in Ibero-America: Politics, Histories, Representations, Intersectionality' <https://eventos.uc3m.es/74616>; and for a video recording of the panel, see 'Descolonizar y despatriarcalizar las culturas de Investigación' <https://media.uc3m.es/video/6333e8fb8f42087b648b4576>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Marina Cavalcanti Tedesco** is a professor at the Department of Cinema and Video and the Postgraduate Program in Cinema and Audiovisual of Universidade Federal Fluminense. Among other books, she edited *Mulheres, cinema e vídeo no Brasil: (mais de) 40 anos de pesquisa* (2022) and *Trabalhadoras do cinema brasileiro: mulheres muito além da direção* (2021) and co-edited *Cinematografia, Expressão e Pensamento* (2019), *Feminino e plural: mulheres no cinema brasileiro* (2017), and *Corpos em projeção: gênero e sexualidade no cinema latino-americano* (2013). Currently, she is part of the steering committee of RAMA, the Latin American Women's Audiovisual Research Network.

**Isabel Seguí** is a Lecturer in Film at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland). Her work has appeared in academic journals such as *Latin American Perspectives*, *Feminist Media Histories*, *Framework*, *Jump Cut*, and edited collections like *Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image* (Balsom & Peleg eds, the MIT Press, 2022) or *Incomplete: the Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film* (Beeston & Solomon eds., UC California Press, 2023). Currently, she is writing a feminist history of non-fiction filmmaking in Peru (funded by the Leverhulme Trust), and co-editing a special issue for the journal *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas* called 'Documents for a Feminist History of Latin American Cinema.'

**Natalia Christofolletti Barrenha** is a film researcher and programmer specialising in Latin American cinema. She conducted postdoctoral research at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas and was Visiting Fellow at the KU Leuven, the Comenius University in Bratislava and the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. She is the author of *A experiência do cinema de Lucrecia Martel: Resíduos do tempo e sons à beira da piscina* (2014, translated into Spanish in 2020) and *Espaços em conflito. Ensaios sobre a cidade no cinema argentino contemporâneo* (2019), and co-editor of *ReFocus: The Films of Lucrecia Martel* (2022). She currently works as a project manager at the Cultural Section of the Embassy of Brazil in London.

**Deborah Shaw** is Professor of Film and Screen Studies at the University of Portsmouth, in the School of Film, Media and Communication. Her research interests include transnational film theory, Latin American cinema, film and migration, and screen studies and gender and sexuality, and she has published widely in these areas. She is the founding co-editor of *Transnational Screens*, and her books include *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Ten Key Films*, (Continuum Publishers, 2003), *The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón*, Manchester University Press (2013). Co-edited books include *The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and *Latin American Women Filmmakers: Production, Politics, Poetics* (I.B.Tauris, 2017), and *Sense8: Transcending Television* (Bloomsbury Publishers 2021).

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