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The Privilege of Editing #WhoOwnsTheProblem: Remembering Pius Adesanmi

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In January 2011, I sat in a small yellow classroom with no windows, emblematic of Carleton University's Southam Hall, with the syllabus for AFRI1001 in front of me. This was only the second semester of my first year at Carleton and my first introduction to Pius Adesanmi. Though I didn't know it, Pius was already a household name in African literature, already a "cultural commentator", already delivering keynote lectures at conferences, art galleries and various other institutions around the world. Incidentally, he went on in those four months to show me many other things I didn't know, about Africa, its arts and its formidable artists.

Two aspects of that class still stand out. The first is J.P. Clark's poem *Abiku*, which has been circulating briskly since Pius's untimely departure, and was a foundational introduction to African poetry in his introductory class. Not only did I find it particularly fascinating from a cosmological perspective (having never before encountered baobab tree spirits or shamans), but after reading it aloud to us in class, Pius dutifully bowed his head, showing us his own scars and describing how this poem was more than mere metaphor, but told of real fear, love and hope.

The second hews closely to the first. Pius was an orator. I cannot read any of the poems from that class without hearing his distinct voice, the rumbling from his chest while he took pause between stanzas, the way he strode purposefully down the aisle in our dingy classroom, bringing each poem to life. This oratorical tenor stays present in his writing.

I will not bore you with further details of our semester. Suffice it to say my mind was expanded and I went on to major in African Studies. I never took another literature class, but I did spend my down time gorging on the writings of Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Teju Cole, A. Igoni Barrett, J.M. Coetzee, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Maryse Condé, Alain Mabanckou... some came as a direct result of AFRI1001, others I found because, in his enthusiasm for all things African literature, Pius pointed me in their direction.

Six years later I was in the last year of my Master's in Anthropology specializing in African Studies. Pius was the head of the African Studies department at the time and wanted me to manage a call for papers for the department's 10-year anniver-

sary book. “I might have a few other more personal projects for you to work on, if you have the time” he said. Apparently, he had conferred with another professor in the department for whom I’d done some editorial work and determined I could be of use to him as an editor as well. Which is why, a few months later, the manuscript for *#WhoOwnsTheProblem? Africa and the Struggle for Agency* appeared in my inbox.

A confession: I was not a great editor when I first received Pius’s manuscript. Reading that initial draft now, I find myself noting missing commas, overlooked mistakes, sentences that could have been restructured. Admittedly, beyond these nit-picky details, there was not all that much for me to do, which may have led to my less than careful review. However, I try not to be too harsh on my younger self, because I can also understand why I might have forgotten to peer through the prose for grammatical errors. I was caught in the grip of a master storyteller.

Were I in the publishing business, as opposed to the freelance editor and grad student business, I think I would be cautious about accepting a manuscript of lectures and keynote addresses by an academic. For one, who would the audience be, beyond other academics? Of the keynote lectures I have witnessed, I can tell you that few of my friends outside my field (never mind the general academy), would care one iota about their content. For two, writing and speaking are two very different things. Not all speeches are well suited to be read, not all papers suited to verbal articulation. And of course, there is the problem of sheer mass. Is there enough to fill 200 pages? How prolific must one be in order to fill up that much space with lectures, keynote addresses or commencement speeches?

Pius did not have any of these problems. If you are even remotely interested in the goings on of Africa, *#WhoOwnsTheProblem* will inform and entertain. It is likely his ability to make sense of complex issues via stories, clear imagery and a vast understanding of not only the players involved in the continent’s pressing issues, but of the creators, writers and thinkers who may have some answers that made Pius such a desirable public speaker. He is heavily influenced by the graceful narrator of all things surreal and wondrous about Africa’s relationship with the world, Chinua Achebe, who Pius quotes heavily. And while most of the chapters speak from a Nigerian perspective, the topics concerned are wide-reaching. Having been a columnist and a professor of literature, Pius knew how to translate a casual, conversational style to vibrant prose with ease. Even those chapters, such as “The Disappeared African Roots of Emma Watson’s UN Feminism” which were not originally speeches, nevertheless have a collegial tone. Reading these articles often felt like having discussions over a pint and this, I suspect, would suit Pius just fine.

Beyond searching for errant commas or en dashes to be replaced with their sibling em dashes, a good editor’s task is to help clarify the writer’s narrative. In the years after editing *#WhoOwnsTheProblem* I have had the pleasure of doing this for several graduate students and the occasional creative writer. How can your central point be best expressed? Is this the tone you want to convey? How does this paragraph bring your argument forward? Such are the most common questions I ask myself when doing editorial work. In the case of *#WhoOwnsTheProblem*, these questions were of little use to me. The questions I required were more subtle. Each essay wove a compelling argument and when put together in a book, become a cohesive mosaic, a portrait of a man and his most pressing ideas. The division of *#WhoOwnsTheProblem* into three parts was, to my mind, largely unnecessary. The themes, that culture is Africa, is

Africans, that globalization is no match for the African particularity, and that social media and technology will wear an African face, are clear and salient.

For me, it was like glimpsing one of the minds behind my own education. In this sense, I suspect for many readers, the book will feel like a return to a favourite class with a favourite teacher. I was proud of myself when I understood the references Pius regularly sprinkled in the essays, though I inevitably missed a few. As I was adding indents to paragraphs, I was being re-schooled in post-colonial discourse, African critiques of feminism, international politics, the politics of development, contemporary Pan-African movements and even occasionally the politics of football on the continent. Though his anecdotes may be contemporary, the topics Pius chose for the book span the years. A chapter recounting an unexpectedly harrowing car trip through Missouri reminds us that the US is still a dangerous place for Black folks, as the country's racist President blows by his impeachment, and the Democrats consider electing a racist candidate of their own. On topics closer to the continent, Pius deftly reminds his audiences that the question of who owns the problem has been asked for decades, by a slew of academics, politicians and philosophers alike.

Indeed, Pius does not jealously guard his own authority on the question. Readers will encounter a plethora of authors, thinkers, Twitter personalities (mostly Nigerian) and hopefully will look them up and read their thoughts on matters large and small on the continent. Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe are present practically between every word. You could call this book an homage to the fecundity of their own work across disciplines and continents. But there are dozens whose contributions to writing, theorizing and thinking Africa are thoroughly and lovingly mentioned throughout the book.

It is here where Pius cleverly combines practice with his artful preaching. In listing artists, thinkers or scholars, he is reminding his readers of the good, artful work that is being done and that will continue to be done, though without his collegial presence. He is similarly reminding his colleagues that they ignore African and global lay audiences at their own peril.

"The Yoruba have always insisted that the crowd is the owner of culture," Pius wrote in his chapter "Aso Ebi on my Mind" and indeed, this can easily be forgotten in academic or literary scenes. Pius was a beacon of validation for the arts and social sciences in Africa and this book is yet another tribute to their value. His writing is a reminder of why culture matters, why studying the arts, music, literature, matters. But they only matter if they are shared, created or metamorphosed by the crowd. Readers will note that while a number of the book's essays were originally keynote lectures for large academic conferences, others were for diverse audiences. There are many disciplines in which there remains much handwringing about the dangers of scholar activism and community-based research. Pius reminds us that the crowd keeps the entire academic operation in business.

It is tempting to say that I didn't learn much about editing from working on *#WhoOwnsTheProblem* because there was so little for me to do. But the learning experience of editing good writing is just as important (if not more important) as editing bad writing. If I learned nothing else, it's that good writing can dance on the page. That is definitively what Pius's writing does. The stories are vividly retold, and it is easy to hear a crowd chuckling on cue in the space between paragraphs.

I did not know it at the time but working for Pius as a research assistant and

editor led to many more editing contracts and the privilege of reading many more authors. This past summer for example, I did the final proofread of the Institute of African Studies' 10-year anniversary anthology—a project come full circle—and I did some editorial work on the anthology *Wreaths for a Wayfarer*, a collection of poems written in honour of Pius. I remain a student of this man who taught me about African literature, who reminds me that culture cannot be separated from politics or technology, and who introduced me to the comings and goings of *abiku* children. To paraphrase a great man, departed too soon: I wish you successful deliberations in reading Pius Adesanmi's final book. You will find, as I did, something new each time you read it.