

Writers Against the Bullying of Otosirieze Obi-Young and the Obfuscation of Truth

In light of recent tweets and threads circulating about the former Deputy Editor of Brittle Paper and the resistance to what many consider a muzzling of truth, we, his colleagues and friends, would like to make a few things clear:

1. We have worked with Otosirieze Obi-Young for years, and never have we felt disrespected nor stifled by him.
2. We know of, and have often celebrated, his firm commitment to diversifying the literary scene, giving young writers visibility, his efforts to make sure that prizes think of more writers than the already-known, especially those writers living on the continent; his push for the establishment of the Brittle Paper Awards is one example of concrete ways in which this commitment has been put to work. On social media, we have seen him talk passionately and with deep knowledge, about the state of African writing and what needs to be done to enhance it, and this was one of the main reasons that he was invited to be part of the team at Brittle Paper, a decision that—and we all saw this over years—transformed that space into a vibrant literary parlour.
3. And so we are shocked at the things being said about his character, conjectures made without specifics, news reports being released referring to him as “a writer”, as though he were merely a nonconsequential and disruptive employee, and it is clear to us that there is an intentional obfuscation of truth and an attempt at derailing a difficult but necessary conversation by way of not only smearing Otosirieze, but also undermining his work and position. Here is a writer and editor who judged the Miles Morland Scholarship, Africa's biggest, and serves as a judge for the Gerald Kraak, Africa's prize for human rights in the arts, a writer who won a Future Award, was named one of 100 most influential Nigerians, a major advocate for young writers and queer writers--and yet he is belittled in the media, reports going out where Ainehi Egoro was reached out to for comments but he was not. These are the tools of gate-keepers and establishments, steeped as they are in classism: to demean and to belittle.
4. We condemn, strongly, the muzzling of truth in a literary space that a lot of Africans, frustrated by often violent, often despotic systems, saw as a rare bastion of truth and free speech. We have read all ensuing statements and the reasons given as to why Otosirieze's post was deleted are unsatisfactory and, considering the weight of what the post had reported on and the power that its subjects possess, unacceptable. It is not surprising, then, that Otosirieze received, after the post was taken down, harsh criticism from the reading public; it is welcome in fact, seeing as we want a cultural and political space where custodians of institutions are held accountable. In that vein, it is not surprising that he

would want to clarify, and distance himself from the failing in judgment of his employer, Ainehi Egoro. The overwhelming support he has received from young writers and Nigerians is proof that we are all fed up with oppressive dynasties and the cultural gatekeepers that enable them.

5. We wonder why the post remains deleted from Brittle Paper's site at the time of drafting this, days later. There are things about which we can be silent but an ethnically-charged gang-rape threat is not one of those things and the choice to delete that post, and to keep it that way, deleted, shows clearly that Brittle Paper has picked a side and that side is the aggressor's. Intentions are irrelevant in this context; only actions and effect are.
6. We condemn, strongly, this flexing of power whereby an employer, Ainehi Egoro, disregards her employee, ousting him from a space to which he had contributed a lot, and this without as much as an email or terms. This is a further muzzling of dissent and we cannot accept corporate cliches in a cultural space where we have oftentimes spoken out against the soullessness and oppression of corporations. Otosirizee was treated disrespectfully, without dignity, as someone easily dispensable--and nobody deserves to be treated that way. That move was abusive and was an unjust flexing of power.
7. We clarify that this is not a call for a boycott of Brittle Paper, a literary space we all believed in and had high hopes for, but we firmly reject this notion that to push back against what is clearly a muzzling of truth and a suppressive use of power is tantamount to a reckless drive to tear down institutions. The peddlers of this theory are dishonest. We see through you, through this: another form of truth-suppression, the use of your elevated voices and positions in the derailing of resistance. We are aware that this is a matter of class and position; a quick glance at the sheer outrage of younger writers and readers, dissatisfied with the failures of our political and cultural institutions, proves this. We condemn the shameless character-smearing that people in positions of power within the literary scene have gone on. We hope that everybody can look at the position they have taken today years down and be proud of themselves.
8. We believe that this issue is not about Brittle Paper or its founder or former deputy editor, but about the freedom of journalists and writers to publish the truth and name and shame evil without fear of being silenced, even as we insist that our colleague and friend, Otosirizee Obi-Young, was treated unjustly by his former employer, Ainehi Egoro, and that in obfuscating truth and misrepresenting (and un-representing) him, the literary establishment has acted reprehensibly and failed us all.

Signed:

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