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Transcontinental Studio Collaboration in the Production of the African--futurist Anthology *Kizazi Moto*

Abstract

This paper explores the production of the animated anthology *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* as a case study for understanding the transnational dynamics and power relations within the global animation industry in the post-colonial context. Utilizing qualitative research based on interviews with key decision makers, the paper examines the production culture, the complexities of identity and representation, and the ideological tensions embedded in the animation tools and processes. Through the interview record, moments of resistance and acceptance emerged, revealing uneven access to resources and the colonial legacies influencing contemporary African animation. The research highlights the need for a critical reassessment of production practices, creative control, the diversity of production crews, as well as the ideological assumptions embedded in animation tools and processes.

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Introduction

Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire was released on Disney+ in 2023. The animated anthology of 10 short films was billed as African content made by and for an African audience.[1] The di-

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1)   Disney Press release: "'Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire' Streaming July 5th Exclusively On Disney+," *Disney Plus Press*, accessed April 24, 2024, https://press.disneyplus.com/news/disney-plus-kizazi-moto-generation--fire-streaming-july-5.

rectors were selected from a call-out for 'fresh new African voices' and the project was pitched to the Walt Disney Company's Europe Middle-East Africa division (EMEA) by the South African animation studio, Triggerfish. The anthology of films resulted from a complex set of transnational collaborations, with the production undertaken by studios across the globe, based in Africa, Europe and North America.

This paper makes use of a qualitative research approach, informed by grounded theory, where insights are allowed to emerge from an iterative and inductive interview process. In-depth and extended interviews were conducted with six key decision makers in the production of *Kizazi Moto*: three animation Directors, two Executive Producers, and two Producers with day-to-day oversight of the production process.[2] The interviews explored how each decision maker made sense of their roles and relations within the broader production culture,[3] as well as their 'distinct relations of personhood'[4] and the context of both contemporary African studio animation and the global animation studio network. Taking inspiration from Nicholas Garnham's view that 'story worlds result not only from the technologies' affordances but also from their creators' assumptions about a medium, technology and an audience',[5] this paper explores the 'constraints and possibilities'[6] that informed choices that were made through the production process, and the contested spaces in which these decisions were taken.

The aim of this paper is to explore the *Kizazi Moto* production as a case study for insights into the operations and power relations that underpin the global animation industry within the enduring legacy of colonialism and imperialism, with a particular focus on the African context. The argument of this paper is that the contending voices of those interviewed for this paper can be understood within the frame of post-colonial theory, within the 'dialectic of cultural struggle',[7] a term that refers to the consumption, distribution and production of popular culture. This paper's focus is solely on latter, where key actors are always, already confronting each other in the field of cultural production.

In his 1972 essay, "External Influences on Broadcasting: Television's Double-Bind," Stuart Hall writes:

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2) Disney has a 'one credit' policy. Many undertook additional roles in the project such as script writing, script editing, concept design and animation.

3) The term 'production culture' as set out by Banks, Conor and Mayer seeks to highlight the 'tension between individuals' agency and the social conditions within which agency is embedded'. Miranda J. Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer, eds., *Production Studies, the Sequel! Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

4) Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood, *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

5) Nicholas Garnham, "Political Economy and Cultural Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 2 (1995), 65.

6) Creativity within constraints: "The balance that media researchers strike between describing media workers as the creators of popular culture and as functionaries in the service of capitalism." Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8.

7) Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays: Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

> There is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the domi-
> nant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose
> and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant
> forms. There are points of resistance; there are also moments of supersession. This is
> the dialectic of cultural struggle.[8]

The views and voices recorded in the interviews undertaken for this paper sit well within Hall's prevailing argument here. Interviewees spoke openly of moments of friction, where identities and representation were contested and where the restrictions of unacknowledged bias were pushed-up against and renegotiated within studio working relationships. The production itself was situated in the context of global competition and the extension of a dominant global corporation's reach into Africa, a process that highlighted pinch points of uneven and unequal access to professional networks, knowledge, intellectual property, and technology.

The animation tools themselves were contested, with several interviewees voicing frustration about what is often dismissed as 'purely technical'[9], pointing to the skewed perspectives and ideological assumptions baked into the software and industry standard processes. Further to this, the importance of the production team and how it is constituted was questioned, as well as the use of service studios, pointing to the need to re-define and acknowledge the importance of crew diversity and for a better understanding of the creative impact of animation workers 'below the line'.[10]

These moments of 'resistance and supersession' that emerged from the interview record were complex and deeply contradictory, with interviewees voicing overlapping and at times competing understandings of Africa, African-ness and by extension notions of, 'centre,' 'power' and 'periphery.' This was particularly pronounced in relation to the role of the South African lead studio, with its own acutely fraught colonial inheritance.

Authenticity (of voices) was an agreed aim for all those interviewed, although there were differences of understanding regarding how this could be achieved and what was really at stake. Despite some degree of scepticism, all spoke enthusiastically about the project's aim to amplify marginalized (African) voices and the ambition to celebrate the diversity of these voices in reclaiming cultural identities — two key tenets of post-colonialism itself.[11] However, perhaps unsurprisingly, interviewees were largely silent in relation to the core corollary of these tenets, namely the dismantling of the oppressive power structures that have (and continue to) silence such voices.

Interviewees were contacted through the author's personal and professional contacts, with subsequent introductions. The resulting familiarity and level of trust between interviewer and interviewee allowed for an informal, open, and discussion-based interview ap-

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8) Ibid., 354.

9) To paraphrase Hall, 'no profound technological revolution is ever in any sense *purely* technical' (2019), 350.

10) *Below the line* refers to crew members who bring the projects vision to life, contrasting with *above the line* 'creatives' who are tasked with directing the projects vision. The latter group usually benefits from significantly better pay and working conditions.

11) Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction: Second Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

proach.[12] The interviews explored the production as a whole (all 10 short films) but focused specifically on three animated films, each with a different location of animation production (Europe, North America and Africa), and animation technique (ranging from 2D to 3D). The Interviews were conducted over Zoom and in-person, with follow-up interviews in some cases and further email communication. The interview questions were open ended, allowing themes to emerge from the discussion.

All interviewee details have been anonymised for this paper. In some cases full anonymity is not possible, given the nature of the project, particularly further up in the production hierarchy. Interviewee names have been replaced with letters of the alphabet: Director A, Producer B, Executive C, etc.

Context Overview
Pitch, Precedent & Oligopoly

In late 2018, the South African animation studio, Triggerfish approached Disney EMEA with the idea for *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire*. Triggerfish is a well-established South African animation studio, specializing in computer generated animation (CGI), with a successful track record of global service studio work and self-initiated feature films. The company's structure is organized around five (White, male) executive partners and a small core team. The company enlarges on a project-by-project basis by hiring contracted employees (numbering over 100 at the peak of *Kizazi Moto* production).

The success of the *Kizazi Moto* pitch to Disney was due to a confluence of favourable factors at local and global scale. This section will detail these factors, situating the project with the view to exploring how this context framed the expectations of key role players and project development. Once Disney EMEA executives were persuaded of the merits of the project, it was necessary for them to pitch the project internally to Disney executives in the USA. There were four key factors that determined the successful internal greenlighting of the project: Walt Disney corporation's strategic business interest in launching Disney+ into Africa, the nature of the corporation's funding cycle, the recruitment of high calibre talent (Oscar winning Director Peter Ramsey as Executive Producer, in particular), and lastly, the financial successes of two important precedents: *Black Panther* (2018) and *Love, Death & Robots* (2019), both were understood to reflect a wider shift in audience appetite.[13]

The financial and critical success of Netflix's animated anthology *Love, Death & Robots* proved that there was an audience for animated short film anthologies for an adult audience. The phenomenal box office success of the feature film, *Black Panther*,[14] demonstrat-

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12) For a discussion of horizontal interview and research approach in production studies see: Vicki Mayer, "Studying Up and F**cking Up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 2 (2008), 141–148, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2008.0007.

13) Executive A (Disney), interview, February 2024.

14) The film made it's production budget ($200 million) back in the 1st week of global release, and was the second highest grossing film that year ($1.3 billion). (Pamela McClintock, "Box Office: 'Black Panther' Becomes Top-Grossing Superhero Film of All Time in U.S.," *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), March 24, 2018,

ed that there was a global audience for Black and African content on, as well as off, screen — with a predominantly Black cast *and* crew. As film historian Wil Haygood notes, 'no Black Director had ever been given such a large amount of money to make a film', and the film was made with an almost all Black cast and a significantly diverse crew.[15]

Furthermore, the Afrofuturism of *Black Panther* was deemed to be a clear precedent for the potential for fictional sci-fi inflected content *about* Africa. This revealed a blurring of genres that impacted on the ways in which *Kizazi Moto* was understood to be not just about Africa but *from* Africa.

A clear distinction should be made between the genre approach of *Black Panther* and that of *Kizazi Moto*. The feature, *Black Panther* was created in the *Afro*-futurist genre, a sub-category of science-fiction centered on the Black experience from the perspective of the African diaspora. Whereas the *Kizazi Moto* anthology was to be *African-futurist* with it's depiction of an imagined Africa viewed expressly from *outside* the Western perspective.[16] It was apparent through the interviews undertaken with key actors in the production of *Kizazi Moto* that subtle inconsistencies and comingling of ideas relating to genre and world views became amplified later on, forming a backdrop that reflected tensions and contested aspects of the production from authorial control of script-writing process to animation studio allocation, explored later in this paper.

As Executive A notes, when it comes to financial greenlighting, 'comps are very important' ('comps' is the industry contraction for 'comparison': a financially favourable precedent).[17] However the most significant factor for the project's greenlighting from Disney's US division was the alignment of Disney EMEA's remit to develop African content with the overall corporation's business strategy at the time. As Executive A explains: "The biggest thing of course, was the streaming investment. The industry was in a risk-friendly phase to some extent at that point."[18] Disney had plans to extend their streaming platform Disney+ into Africa, in the context of what writer James Meek describes as the 'present-day oligopoly in digital media'[19] where streaming firms such as Netflix challenge the 'legacy media conglomerates' (Disney, Disney+ and ABC make up the largest share of this 'legacy' group).[20]

Some background to this shifting oligopoly is instructive here:[21] when Netflix first launched in 2007, Disney had licenced much of its content to the, then up-and-coming,

accessed December 9, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/box-office-black--panther-becomes-top-grossing-superhero-film-all-time-us-1097101/).

15) Wil Haygood, *Colorization: One Hundred Years of Black Films in a White World*, First edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), 383–384.

16) The term African-futurism was coined by Nnedi Okorafor. See: Nnedi Okorafor, "Nnedi Okorafor: Sci-Fi Stories That Imagine a Future Africa | TED Talk," accessed April 29, 2024, https://www.ted.com/talks/nnedi_okorafor_sci_fi_stories_that_imagine_a_future_africa.

17) Executive A (Disney), Interview, 2024.

18) Ibid.

19) James Meek, *London Review of Books*, accessed January 2024, https://www.lrb.co.uk/podcasts-and-videos/videos/bookshop-events-films/james-meek-dreams-of-leaving-and-remaining.

20) The remainder is comprised of Paramount, Paramount+ and CBS, Channel 5 in the UK; Comcast (Peacock) and NBC, along with the UK Sky channels; Warner Bros Discovery, which as well as streaming via Max now controls CNN. (Meek, 2024).

21) To add tenor to this picture, Meek likens the Disney-Netflix 'face-off' to the fictionalized struggle between Gojo and Waystar that plays out towards the end of HBO's 2018 Series, *Succession*, (Meek, 2024).

streaming firm.[22] Disney CEO, Bob Iger, later spoke of this 'short-sightedness' in not identifying Netflix as a competitive adversary and by not recognizing streaming as an existential threat to the corporation in its traditional form: 'we decided at the time that we would stop licensing to Netflix and do it ourselves.'[23] Consequently, Disney's streaming platform was launched into Europe and America in 2019 with the ambition to expand globally by 2022. With this global push came the increasing appetite for discovering 'new talent' and 'new voices' globally.[24] This is the slipstream that Triggerfish and Disney EMEA identified: "Our creative ambitions aligned with the launch of streaming and the greater investment in original content. We used that opportunity to get Kizazi through."[25]

The African Animation Studio Context
Service Studios & Freelance Labour

The title *Kizazi Moto*, is derived from Swahili, (*Generation Fire* is the English translation). 'Moto' is the word for fire in several African languages, intended to capture 'the spirit of the project coming from several countries across the continent'.[26]

The project began with an open call for African Directors to pitch their script ideas. Triggerfish and Disney received 63 responses from which 10 films were selected (a total of 13 Directors). Towards the end of the pre-production and script development phase, Triggerfish, as the lead animation studio on the project, undertook the process of allocating each Director to an animation studio for the production phase (referred to in the industry as a 'service studio'). The intention had been to use African studios for the production phase, however due to a series of factors outlined below, only half of the 10 films were ultimately allocated to studios within Africa of which four were allocated to studios in South Africa, and one to a studio in Egypt. The reasons behind the decision to allocate service studios in this way is illuminating in what it can reveal about the contemporary African studio context and the shape of the global studio network.

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22) Most notably, Disney's Marvel content following Marvel's acquisition in 2006 as well as content from Disney's later acquisition of Pixar, Lucas Film, FX, Hulu and Fox Entertainment, (Meek, 2024).

23) "As Disney Turns 100, Its Business Is on a Rollercoaster Ride," *The Economist*, accessed April, 24, 2024, https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/01/19/as-disney-turns-100-its-business-is-on-a-rollercoaster-ride.

24) In 2022, Disney+ added 42 additional countries and 11 territories in Africa, Europe and West Asia (https://variety.com/2022/digital/news/disney-plus-march-2022-earnings-1235264311/) Todd Spangler, "Disney+ Powers to Nearly 138 Million Subscribers, Beating Streaming Expectations for March Quarter," *Variety* (blog), May 11, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/digital/news/disney-plus-march-2022-earnings-1235264311/.

25) Executive A (Disney), Interview, 2024.

26) Tendayi Nyeke quoted in SYFY Official Site. Josh Weiss, "Disney+ to Showcase African Creators with 'Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire' Sci-Fi Anthology," *syfy*, June 17, 2021, accessed April 24, 2024, https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/kizazi-moto-generation-fire-disney-plus.

Film Title	Production Company	Lead Studio	Service Studio	Main country of animation production
First Totem Problems	Disney	Triggerfish	Giraffics	Egypt
Surf Sangoma	Disney	Triggerfish	Chocolate Tribe Motif Triggerfish	South Africa
Stardust	Disney	Triggerfish	Triggerfish	South Africa
Herderboy	Disney	Triggerfish	Triggerfish	South Africa
Moremi	Disney	Triggerfish	Lucan	South Africa
Mkhuzi	Disney	Triggerfish	Studio Meala	Ireland
Hatima	Disney	Triggerfish	Studio Meala	Ireland
Mukudzei	Disney	Triggerfish	Saturday Animation Allula Animation	Canada
You Give Me Heart	Disney	Triggerfish	Portfolio Entertainment	Canada
Enkai	Disney	Triggerfish	Blink Industries	United Kingdom

Africa's transnational animation industry connections are weak.[27] Beyond national borders, African studios are more likely to connect with other parts of the world than with other African countries. This lack of a robust intra-African studio network was a key factor in the decision to allocate service studios to those based outside the continent. As Producer A and Producer B noted, there are significant challenges that skew the growth and development of a more inward facing Africa animation industry, such as high software associated costs, particularly in relation to digital 3D animation, where a complex series of interwoven stages and workflows are formalized into a standard of practice (known as 'the pipeline'). "Through this project we've met a lot of cool people doing things on the continent [African], but most are working with free software because things like Maya or training in Houdini are insanely expensive… Software is the biggest barrier to entry and you need to conform with a certain pipeline to make it work."[28] Furthermore, these patterns are perpetuated by the industry's reliance on reputation and existing networks: "It's hard if you don't know the studios and they don't have a reputation to fall back on. It's hard to know if they can pull it off or not because you don't see a lot of animated features or even shorts coming out of Africa. I don't think the culture is there yet. The barrier to entry is so high."[29]

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27) "It is hard to imagine quite how limited the interaction is, in this [media production] space." Producer A, Interview, February 20, 2024.
28) Producer A, Interview, February 28, 2024.
29) Producer B, Interview, 2024.

In an attempt to build African studio connections through the project, a questionnaire focused on quality assurance (QA) was sent out to over 100 African animation studios, asking them to self-report on organizational issues such as how many people worked regularly in the studio, to equipment, IT infrastructure, free-lance base, and data protection (the latter being a core priority for Disney). [30] The results of the brief survey were presented to Triggerfish and Disney EMEA and the recommendation was that (outside of South Africa), only one of the studios surveyed would fit the requirements (namely Giraffics Studio in Egypt). As Executive B notes "most African studios were too small. They did not have access to enough crew, even if they drew on their pool of freelancers. Most studios were about 12 people and each short needed about 60 and and a lot of them wouldn't comply to Disney security requirements, and all sorts of things like that." [31]

Several interviewees questioned how genuine an attempt the survey had been in reaching out to animation studios on the continent, and some questioned how clear this method of studio appointment had been made to the Directors at the outset of the project. More than one Director stated that there had been suggestions in the initial stages, that their own studio would be considered for the production of their film "but after signing the contract it was like 'Nah bra, this is the studio you'll be working with." [32] Others suggested that assistance could have been provided to studios in order to meet the QA and data protection standards required. Several interviewees pointed to the commercial nature of the project, the current African industry context, and potential for financial risks: "things could have gone really, really wrong." [33] and as Executive A noted, from Disney's perspective they were already taking a risk with Triggerfish (one of the continent's most established studios), "Triggerfish had done a lot of great service work…but we were kind of taking a risk in terms of their original stuff." [34]

In addition to this there was pressure on the lead studio to make timely decisions in terms of service studio allocation. As Executive B explains, the funding window for the project was tight, with implications for time available to establish connections with other African countries that were absent or undeveloped: "We were planning on doing them all on the continent. It was very ambitious, but [Disney] were like, 'We want to get this going quickly". [35] Executive A explains the view from Disney was: "The focus was backing the director/creator's vision with strong talent/studios and to do as much of the production in the [African] continent while taking into account current constraints of budget, timeline and available expertise [within Africa]." [36]

Ultimately, as a commercial venture, cost was the significant factor in studio allocation and while African studios could provide relatively cheap studio services in terms of labour, [37]

30) A postgraduate student from Witwatersrand University was tasked with managing the questionnaire and compiling the results.
31) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.
32) Director B, Interview, 2024.
33) Producer A, Interview, 2024.
34) Executive A (Disney), Interview, 2024
35) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.
36) Executive A (Disney), Email correspondence, 2024.
37) "We have a cheaper salary base" (Executive B, Interview, 2024).

studios in Canada, France, the UK, and Ireland were able to compete due to their ability to access state tax credit incentives.[38] This was decisive.[39]

It is worth noting that although state tax credit incentives do exist in South Africa, Triggerfish, the lead studio on the project was not eligible to access them. The state incentives are designed as affirmative action to promote groups previously disadvantaged under the Apartheid regime[40] and despite attempts to modify and extend the company leadership, as set out by Executive B's interview, Triggerfish remains a White, male-led company therefore unable to access state support in this regard. Triggerfish has however more recently opened an office in Ireland and is able to access tax credits through the Irish Government.[41]

The South African Studio Landscape

Following the results of the African studio questionnaire, the option had initially been explored to allocate all films to service studios within South Africa for the projection phase. The country's freelance labour base, however, on which the South African animation industry depends, would not have had capacity to sustain this scale of project,[42] as the same pool of contracted labour circulates between the country's animation studios on a project-by-project basis; "We all use the same people." [43]

The growth and development of this limited labour pool in South Africa is frustrated by a series of cascading and mutually compounding factors, namely the lack of sufficient full-time employment to support skill development and specialism (on which the growth of an animation industry depends), as well as a global 'brain drain' of skilled labour. As Producer A notes, "There isn't a fulltime employer for people that work in the animation industry because there's not enough work being commissioned." This lack of job security forces a flattening of the specialized skill base: "you'll see a lot of people working on two sides of the pipeline… on upfront design or modelling and then on lighting or surfacing or comp. That way they know at least they have two contracts per project."[44] The precarious nature of the industry additionally undermines standard career progression. Freelancers are tempted to work for international studios remotely, getting paid in foreign curren-

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38) For example, in France, this incentive amounts up to: "30% or 40%, of the qualifying expenditures incurred, and can total a maximum of €30 million per project," "The Tax Rebate for International Productions (TRIP)," *CNC*, accessed April 29, 2024, https://www.cnc.fr/web/en/tax-rebate/the-tax-rebate-for-international-productions-trip_190742.

39) Executive A (Disney), Interview, 2024.

40) See Stefano Ponte, Simon Roberts, and Lance Van Sittert, "'Black Economic Empowerment,' Business and the State in South Africa," *Development and Change* 38, no. 5 (2007), 933–955, and "SA Film & TV Production and Co-Production (SA Film) — The Department of Trade Industry and Competition," May 15, 2019, http://www.thedtic.gov.za/financial-and-non-financial-support/incentives/film-incentive/sa-film-tv-production-and-co-production-sa-film/.

41) Some of the accounts and payments for Kizazi Moto were routed via Triggerfish's Irish office.

42) Particularly as companies like Triggerfish were already working on other productions at the same time, for example. *AAu's Song* (2023, Disney+).

43) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.

44) Producer A, Interview, 2024.

cies that have a favourable exchange rate with the South African Rand. In doing so, they are often likely to accept roles that are below their grade.[45]

To give additional context, it is worth noting that the original pitch for the *Kizazi Moto* project had been motivated, in part with the aim of African industry capacity building.[46] Disney EMEA and Triggerfish had previously collaborated on a project to support the development of African script writers.[47] This script writing incubator had been remarkably successful[48] and there was the resulting ambition on behalf of executives from both companies to work together to support the development of African Directors.[49] As such, the initial *Kizazi Moto* pitch had included training for Directors, with budgeting for interns (in an attempt to build a culture around these new voices). During the pitching and greenlighting process, this training arm of the project was largely dropped as it was deemed "an expensive part of the production that doesn't necessarily add to the final product."[50]

This initial thrust for the project to provide a basis for broader-based industry capacity building and training had a legacy: it remained in the minds of the Directors and other members of the production team as an ambition, providing a backdrop for some of the tensions and contestations that surfaced around the projects purpose: "This is what you guys sold, you sold this as an African project. So I said, 'you better deliver on that!'"[51]

Project Organization: *People/Team/Diversity*

During the early pre-production phase, it was clear that the scale and global complexity of the project required the recruitment of further members of the senior production team. At full tilt the project "had over 1000 contracts across the globe… we'd invoice Disney separately in Euros, Rands, Dollars, get money into different accounts and then we'd pay-out depending on where people were based. And then there'd be a tank in the exchange rate![52] It was super complex!"[53]

During the recruitment phase Triggerfish was keenly aware of the need to redress the gender imbalance within the production. The selection of directors from the call-out had resulted in only two female directors out of the 13. "We struggled to find female directors because many of them were super busy. There are less women directors to start with and those that had won awards were already noticed and employed."[54] There was a conscious

45) "They are happy to take a Junior job because they get paid like Seniors would in SA, they're like, 'its so much less hours and I get paid so much more money'," (Producer A, 2024).

46) "A big part of it was our initial collaboration with Triggerfish," (Executive A, Interview, 2024).

47) *Story Lab* (2015) — an African script writing incubator. Georg Szalai, "South African Animation Studio Triggerfish Launches Story Lab With Disney Support," *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), July, 15, 2015.

48) Resulting in commissions from Netflix and Disney: *Kiya and the Kimoja Heroes*, and *Supa Team 4* (2023).

49) "We still had the problem that when directors come on board they usually want to change the script anyway and we don't get many opportunities to train directors"(Executive B, Interview, 2024).

50) Executive B (Triggerfish) and Executive A (Disney) noted that despite this, the team did offer a degree of training and mentoring for directors during the project.

51) Director B, Interview, 2024.

52) 'Tank', meaning a sudden drop or decline in the currency exchange rate.

53) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.

54) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.

push to redress this gender imbalance by recruiting female script writers, producers and into other key creative roles.

The project was also an opportunity to recruit with a broader view to diversity within Triggerfish itself. "I knew I wanted more development execs as Triggerfish does have a history of being White, male [led]."[55] Tendayi Nyeke, was recruited as executive Producer and two experienced Senior Producers were brought on to the project: Leanne Preston Cortez and Kaya Kuhn, as well as line-producer Larney de Swardt. Triggerfish had been keen to recruit Nyeke for some time, but it was only with the budget stability of Disney funding that Triggerfish was able to create an attractive full-time post with her in mind.[56]

There was a push for diversity from the Directors themselves: "Early on, the team starts ramping up. In the beginning it's just you and a concept artist and then suddenly, it's just like 12 people got hired, and not one of them was black!"[57] Producers and Directors spoke insightfully about the benefits of crew diversity as well as the significant barriers to achieving it. Interviewees noted that existing networks and working relationships within the industry are "globally… still very Male and very White"[58] and more narrowly the context of the South African studio industry, still deeply implicated in the legacies of racial inequality, as well as the lack of development opportunities to strengthen an African industry network.

Producer A and Director A spoke of how the push for diversity within the crew raised a debate regarding the understanding of diversity as a guiding principle, extending beyond race to include gender identity and sexual orientation, allowing for an African-futurist project to be responsive and responsible to the breadth of African experience.[59] Producer A noted that unlike South Africa, where respect for freedom of sexual orientation and gender identity are enshrined in the Bill of Rights, in many African countries (where some directors were based), homosexuality is oftentimes illegal and gender identities strictly policed.

Friction in Production:
Race, Bias, and Studio Cultures

Within *Kizazi Moto's* complex and intricate production process there were points of synergy between individuals and studios and there were points of friction. This section focuses further on examining the sources of friction and ways that they were mitigated and understood, with the purpose of further elucidating aspects of the local and global landscape that these actors had to navigate. The decision not to focus on the many, fruitful points of synergy between key actors of this extraordinary project is in no way intended to under-

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55) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.
56) Nyeke was later headhunted by Netflix and she left Triggerfish before the completion of *Kizazi Moto.*
57) Director A, Interview, February 9, 2024.
58) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.
59) See, for example: Bisi Alimi, "If You Say Being Gay Is Not African, You Don't Know Your History," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2015, sec. opinion, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/09/being-gay-african-history-homosexuality-christianity.

mine or deny their existence. It is purely that points of discord are likely to be more help-ful to this paper's purpose: the illumination of aspects of the constraints and barriers of the transnational studio landscape from an African, post-colonial perspective.

Tensions are inherent in the production process and particularly in productions of transnational nature,[60] and the particular tenor of these tensions were evident in commu-nications between studio, Director and production team. Directors came up against a 'narrowed' understanding of racism, where 'proper racism is thought of in the past tense' or even 'frozen.'[61] Directors and Producers pointed to perceived levels of presumed supe-riority, miscommunication, and at times, severely biased expectations of African creatives and crew:

> I don't think we were what they [the studios] expected. They were expecting 'signed for'[62] Africans, you know, 'simple,' not people who are more skilled than their entire studio put together.[63]
> We needed to protect African directors more and push for their vision against that kind of white saviourism colonialism bullshit that comes in [the form of] 'we know better than you because … you're just a primitive African,'[64]

All three directors interviewed and those on the production team related moments when they felt dismissed and made to feel as if they were complaining, particularly when making the case for diversity on their team:

> It took a long time for people to see the value of brining Africans and Afro diaspo-rans into the project.[65]
> It isn't about charity. It is necessary if you want to create an authentic film and for it to have a unique quality, we need to bring the people into the room who can repre-sent the culture and the tones we are trying to tap into.[66]

In many instances there was frustration with the inability of studios to acknowledge bias inherent in the very tools of contemporary animation making. The digital realisation of character hair and skin tone were sources of friction.[67] Director A spoke of frustrated communication with members of their production team regarding the main character's

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60) For a discussion of this and exploration of tensions inherent in transnational (film) productions see Jane Landman, "'Not in Kansas Anymore:' Transnational Collaboration in Television Science Fiction Produc-tion," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 140–153. And more generally Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Priceton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
61) Alana Lentin, "Racism in public or public racism: doing racism in 'post-racial times'," *Ethnic and racial Stu-dies* 39, no. 1 (2016), 33–48.
62) i.e. tokenism: 'signing on behalf of others.'
63) Director B, Interview, 2024.
64) Producer B, Interview, 2024.
65) Director A, Interview, 2024.
66) Director C, Interview, 2024.
67) "If you spoke to every Director, they would all have their own freak out about this!" (Producer A, Interview, 2024).

skin colour and tone. The concept art and design called for dark skin tones of the characters, in-keeping with the setting and context of the film's story but the reply from the lighting supervisor had been, 'no we can't do this', and the Director was asked to make the character lighter in skin tone. Producer A spoke of how they resorted to tasking their project manager to seek out online tutorials on lighting that could be shared with the technical lighting team. Producer A also resorted to bringing in precedents such as the Disney/Pixar feature *Soul* (2020) to evidence that the lighting of dark-skinned characters for animation was entirely, technically possible. Another Director reported on how they discovered that their character's body shape had been changed without them being notified. The female character had lost her curves and hips due to a freelance designer on the project thinking that it would be best to 'slim her down', based on (unexamined and presumed to be 'neutral') aesthetic choices. Similarly, the Directors came up against technical teams who presumed the conventions of the animation process to be neutral. When developing animation for characters with African hair textures, an interviewee reported frustratedly that "every time they came back with 'no but the polygons and the this and that, or it's too much render'. And I was like, it is hair! How can you tell me this!?"[68]

Another area of friction developed around the conventions and established norms of the 3D animation pipeline. One experienced industry interviewee explained that there is markedly more rigidity in the more established studios and that any project of this kind would need to navigate this. What was different about *Kizazi Moto* was that the Directors felt that the lack of general awareness of colonial legacies and assumptions muddied the communication with their service studios on the production at times. Directors' creative decisions were mis-interpreted as power struggles (they were made to feel that they were complaining) thereby undermining the ability for the team to arrive at creative solutions and an agreed point of view. As one interviewee noted, when flexibility was requested or unconventional routes suggested, the response was often: "No you just don't know how to do things properly, this is how it's done, this is how it's always been done and we have the money to do it that way."[69] An example was given where a studio, working with the software *Unreal Engine* pushed back on the directors and their team with regards to what was visually possible, "They were pushing us in terms of what Unreal could and couldn't do. They couldn't achieve a look for the effects for [the film]". The Producer's solution was to bring in the studio run by the Directors of the film, based in Africa. "We said to the Director's studio: 'whatever you can fix in comp, do it, here's some money, have fun'. And they kit-bashed stuff and hacked it and got what they wanted. Because they weren't trying to follow some big studio pipeline."[70]

Directors and Producers noted that smaller European studios and women-led studios demonstrated more flexibility and were more willing to take creative risks. Whereas the more established, South African studio, Triggerfish[71] was considerably more rigid, keen to

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68) Producer A, Interview, 2024.
69) Director B, Interview, 2024.
70) Producer A, Interview, 2024.
71) "Triggerfish is White, male, and comes from a very privileged blind spot whereas when working with our Ugandan studios, our female led studios, our small studios who've had to like fight a little bit harder, they are a lot more flexible." (Producer A, 2024).

fit in with the established, global industry pipeline:[72] "So when [the director] came in and he's used to running his 'wild west' studio [in Africa]… he'd want something that he knew was quick and easy to do if you didn't do it by the Triggerfish book. He came up against quite a lot of 'No you can't do it that way.'"[73]

Executive B noted that perceptions of studio rigidity should be understood in relation to the global studio context and the nature of anthology animation projects in general, where each short film is treated as if it is a singular unit 'but the budget and pipelines don't necessarily account for that.'[74] Executive B noted that Triggerfish comes from a feature film background, where artists specialise in a particular area, "so it's not always possible to hack something together like a smaller studio can, where everyone is a generalist." In addition, many of the international studios on the project came from a TV background "where the turnaround is much faster and each stage is locked off without any chance of going back, compared to the Kizazi project, where we did multiple versions of just the animatic, for example"[75] Executive B also noted that the majority of the directors on the project "were first time directors, so [lack of experience] could also have accounted for some of the friction and frustrations and decisions made. They [the Directors] already all felt a huge amount of responsibility to deliver something good and worthwhile, so although working with European studios must have affected the end results of course, I'm not sure we would've managed working with local studios as well."[76]

Authorial Control

When undertaking interviews, it had been expected that there would be reports of friction regarding the script development and overall narrative control of the short films, given the nature of the project: African content and creatives being commissioned by a global media conglomerate, mediated by a studio within Africa that has not yet meaningfully challenged its roots in the residual privileges of apartheid. Contestations of authorial control, however, were not raised by any of the interviewees. When asked directly, many even went so far as to say that there 'was no brief' from Disney.[77] In addition, interviewees spoke openly of the support, particularly from individuals within Disney EMEA in delivering 'their vision as directors', insisting that Disney was 'hands-off' regarding the content, form and story-telling structure of each short film: "They organized a lot of sessions, like every week it was a new person saying how they wanted us to be more authentic to the culture and whatnot. They enforced that repeatedly until it actually went through our skulls that they were not trying to make us make 'Disney Africa' but [rather to] tell our own stories."[78]

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72) "[they say] this is how it is done overseas so this is how we should be doing it" (Producer B, 2024).

73) Director B, Interview, 2024.

74) Singular units are the way feature films are developed as opposed to episodes (tv series) where certain aspects are repeated and re-used.

75) Executive B, Email correspondence, November 2024.

76) Executive B, Email, 2024.

77) "It was an open brief. I mean, obviously with the African vision. But we did want it to be optimistic because that's Disney's brand, you know, and there's a lot of dystopian stuff out there." (Executive B, Interview, 2024)

78) Director B, Interview, 2024.

What is striking, however is the marked similarities in form, content, thematic and narrative approach of each of the 10 short films. As one Director notes, 'There are so many similarities between topics and themes of the films! But this was not planned because we were actually working in silos!'[79] Each film production team had worked in isolation from one another with the aim of preventing any cross pollination between the films. However, most of the 10 films share recurring themes with archetypal characters and individualist narrative arcs: hero's journey, coming-of-age, magical children proving themselves against the odds to an older generation (featuring strong female, grandparent, ancestral supporting characters). In addition, it is striking that none of the 10 central, pubescent characters were written to explore sexual orientation or gender identity — themes now increasingly common in 'coming of age' popular narratives and in media.[80] This lack is particularly marked given the attempts made to include strong, often older (though only cis/heteronormative) female characters, as well as the fact that South Africa (where lead studio Triggerfish is based) is a bastion and regional exception in terms of queer rights and protections. [81]

What were, then, the processes or mechanisms by which this degree of homogeneity arose? When asked directly, interviewees referred to the initial pitch for a story that had been brought by the Directors themselves to Triggerfish and Disney. It is not clear therefore, whether in response the call-out for a 'Disney' pitch, directors self-censored in relation to their anticipation, perhaps unfounded, of Disney's expectations of 'African content' and fashioning them after successful precedents. Or whether perceptions of conservative religious views held by some key role players within the lead studio or the socially conservative nature of the global media corporation inadvertently had a dampening effect through the initial selection of scripts. As Executive B points out, there was indeed a project brief given to the Directors, albeit one that emerged through the form of script revisions, production comments and editing advice. "We did want it to be optimistic because that's Disney's brand."[82] "[Directors] were told it had to be aspirational, and it had to be Afrofuturism. They were all under the same creative team. They all got notes from this same team so of course that will carry through."[83] Each project, was guided and under the direct control of a central creative executive production team: "Some of the scripts, went through up to 17 drafts!"[84]

Executive B explains, "We asked a lot of questions, but most [script] changes were aimed at pushing the films further apart. The editorial advice we gave was…to make sure their intentions for their stories were coming across to an audience."[85] It should be asked

79) Director B, Interview, 2024.

80) "2022 GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index | GLAAD," *glaad*, October 13, 2022, accessed December 4, 2024, https://glaad.org/sri/2022/.

81) South Africa's Constitution is the first in the world to prohibit unfair discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. It thereby guarantees equality for gay and lesbian people. ('Gay and Lesbian Rights'). See also: Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, 1. ed. (paperback) (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

82) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.

83) Producer B, Interview, 2024.

84) Executive B (Triggerfish), Interview, 2024.

85) Executive B (Triggerfish), Email correspondence, 2024.

then, how was this 'audience' defined? In earlier sections of this paper, it was noted that the critical and financial success of the feature film *Black Panther* (2018) had been an important precedent and supportive contextual factor in Disney's greenlighting of the budget for *Kizazi Moto*. It is instructive here, to revisit this and note, as Executive Producer A explained: "One of the things that helped was the success of Black Panther with *US audiences*"[86] (emphasis added). If North American audiences are the yardstick for success for the corporation[87] this may indeed have filtered down into the selection, pre-production, production and post-production processes, compromising the very impetus of an African futurist project.

Given that Directors did not raise concern regarding their authorial control as such, shows that there is a broader scope of creative control that needs to be acknowledged that includes the composition and site of the animation production itself: the impact and creativity of 'below the line'[88] workers, as well as the world views and power relations that often serve as interruptions or at least complications in communication between Director, crew and studio.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the frictions and contestations within the production of *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire*, as an attempt to better understand the way that contemporary media practitioners navigate the animation production landscape from an African perspective in a global, transnational context. Unpicking points of tension helped zoom-in on particular aspects of the transnational animation production terrain, it's barriers and possibilities, in the hope that patterns of labour circulation and meaning-making can be better questioned and understood. As previously noted, this focus should not be taken to suggest that the *Kizazi Moto* project was not also teeming with bold and deeply creative working connections (to which all interviewees testified). Indeed, between the release date of the animated anthology and the writing of this paper, several African Directors from the project have had further projects commissioned and some intra-African networks and connections that developed through the *Kizazi Moto* production are likely to gather more support as a result. In South Africa, Triggerfish (with continued calls for it to decolonize) performs the thankless task of pushing projects like *Kizazi Moto* forward, clearing a path for those who are already challenging the studio's dominance, a burgeoning Pan-African grouping of young media makers — some of whom were interviewed for this paper.

The paper has argued that the contending voices in the interview record can be understood within the frame of post-colonial theory within a 'dialectic of cultural struggle,' which, as Stuart Hall writes, "goes on continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and

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86) Executive A (Disney), Interview, 2024.

87) See: Malou Van Rooij, "Carefully Constructed Yet Curiously Real: How Major American Animation Studios Generate Empathy Through a Shared Style of Character Design," *Animation* 14, no. 3 (2019), 191–206, https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847719875071.

88) For more on this term and debate specific to the field of animation, see Sabine Heller, "Below-the-line creativity and authorship in animation: the reality of animation production," *Revue française des sciences de l'information et de la communication*, no. 18 (2019).

acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant bat-tlefield. A battlefield where no once- for- all victories are obtained but where there are al-ways strategic positions to be won and lost."[89] This paper has highlighted moments of 're-sistance' and 'acceptance' around strategic positions of representation and authorial control, in the hope of identifying more precise nodes where inequality and colonial lega-cies can be challenged within animation production. The paper aims to point out particu-lar barriers to change as areas for further research, namely to question: the 'neutrality' of the tools and processes of animation making (technical, software, pipeline), the nature and composition of production crew, and the allocation of service studios (working rela-tionships and a re-evaluation of creative control), as well as further study into animation specific cultural circuits.

Contending ideas and imaginings about Africa and African-ness[90] framed both the context and focus of the *Kizazi Moto* production. The interview record reveals how over-lapping concepts of identities, assumptions and biases underpinned the relationships that shaped the production process, further complicating and contesting ideas of an interna-tional division of cultural labour.[91] The billing of the *Kizazi Moto* project as African, was a core orientating focus for the project and for those involved in its creative development. The slippage between the ambitions and frictions inherent in this project can be read in the space between the two following two quotes:

> I don't think it really matters where production takes place — US productions are of-ten outsourced to the East. For [*Kizazi Moto*], an African studio pitched the project and produced the project. Some of the work was outsourced to international studios, sure, but the creators[/Directors] were all African and that was what made it African.[92]
> Initially I'd been hoping to work with a studio on the [African] continent, so for the decision for the… production and the money to go externally to Europe, I was very upset by that. I think I had to spend a couple of days thinking about how I fit into new neo-colonial structures.[93]

One voice speaks of the compromises necessary to build projects of this scale within the limits of the current industry landscape, and the other calls for the need to push up against the legacies that have formed this landscape, demanding change, in keeping with the titular expectations of the projects creators, "We titled it Generation Fire…because it was this new generation of film makers kind of looking back at the past and where they came from."[94]

89) Hall, Stuart, 2019.
90) For more detailed discussion on these interconnected images and imaginings see Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004), 347–372, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-347.
91) A term coined and explored by Toby Miller in Toby Miller, "The New International Division of Cultural La-bor Revisited," *Revista ICONO14: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Tecnologías Emergentes* 14, no. 2 (2016), 97, https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v14i2.992.
92) Executive B, Interview, 2024.
93) Director C, Interview, 2024.
94) Executive B, Interview, 2024.

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Biography

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