

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

CLAUDE

GRUNITZKY:

Hello, everyone. It is my pleasure to host this second webinar that is part of the launch series that we have been crafting, weaving, TRUE Africa University and MIT, MIT represented by the MIT Center for International Studies and MIT Africa. And last week, which was our grand opening, our launch event, we had a panel discussion around the film *The Great Green Wall*, which we'd shown. And we had six people actually starting off TRUE Africa University slash MIT webinar series.

Today is a little bit different, because we have a very, very special guest. And you all know who she is, but I want to introduce her properly in a minute or so. But before we get there, I want to maybe start by telling you who I am. My name is Claude Grunitzky. I am from Togo. I define myself now as a serial immigrant, and I'll explain why that is relevant to this specific topic today.

I am a graduate of MIT, and I'm launching TRUE Africa University because I want to help find actionable ways to nurture Africa's talent. As many of you know, 60% of the African population is under the age of 25. Africa is 1.4 billion people. And I keep saying this at every talk-- I keep repeating this as often as I can-- there are more children born in Nigeria every year than in the entire European Union. So we have a lot to talk about.

This series is going to be unpacking a lot of different topics related to sustainable development in Africa and new ways that Africans can find more virtuous ways to develop, and to grow, and to provide for its citizens, and its sons, and daughters. And so TRUE Africa University is launching with webinars, but then we're going to get into master classes and all kinds of courses and educational materials for young Africans. But this would have never, ever been possible without the support of the MIT Center for International Studies, which aims to support and promote international research and education at MIT.

MIT CIS, as we call it, helps to produce research that creatively addresses global issues while helping to educate the next generation of global citizens. The website is cis.mit.edu. And then, we're also supported for this webinar series, which again is 11

weeks-- we have nine weeks left after this one-- every Thursday at noon, and we are supported by the MIT Africa program, which is actually based at the MIT Center for International Studies. And MIT Africa is really about empowering MIT students and faculty to advance knowledge and solve the world's greatest challenges by connecting them with leading researchers, companies, and other partners in African countries. The website is misti.mit.edu.

So with that, I want to say what a huge-- what an incredible honor it is for me to introduce today's speaker. It's a webinar. So it's not just a conversation, it's a presentation that will be followed by a conversation.

And Taiye Selasi is a very, very, very special person. I've been friends with her for a few years now. But it just so happens that about eight years ago she burst on the scene with her debut novel *Ghana Must Go*, which was actually critically-acclaimed. But more importantly, the people who raved about it were some of my favorite novelists and people who I admire that I modeled myself after. And two of those people are the late Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie.

And I was really interested in meeting Taiye Selasi because, first, I love Toni Morrison, I love Salman Rushdie. But when I first moved to London as a 20-year-old, Salman Rushdie had published a book of essays called *Imaginary Homelands*. And that book really ended up shaping my trajectory as a journalist, as a writer, as a publisher. And it was really about people like myself who are citizens of many different parts of the world, but who are also sometimes ostracized for not being natives.

And so that's why it came to define myself as a serial immigrant. And when I met Taiye-- when I finally got to meet Taiye and work with her on various projects, I realized that she too was a global citizen, that she too was an Afropolitan, to use a word that she helped popularize, that she too was transcultural. She has lived in the United States. She is currently living in Lisbon, having lived before that in Berlin, in Rome.

Her parents actually met-- and she'll correct me if I'm wrong-- I think met in medical school in Zambia. And so both of her parents are doctors. And then she also grew up in Boston. So she's one of those people who, through storytelling, has been able

to bring many, many different trajectories to life. And with that, it's my great, great honor to introduce the writer, novelist, Taiye Selasi, who will talk not just about her life in the literary world but also about the way she's approaching storytelling from a film perspective. So thank you, Taiye, for agreeing to participate in our TRUE Africa University MIT webinar series, and now you have the floor.

TAIYE SELASI: Thank you, Claude. Can you hear me?

CLAUDE Yes we can.

GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: Fantastic. Thank you, Claude. Thank you, MIT. Thank you, CIS. Thank you participants wherever you are in the vast unseen universe. It's just a delight to be here.

As you know, Claude, African stories as a concept is my absolute favorite topic. I like to say that I've been storytelling since I was four years old when I announced that I wanted to be a writer, and I've been in Africa since I was born. So African stories are at the heart of everything that I do. But it's true that only very recently I began to think about what it is that's been troubling me about the way we speak about their value-- what's been irking me for about a decade now about how we shape conversations around the value of African content.

And I've come to realize that so often when we are talking about, especially celebrating, African narrative and African creativity, we tend to group three things together. So we tend to collapse the African content, the African creative, and the African consumer, and speak about them as if they belong to sort of one monolith. And over time, as I've cycled through all of those identities and entities, I've come to realize that this is a problem. So I'd like to use the next 20 minutes or so to explain what I've learned and how I've learned it.

So this all comes down to my own journey as an African storyteller, as an African creative, which I like to sort of break into three parts-- the beginning, the book, the middle, the talk, and the end, or certainly the endgame, the screen. I would love to start the slides at this point to share the screen. So some of you may know, I started my creative career by publishing a novel. You can go to the next slide. That novel is called *Ghana Must Go*, and it quite literally changed my life.

I like to say that *Ghana Must Go* is the novel that I've been wanting to read for most of my life. But in doing so, I would be singing from the late great Toni Morrison who said that *Beloved* was the novel that she wanted to read. *Ghana Must Go*, in many ways, was the same for me. I wrote it from the heart about an Afropolitan family based between the states, between UK, and between Ghana. And I was shocked, bowled over, delighted by its success. But I have to acknowledge that I was standing on the shoulders of, and side by side with, several African novelists at the time.

So in the moment that I published *Ghana Must Go*-- we can go to the next slide-- it met with some considerable success. It was published and translated into over 20 languages. I went on multinational book tour. And I was aware that I was participating in a moment, what was called sort of the golden era of contemporary African literature.

So at the time that I published *Ghana Must Go*, readers had also been recently seduced by the epically talented African novelists who emerged around the same time. There was Teju Cole, there was NoViolet Bulawayo, there was [INAUDIBLE], there was [INAUDIBLE], there was just one insanely talented African novelist after another coming up at that time. And the cumulative effect, I think, of that moment in publishing-- it was five or 10 years in publishing-- was to really surface and to center African narratives from representing a variety of African experiences-- the plural is very important to me here-- in a way that was absolutely thrilling. The trouble was that most of that African literature was produced in what one justified critic would call "the West."

Now, I've argued that this concept of the West versus Africa is troubled by what you describe, Claude, the experience of the serial immigrant, what I've called the multi-local the Afropolitan. Africans as we know, have taken their place in and are continuing to shape the West. So to speak of the West as if it's somehow wholly disconnected from the African continent is already perhaps inaccurate. But it was certainly the case that this flourishing of African literature mostly occurred for audiences in the US, the UK, and the EU. So much so that when I wanted to launch my novel, which is called *Ghana Must Go* and is about a family that is Nigerian [INAUDIBLE] in Nigeria and Ghana, it was almost impossible to do so.

My publisher could not support me. I ended up-- my mom ended up ordering copies of the books through the wholesaler to her pediatric office. And then we had to unload the trucks and essentially stage a do-it-yourself book launch in Accra. Why was that? I would argue that's because, again returning to that distinction that I've learned to attend to, there was a difference between the value placed on the African novelist and the African reader, the African creative, or indeed African content, and the African consumer of that content.

It was simply the case that the publishing world had oriented itself towards its readers in one part of the world while making content about a different part of the world. Largely [INAUDIBLE] readers are the same. And that is when I think I began to have some questions about this distinction. I think that's what I began to ask myself, what is at stake in this distinction between who makes the content and who is allowed-- who was given immediate access thereto.

But I didn't quite understand it yet. That came later. We can go to the next slide. Because from the beginning of my life and storytelling the book, I'm drawn to the middle, the talk. As some more of you may know, some years ago I gave a Ted Talk at the Ted conference in Brazil, introducing the concept of the multi-local, a bit like an essay I'd written some years before, which introduced the concept of an Afropolitan or Afropolitan experience. The Ted Talk took that point of departure, and zoomed out, and asked whether several citizens of the world, but most importantly human beings were experiencing what I like to think of as multi-local reality.

What was interesting to me, though, besides the debate and the discourse that sprung up around multi-locality was the difference in which-- so my novel was a *New York Times* best seller and *Der Spiegel* best seller, for which I would be eternally grateful, but there is no way even with all of my Nigerian family members buying all the copies they could, that it reached three million people in a year. There's simply not. And I think what I realized in giving the Ted talk was that I'd stumbled on a new mode of engagement, one that would have a much deeper, broader impact than writing fiction alone.

It turns out that when I moved to New York in 2005, the same year that I wrote the essay about Afropolitans, I started studying screenwriting at the WGAE East

Screenwriting Lab at Columbia University, run by some incredible creatives really supporting underrepresented talent. So I learned how to write a screenplay. I knew my way around Final Draft. And at the moment that I gave a Ted Talk and realized that screen, that video content, that online video content could have the reach that my Ted Talk did, I realized that I probably wanted to get back into screenwriting.

I had studied feature writing, but when I got back around to the craft, television had entered its golden era. So I paired up with a fantastic producer-- she's actually an African-American legend, the producer behind CBS's *The Equalizer* and she's called Debra Martin Chase. And she and I partnered and put together a series set in Ghana, a country near and dear to my heart, and we managed to get it greenlit by a major streamer.

Bottles were popped, celebrations were planned, and then budgets were written. And this is when I started to realize that there was something going on in television, as there had been something going on in literature as well. So this goes back just a few years, when global distributors had turned their attention to Africa. We can go to the next slide.

The first series to emerge in South Africa, where there is an incredible service production culture in place, there was *Queen Sono* the fantastic, then came the teen series *Blood & Water*-- excellent pieces of content. If you haven't seen them, drop off this call and go-- and then recently announced a Fremantle production called *Reyka*, but all working within what we call the local content space. South African stories told by and written for South African audiences, but local audiences as well.

After South Africa came Nigeria. We can go to the next slide. And probably the largest global streamers set their sights on Nigeria just after South Africa and announced a slate of productions partnering with one of Nigeria's most forward-thinking producers, bringing some of Nigeria's most epic texts to life. It was incredibly exciting. We were so honored to bring Ghana to the table. And then we learned about the budgets. Next slide.

Dun-dun-dun. So at the time that I threw my hat into the television ring, the television industry as a whole was undergoing very [INAUDIBLE]. This was a time at which-- again, this is a few years ago-- television budgets in the United States and in

the UK were on the rise. So we know and we can imagine, if you've seen the sort of epic and epic series that *Game of Thrones*, that this series comes to about 15 million, if not more, per episode to make.

But even a more sort of character driven series like *Euphoria*, which is at the end of this graph, was coming in at \$11 million United States per episode. So this was a moment in which television producers were investing huge amounts of money to tell stories, episodic stories, with film quality production values. And the results were astounding. Audiences were loving it. You can go to the next slide. Next slide. Yes.

The thing is that enthusiasm about investing did not extend to the new entrant into the TV space, which was African context. So you think about *Game of Thrones*, you think about *The Crown*, you can sort of understand the scope of those budgets. But let's take a show like *Orange is the New Black*, which doesn't have a huge number of locations, does not rely on explosives or pyrotechnics for the narrative storytelling. That's costing about \$4 million an episode.

Now, streamers don't like to release these kinds of numbers. So these are some of the few that are widely publicized. We've got to compare a series like *Orange is the New Black* to a series like *Queen Sono*, which she's following an international spy, it does involve a bit more action sequences, and so forth. The budget for a series like *Orange is the New Black* for one episode is more than the budget assigned to the entire season of *Queen Sono*. And as somebody who came from literature, I started to ask myself, why?

And I got an answer. I was told, listen, what we're trying to do here is to create African content for African consumers. And I said, that's fantastic. This African content surely will be viewed by African consumers, consumers on the continent, and African consumers in the diaspora, and global viewers if it is made in the same production values and the attention to detail as the content that this audience is [INAUDIBLE] presently consuming. And I was told, well, not really.

So the catch is if we make a series like *Queen Sono*, if we make African content with global production values, the risk is that it will turn off African consumers. The African viewer isn't accustomed to this kind of slick Hollywood level of production, and if we deliver this kind of content to them, they might be put off-- they very

simply might not watch it. We want to make African content that feels African-- question mark [INAUDIBLE], what is African-- for African consumers, because that's what they know and that's what they want.

I have to say, I scratched my head at this presupposition. I was reminded of one of my favorite feature films it's called *Y Tu Mamá También*. And it was written and directed by a fantastic Mexican director. And I remember, this was years ago before I started writing about Afropolitans and that I read about this story, about this man's beautiful piece of cinema. So this brilliant Mexican director had just directed a Hollywood hit called *Great Expectations*-- let's say a standard Hollywood piece of content. But he wanted to go to Mexico, and he wanted to direct something which was about Mexican and which was in Spanish. And he's done this Hollywood project.

So he starts with the Hollywood studios and says, right, do you think that you could give me some money to go make a piece of Mexican content? And the idea was like, we can, but just a little bit, because Mexican audiences don't really want such high-quality content. So he goes to Mexico, and there too he's told the same. You know those Hollywood budgets that you're used to? We don't make content at that scale.

And so he was sort of caught between a rock and a cheap place, in the sense that on the one hand Hollywood didn't believe that Mexico was worth investing in. And on the other hand, Mexican budgets weren't what he was used to making. But he believed that if he could make a piece of content about Mexico at global standards, it would appeal not just to global audiences but to Mexicans as well. He made *Y Tu Mamá También*, entirely financed by a private investor who put about \$5 million into the film, which was peanuts by Hollywood standards but epic by Mexican ones. And to the question of whether or not that film, which was beloved by New York and other critics, appealed to Mexican viewers.

The answer is, it still holds one of the records for biggest box office openings in Mexico. *Y Tu Mamá También* then says to me that this notion that the Mexican viewer, the African viewer, doesn't want premium content, doesn't know what to do with high-quality visual and narrative is facetious. You can go to the next day.

And yet that is how contemporary African television is being produced. When *Queen Sono* debuted, with its fantastic lead actress Pearl Thusi, who's just radiant in

everything she does, it struck me that the *New York Times* reviewer wrote "makes you wonder whether the budget for *Queen Sono* wasn't quite as generous as it was for other Netflix series." Makes you wonder indeed.

What's going on there? Why are global distributors so loathe to spend the money on African content when they are so desperate to woo the African consumer? Well, they're desperate to woo the African consumer for a very, very clear reason. Streamers subscriptions in the US, in the UK, in the EU are starting to plateau. Even during the pandemic, there are only so many people who can join-- who can become incremental subscribers. But Africa, full of the young, as Claude knows, full of the mobile connected, is a market just waiting to be-- it's a market full of incremental subscribers.

And so when some of these distributors say we are sending the troops to Africa, what they mean is, we are going to seduce, we are going to connect the African consumer, the incremental subscriber. The value we place is on the incremental subscriber, but it's the value also on the African content. Is it also on the African creative when these global platforms will not pay equally for the content and will not compensate equally the creators. This is something-- this is a question that I think has been raised for me in my journey through African storytelling, through African creation.

Because the thing is, when non-white content, let's say, is created with global production values, in India, in Korea, the results are unanimously spectacular. We can go to the next slide. A film like *White Tiger*, which I couldn't help but notice, one reviewer says lack stars familiar to American audiences, as if there are no Indian Americans in America. But OK.

White Tiger had about 27 million viewers it. Climbed all the way to Netflix's number two, and it is set in an entirely non-white, non-American milieu. *Sweet Home* is a Korean series made with beautiful production values. It's gotten to 22 million viewers in Korea and beyond. And what these series and feature film say to me is that when the production value is there, the audience, global and local, comes. This is what I want to see happen with African content.

We can go to the next slide. When we say that African content is made by Africans

and watched by the world, when we say that African novels are written by Africans but read by the world, I am looking-- it has become my mission as an African storyteller, as an African creative, to ensure that the value we place on the African continent is commensurate to the value we place on the African consumer, on the reader, on the viewer, but also the same, that if we want to go and get the incremental subscriber, we make sure that we deliver to that African consumer the same quality content that we deliver to the rest of the world. Because these stories, coming back to my novel, coming back to my Ted Talk, are universal.

They are rooted in richly complicated local context, to be sure. And that is indeed their power. That is indeed what will make them travel the world. That is indeed what will make these stories change minds and touch hearts. I am a lifelong, devoted believer in the power of the story.

One of the reasons that the *Y Tu Mamá También* example stayed with me is because the head of a production company said to me that he'd seen that film on a flight. He's a gentleman from the United States of America, from the West Coast, white America-- he said he didn't know much about Mexico beyond what he read in the news. But watching that particular and beautifully drawn portrayal of a Mexican middle class environment and those particular Mexican characters, he began to think about Mexico differently. And so when he got off the flight, having watched the film, he changed his investment strategy in Mexico.

Listening to the story, it occurred to me that this is the real power of African content-- to create new opportunities to change understandings of selfhood, to change not just the world's view of Africa, but Africans themselves, of what's possible and what's possible now. And so I understand that this content is more than just entertainment. It has the power to effect real change, to touch [INAUDIBLE] to change minds, and so it needs to be excellent, it needs to be made excellently, and I am tireless in my fight to make sure that the value is assigned across the consumer, the content, and the creative.

The bad news is that that hasn't happened to date. The good news is that the potential is enormous. I'll stop there so I make sure that I leave enough time for questions. But thank you for allowing me to share.

CLAUDE

GRUNITZKY:

Well, thank you, multi-local Taiye, for telling us the story, which is really your transition from being a novelist to being a storyteller that is looking at bigger audiences-- people who may not be so literate, but they are able to understand stories. But then I want to go back to your example of *Y Tu Mamá También*, which I loved as well-- many people loved it. But what was interesting about *Y Tu Mamá También*, it wasn't just loved by Mexicans, right? It was loved by people in France, it was loved by people in Asia, it was loved by Americans.

And when you were referring to the concept of being made by Africans and watched by the world, why do you think we haven't had an African story that was actually made by Africans and that was watched by the world? I'll give an example. Earlier Ari and I were talking about *Black Panther*, which was made by African-Americans and watched by the world, but not made by Africans, made by African-Americans, and a lot of Africans didn't really relate to *Black Panther*. So why do you think we haven't had a single African story that had an *Y Tu Mamá También*, kind of impact or the kind of impact that a, say, *City of God* coming out of Brazil would have had in the world. What's holding us back?

TAIYE SELASI:

It's certainly not the quality of the storytelling. It's certainly not the vision or the universality of the narrative. I would argue that this is down to budget and marketing. Access and positioning. So *Rafiki*, this gorgeous film out of Kenya, or *The Wound*, there have been world-class pieces of content created by African creators. And we're talking about creators who are continental, but we can also talk about Afropolitans and Afrucabs in the diaspora, and then we can include a vast range of French Senegalese filmmakers and so forth. But the point is, the talent is there.

The question is, where is the access? *Y Tu Mamá También*, was made at a price point that most Mexican films were not [INAUDIBLE] at the time. It was higher. It was higher than what was typically considered local Mexican budget. And it needed to be in order to break through to be seen by the critics in the *New York Times* and at the other times that launched it into its global position.

That an individual Mexican investor decided to spend that money on that film to me suggests that we might need to stop waiting for an entire studio system that does not necessarily think that continental stories are universal skills. We might need to stop waiting for that system to change and start thinking about different ways to

create content with production values that the position the narrative [INAUDIBLE].

CLAUDE
GRUNITZKY: But if we're going to be honest with ourselves though, isn't that perhaps the symptom of a deeper problem, which is the fact that perhaps many high net worth Africans do not really value the creative industries in the same way that say that Mexican investor who funded *Y Tu Mamá También*,

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

TAIYE SELASI: Or the Korean investor who funded *Parasite*, who comes from a tech empire. Yeah.

CLAUDE
GRUNITZKY: Exactly. So you're the child of doctors, right? So a lot of our African parents want us to be doctors, or lawyers, and so on. When I decided to become a magazine editor and publisher in my early 20s, people thought I was going crazy, because it wasn't really the traditional path for well-educated Africans. And so if we take it deeper, this conversation, into the world of those people who could fund these kinds of films, assuming that we're in this made-in-Africa mentality and not just waiting for Netflix and Amazon to come and fund all these African films, what do you see as a sustainable path for actually creating those films, that are world-class films and that will actually be embraced by the world?

TAIYE SELASI: I mean, you're asking exactly the right question. When I think about the investor from a pharma background who made *Y Tu Mamá También* possible or the investor from a tech background who made *Parasite* possible, I ask myself the same question, Claude. Where is the African improvement? What have we missed that the Indian understood that, the Korean understood that, the Mexican understood about what these films do in the world? Because it's more than just making one beautiful film that wins a number of words.

Y Tu Mamá También, ushered in what is often now referred to as the new wave of Mexican cinema. It wasn't one film, it was several. And those several films absolutely begin to change the way that Mexico is viewed by a great many people. And I believe that African investors, it's continental [INAUDIBLE] African universities might be missing a trick there, might be underestimating the extent to which content shapes mentality, the way in which content can quite literally transform investment culture.

So when you talk about a businessman who's on the plane-- I heard one gentleman saying I was on a plane and I watched *Bob Hearts Abishola*, that CBS series which centers Nigerian-American [INAUDIBLE] experience. And he said, it suddenly occurred to me that I'd never noticed that most of the doctors I know are Nigerian, most of the engineers I know are Nigerian. And he went home and did a bit of research, [INAUDIBLE] a book which sort of places Nigerians next to Jewish Americans, Cuban Americans, and Asian Americans as some of the highest-performing immigrants in the United States. *Bob Hearts Abishola*, a network sitcom, transformed this man's view of what he could do with Nigerian investors.

I think is if African high net worth individuals started from that premise, they would understand that the value of this content far exceeds the joys of narrative, which of course I live and die by the joys of narratives. But the return here is greater.

CLAUDE

GRUNITZKY:

But then, Taiye, let me press on this a little bit, because we do have to unpack this. It is quite complicated. It doesn't really make sense to a lot of people. And many of us have noticed this problem, and this is also a good time to transition to the questions from the participants-- there's an anonymous attendee who said, well-- I'm reading it now-- a couple of Nigerians have invested a lot in Nigeria's films, but they did not succeed. For example, *Half of a Yellow Sun* or *Eyimofe* and?

So do you do you mind kind of answering that specific question? I wish we had the name of the attendee, but they wish to remain anonymous right now.

TAIYE SELASI:

No, and I welcome that anonymity. You know, I understand that. Where we as educated Africans, much less those who might be considered high net worth individuals, are not necessarily statistically speaking many in number. So the pressures can feel greater, and they can seem to fall on the shoulders of a few. It's true that some of the investors who enthusiastically backed certain projects were disappointed. It's also true that one of the richest men in Britain. Mr Dyson, did not succeed the first time he tried to make a bagless vacuum. So not that if you want to invest in something that doesn't work the first time, you decide that that's invalidated as a critical area of investment.

I think that we need more confidence. I also think we need more attempts. I wrote an essay once about the African literature, saying we need more names. We take a

very few and act as if it's a large pool. The fact that we can feel like a large group is merely a testament to the power of the talent involved, but the numbers are so small. And so I would say, we need to keep trying. We need to try again.

Parasite was not the only Korean film made in the last 20 years. It is the one that won an Academy Award, because the investors stayed with that Director. I think that we need to nurture African talent, not simply [INAUDIBLE]. African creatives, but creatives full stop are not race horses. You need to cultivate the environment in which these creators and creatives find their stride, find their sea legs, and hit their mark. But I think for the time being, as you say, Claude, most of our parents want us to be doctors, lawyers, or hedge fund managers. They're not that excited when we say want to be show runners and cultural arbiters. And yet this is where the real power, at least some of it, lies.

CLAUDE

GRUNITZKY:

The question about the creative industries is important, and we have quite a few attendees who are weighing in with very, very specific insights. And one of them is actually a friend, Farai Gundan. I didn't know she was here. Hi, Farai, it's great that you're here. She asked a question about the business model once again, because a lot of us are looking at the economics of can this be self-sustaining. This is about sustainable development-- how can we keep this going and create viable models?

And her question is related to a specific example from her country. Hey says Strive Masiyiwa, the Zimbabwean billionaire, invested in [INAUDIBLE] as a platform, and it subsequently folded. As long as the platforms are owned by non-Africans, then we are stuck in how our narratives are funded and distributed. So we had examples there once again of Netflix and the same kind of American companies coming into Africa. We had other Nigerian ventures that actually didn't work as a streaming platform, IROKO TV just being one of several that started. Afrostream in the Francophone world also started and folded.

So I'm wondering, should we also be talking about the platform, and the ownership of the platform, and not just the actual quality of the content.

TAIYE SELASI:

We can. Yes, absolutely. I don't want to position myself as an expert in production finance. In fact, I'm just rather plucky storyteller. But I have observed in my short journey down this path that there is a meaningful distinction between the

[AUDIO OUT]

But the lines got blurred when distributors became content creators as well. So it's entirely possible that a production be financed privately and then sold into distribution, which is one could argue what happens when you write a novel. Nobody needs to fund-- well, somebody needs to fund the novel, let's be honest. But it doesn't take as much money funding a series. But you create the content, and then you sell into distribution. The question is, what are the priorities of the distributor? So I don't think that global streaming platforms are to be ruled out as viable distributors. There's an incredible track that's the laid in that regard, especially coming into Nigeria and South Africa and soon Kenya.

I don't know. I wouldn't be able to speak confidently, because I haven't looked into the numbers, whether or not the move is to compete with the distribution channels. But I'm absolutely convinced-- I'm absolutely convinced-- that at the first step of the process, the production company that sells the content into distribution needs to be more locally and indigenously backed. Of that I am absolutely sure.

And then you get more of the control. Because if you're an African creative that's done a sort of deal with a global streamer, those deals are not-- I worked at a hedge fund, they are not favorable terms. You're selling your content sort of forever in perpetuity. Your great grandchildren will not see a royalty ever. It's very different if you own the IP and then you sell it into distribution. This is a model on which many production companies have been working for years. Then you're collecting royalties, and you're selling territory by territory. And that's just a basic question of ownership. But those owners who are creating this content need backers. And that's why I feel that let's say some of our home grown high-fliers perhaps have yet to come round to the opportunity.

CLAUDE Well, thank you for clarifying on that specific topic--

GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: Do you see what I mean, though, Claude?

CLAUDE Yeah, but it's complicated. It's complicated, because independence comes with ownership, and ownership comes with pride, it comes with identity.

GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: And with risk.

CLAUDE And it comes with risk.

GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: And with risk.

CLAUDE Exactly. So risk taking, a lot of cultural entrepreneurs have actually taken quite a
GRUNITZKY: few risks and lost their shirt. So streaming has opened up a whole new suite of business opportunities for a generation that is willing to take risk in a different way, because the barriers to entry are not the same. But if we're looking at the high quality productions that you're thinking about, right now the people who are willing to fund these productions are still the Hollywood companies. And so that's what--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

TAIYE SELASI: That's not entirely true. That's entirely true.

CLAUDE Well, let's talk about that. Why is it not true?

GRUNITZKY:

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

TAIYE SELASI: No, no, it's not entirely true. Nothing you say is wholly untrue. It's just not entirely true, in the sense that there's sort of a middle ground. So you can create a piece of content-- you can get a series. Let's call it Claude. You can create Claude the series, and you've got to first decide where-- who's the production company that's going to make Claude. You've got to hire the writers, you do the creative development, then you go to the physical production.

That could all happen, let's say, through a completely independent and independently-financed production company based in Dakar. I'm making this up. And if that company had sufficient funding, they could produce eight episodes-- an entire season by streaming standards-- 13 for network. So you can do eight episodes of Claude with global production values, say 1 million an episode. So 8 is true in there-- two episodes of *Orange is the New Black*.

So you've got your eight episode season, it looks fantastic, you've got word of

mouth you've got a very strategic social media marketing campaign. Now, you sell it into distribution. So you've made Claude. Claude has been made by Claude Limited, a production company based in-- I'm choosing Dakar, because it's a city I love-- and you've now sold it territory by territory. Perhaps you've hired a company like Fremantle to do distribution, but you own the IP.

That's very different than if the writer of Claude, a very plucky Senegalese or [INAUDIBLE] person who wants to do a series in French and [INAUDIBLE] English, creates the content and then sells it directly to the distributor. And they make it and they own it. So I'm saying that that independently financed production company that made Claude and sold it territory by territory, I would argue that they're likely to see a return. But first they've got to take that risk. I agree with you, there's a difference between spending \$400,00 and \$8 million. I know the size of the risk, especially for investors more accustomed to

[AUDIO OUT]

Their returns in oil are not lost on me. And yet the size of the opportunity is not lost on me either.

CLAUDE

GRUNITZKY:

Yeah. I think I get where you're going with this. It's almost as if the world needs to start embracing African stories in a way that many young people in the world have started embracing African music, whether it's Afrobeats or Wizkid or other musicians who are producing this kind of global music that is coming from a local African perspective. And then those local production companies, making TV series like Claude will then be able to sell internationally and see a return on their investment.

TAIYE SELASI:

But you're saying it. Because you've got to do excellently. If Wizkid tracks were somehow shoddily produced, they don't travel the globe. He's a musical genius, but the quality is there. It's also down to the means of production, it's down to technology. So much is making this eminently possible at the moment, which is, I think, the will is gathering, and it's incredibly exciting to see. I'll put it that way.

But I cut you off. Please continue.

CLAUDE

No, because there's a few questions-- I want to get to some of the questions in the

GRUNITZKY: time that we have left. There's a few questions about African pride and African identity that I'm seeing in the Q&A section now. One of them is from Michael Degraf. He says, I'm curious about what Selasi thinks about local languages in the making of African movies. Because it goes to the core of identity and misrepresentations in the media.

And in a similar vein, Jacqueline Bidou says, could Western idolation be the barrier. In Mexico, India, and South Korea, English is taught. But each country teaches their own national and regional languages alongside it. In many African countries, either English or French are the primary language is taught in school. So from a young age, we're taught to believe our own stories can't be told from our own cultural perspective. So I think it's interesting what Michael and Jacquelin are saying--

TAIYE SELASI: Absolutely.

CLAUDE --if we don't value our own identity and our own cultures, then there's always going to be a barrier. Because we're always going to be waiting for foreigners to like us or to accept us.

TAIYE SELASI: Well, I-- and I'm not advocating that at all, do you know what I mean? I think much content needs to be not in English. I think that there is an incredible opportunity for indigenous language content, made possible by the digitization of content production. Absolutely. I would, alongside that observation, position a sentiment that I hold, which is that the English that I speak was taught to me not only by African people but with African values and on the basis of African principles. And I'm not content to imagine that the empire, whose opinions about non-white people have just recently become so very public, the empire that arrived on my parents soil.

If they could have brought their English and sort of rammed it down those throats, I'm not content to accept that the English that comes out of my mouth belongs to them. My English is mine as well. My English is an Africa language, as I am a Africa woman. And that is something that must be sowed, because they cannot be a unidirectional engagement. So I think indigenous languages-- yes, I think recognizing that Africa has embraced English and French and made it its own.

Also yes. I mean, you mentioned Salman Rushdie, who often says the English

[INAUDIBLE] language as well. And if that was not the intention, England shouldn't have come to India. And I believe that very sincerely. So language is a key part, provided we are willing to be I think quite flexible about how we understand the use of language and its relationship with identity. But tried, I love that word-- tried to say that this story, this local story, this indigenous language local story, deserves to be seen by the world. This is where it begins.

CLAUDE

GRUNITZKY:

Yeah. Yeah. I see it. And I'm seeing a comment from another anonymous attendee who also is Nigerian. For some reason, I don't know why Nigerians wanted to be so anonymous these days. But just this filmmaker, who's either a male or female, says as a Nigerian filmmaker living and working in Lagos, a great source of disappointment is how a lot of fellow filmmakers accept a pittance for their content. Netflix is wrong for offering a low price, but I think the problem is with a lot of Nigerian filmmakers themselves. So is that the chicken or the egg? I mean, how do we even start to tackle that question?

TAIYE SELASI:

Oh, no. It's most certainly the fried cutlet. I mean, listen, that pittance should not be offered. There is something deeply flawed for the reasons that I've tried to sort of parse in the offering in the first place. And the tricky thing is to ask creatives who have been waiting so long for this kind of opportunity, who do believe in their work, who do have that pride in their stories, who yearn for their stories to reach global audiences. I think it becomes very, very difficult to ask those critics to say no to the opportunity no matter how demeaning its terms.

Now, I'm not saying that I don't recognize what my anonymous filmmaking Nigerian brother or sister has underlined, I know exactly where that comes from. Because you sort [INAUDIBLE] well, if everybody said no, they would have to raise prices. It's the heart of collective bargaining, and I'm all for it.

But at the same time I try to remember-- I tried to put myself in the shoes of the South African creative, the Nigerian creative, the Kenyan creative, who is accepting fees drastically lower than his or her European counterpart and just egregiously lower than his American one. I try to put myself in the shoes of that creative and to remember that it is the deepest desire, the most heartfelt desire of the storyteller, to have his story told. And with that kind of compassion I try to really reshift my focus to the entity that is making the offer in the first place.

CLAUDE Yeah. Yeah. I'm still kind of wrapping my head around real solutions, as this webinar
GRUNITZKY: series is really about finding solutions so that we can inspire people to take action and create their own ventures or their own production companies and so on.

TAIYE SELASI: Right. Well, listen--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

CLAUDE But there's a question there which I find really interesting, because I've dealt with it
GRUNITZKY: myself, and it goes back to what I was saying about high net worth Africans not wanting to fund content. And the question is, how do you convince investors and governments to fund creatives when they claim they have other competing issues say in health care, and education, et cetera. And it goes back to the bigger question, as in what is the value of culture? What is the value of filmmaking? What is the value of literature? What is the value of the creative industries when everyone feels that Africa has other problems with public health and education that might be more important to tackle first from a government or investor perspective?

TAIYE SELASI: That's interesting. I mean, the value is uncontested. And I also think that the sincerity of-- let me put it this way, of currently sitting African government's commitment to health care and education is contestable. So I think that argument would make a lot more sense if we were looking at context in which health care and education were actually being well funded as opposed to SUV convoys, but that's perhaps a different question for different webinar.

Certainly I think that culture will for the moment, as has been the case in places like India, and South Korea, rely on private capital. I think as you wisely and rightly draw attention to plausible real-world solutions, I think we might have to move away from the notion that African governments are suddenly going to become deeply accountable to the citizens in the first place. I'm talking about currently, not generically speaking. And instead think about whether there are visionary individuals who can play the role in a continental context that we've seen others play elsewhere.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

CLAUDE GRUNITZKY: Yeah. We could talk about this forever. Unfortunately, we're coming to the end of this webinar. But I do want to ask you about three books that are important to you and that you would love to share with this audience. Obviously, I can say that *Ghana Must Go* is the book that you should all go and get and order on Amazon right now. But if you can talk about three books-- and I'm going to need your help, Ari, and also Michelle and Laura at MIT to be able to type the names of these books, if you can, into the chat section, so that all our participants and attendees can actually know about these books that Taiye cares about.

TAIYE SELASI: OK. Well, I could not feel more strongly, as they say about, *Dust*. It's the debut novel of the Kenyan novelist Yvonne Owuor. I'll make sure that you get that properly spelled. And it's just magical. Speaking of a text that is completely opened a part of the world for me, made available a part of the world for me the way that had never been possible before *Dust* is absolutely one of those books for me. Everybody must read it immediately.

And then-- oh, my God, there's so many. There's so many. *Every Day is for the Thief* by Teju Cole was-- I sort have fallen in love with Teju's [INAUDIBLE] protagonist wandering around in open city. And so I was so delighted to find a similar kind of journey in *Every Day is for the Thief*. So that's Teju Cole.

So you've got Yvonne, you've got Teju-- I can only say three? Oh, god.

CLAUDE GRUNITZKY: Only three. And I'm trying to type them as fast as you're speaking into the chat section. So now I'm going to type Teju Coles book.

TAIYE SELASI: I think-- Oh god, oh god, oh god. I think *Stay With Me*. I'm just thinking about things that I've read in the last little while that I've just completely-- Ayo Adebayo, her novel, *Stay With Me*, which is sort of a portrait of a Nigerian marriage, let's say, in distress or under stress, is filmic. If it's not already a series, it must soon become. This is something I would love to find high net worth individual Nigerians-- just, oh, let's make this.

CLAUDE GRUNITZKY: Which book? I'm not familiar with this one. Which book is this?

CLAUDE GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: *Stay With Me*.

CLAUDE OK.

GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: *Stay With Me*

CLAUDE By?

GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: Ayo Adebayo.

CLAUDE OK.

GRUNITZKY:

TAIYE SELASI: Oh, god. Did I say all Nigerians? No, no, I didn't. Oh, I think I [INAUDIBLE]. But yes, *Stay With Me* is gorgeous. *Every Day is for the Thief* is just transporting, and then *Dust* is a flawless book of art. So those are three that just I adore.

CLAUDE Well, that's great. Thank you so much, Taiye, for this talk. It's been a real joy to talk
GRUNITZKY: to you about African storytelling, which obviously is a topic that I've spent my entire adult life promoting. So this is a very, very important.

TAIYE SELASI: Absolutely.

CLAUDE I'm glad we got to kick off our solo webinar series with this talk. And we want to
GRUNITZKY: thank you for that.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

TAIYE SELASI: No, sorry, Claude. I was just going to say, if there are any questions that any of the participants didn't get to ask in this venue, I'm more than willing to field questions on Instagram-- just to say that the conversation should indeed continue. please.

CLAUDE Well, great. That's wonderful. So next Thursday at 12:00 PM Eastern, we have our
GRUNITZKY: next webinar, which is with another Nigerian. For some reason this whole thing might be called the TRUE Africa University Nigeria series, because there are so many Nigerians. And it's going to be with somebody who also is a very, very successful serial entrepreneur in Africa. His name is Iyinoluwa Aboyeji, and he will be talking about the initiatives and investments that are transforming Africa.

We talked a little bit about business today, but he has created two of the most successful companies in Africa and created both of them before he turned 30. And now he's investing in Africa with his fund Future Africa. So that's going to be a very interesting talk about business, and opportunity, and investment, and innovation.

And so, with that, I want to thank the MIT Center for International Studies and the MIT Africa initiative for supporting us in this series. Again, I'm Claude Grunitzky. I'm the founder of TRUE Africa University. And if you want to hear more about us, then you can just go to trueafricauniversity.com. And again, the call to action is to go to Amazon and buy *Ghana Must Go* by Taiye Selasi. Thanks. Wonderful. [INAUDIBLE] afternoon to everyone. Bye.