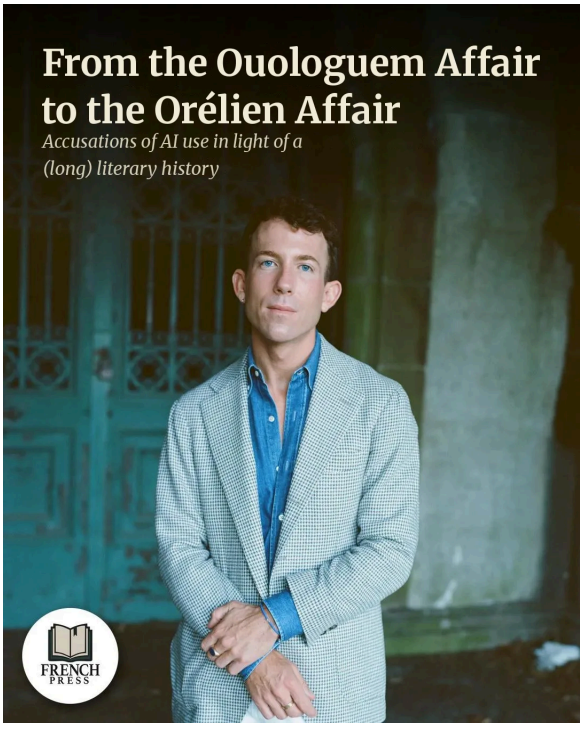
ESSAY

From the Ouologuem Affair to the Orélien Affair

by Doyle D. Calhoun

October 17, 2026

Accusations of AI use in light of a (long) literary history



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> *I want [...] to hand you a brand-new gadget, one that will let you compose on the assembly line every book your boss orders from you. [...] For your books (as I advise you to make them from now on) must allow you to invent, in the corridors of your imagination, A BILLION NOVELS WITHOUT EFFORT! ... And that is the kind of mechanism that will give you ready-cooked work: it's up to you! to find, for the public, the sauce that makes the dish go down.*
>
> *—Yambo Ouologuem, Lettre à la France nègre (1969)*[1]

"A Billion Novels Without Effort"

This is not a new generative artificial intelligence model designed to mass-produce "ready-cooked" literary texts, but a paper gadget: an analog technology imagined in the late 1960s by the Malian writer Yambo Ouologuem. These lines are taken from *Lettre à la France nègre*, a collection of polemical and parodic texts published in 1969, in the wake of the publication of Ouologuem's landmark novel, *Le Devoir de violence*, and its consecration with the Prix Renaudot (1968), and anticipating the plagiarism scandal that would soon engulf the book and its author, an episode that literary history remembers as the "Ouologuem affair."

The title of Ouologuem's *Lettre* plays, of course, on the polysemy of the word "nègre." An insulting term that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, designated both the colonial slave and the Black person, before being resignified by the poets of Négritude between the wars, it remains in French one of the words for the ghostwriter. The metaphor is unambiguous: like the colonial slave, the literary "nègre" bears the burden of the labor without ever receiving recognition for it. The word nonetheless persists in the usage of the publishing world: a sign, perhaps, that coloniality has never quite left the backstage of the book world...

In this letter, in which the disenchanted writer tries to imagine a sort of AI avant la lettre, Ouologuem addresses his "dear *négraille*": the "nègres" (Blacks) of French literature, who toil in obscurity for a pantheon of white writers. Here is some of Ouologuem's advice to these invisible slaves, whose labor keeps the whole literary machine running: "Don't aim so high, as long as you are a nègre. People see in you the worker on the assembly line: so avoid mental titillations, the agonies of messages to be communicated, and manufacture your con-sumer literature *nègrement*..." (p. 188). The "nègre," Ouologuem suggests, is made to work in the shadows, never to shine.

This fantasy of an assembly-line literature seems to speak directly to our era, marked by the growing use of artificial intelligence. Yet what Ouologuem's text lays bare is not only a literary technology but an entire economy: that of a book market that consumes... texts as well as individuals.

The Ouologuem affair and his *Lettre à la France nègre* offer fruitful starting points for revisiting several recent "scandals" in which discourses on artificial intelligence, plagiarism, and literary creation intersect, or rather collide.

I draw the following propositions from them:

These technologies are not as new as one might first think. The problems posed by an AI-generated novel may seem unprecedented. They belong, however, to a long history of literary creation, from the ghostwriter and the fabrication of texts to combinatorics, from "automatic" writing to Oulipian constraints. Let us not forget that Ouologuem's fantasy of a "billion novels" is contemporary with Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961). It is the same dream of infinite production.

The accusations do not fall from the sky. They are neither unmotivated nor innocent. The six AI-related literary scandals that have shaken the literary world since 2025 all target Black or racialized writers. The accusations come from groups and individuals who not only make no secret of their political agenda but present themselves as guardians of a certain purity of literary creation and creativity, in most cases with no training in literature whatsoever.

The stakes extend beyond the world of publishing. The questions raised go far beyond the fate of publishing in the age of AI. They touch on old and still very live anxieties: which writers have a place in the pantheon of French (or English) letters, and who owns the language of Molière, or that of Shakespeare?

C'était ça ou mourir Causes a Scandal

The first novel by the Haitian-born Quebec writer Thélyson Orélien, *C'était ça ou mourir* was widely acclaimed during the 2026 *rentrée littéraire*. The book traces the flight of a young history-geography teacher driven out of Haiti by gang violence after his neighborhood was practically razed. It is a sort of reportage-novel that closely follows the author's biography.

The novel won the Fnac Prize for the novel and appeared on the first Goncourt selection. Everything changed overnight. An initially anonymous X account, "Balance ton Claude," claimed that the detection software Pangram judged certain passages of the novel to be "100%" AI-generated. Accusations of plagiarism targeting Orélien's journalistic texts and fiction prior to *C'était ça ou mourir* quickly followed.

Some writers (Virginie Despentes, Dorcy Rugamba, Dany Laferrière, and Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, the 2021 Goncourt laureate) came to Orélien's defense, on social media, on air, and in writing. But the literary world quickly closed ranks. Orélien's publishers, Grasset in France and Boréal in Canada, suspended promotion of the book, citing the author's "well-being." The Académie Goncourt withdrew the novel from its selection in order, it said, to preserve "the integrity of the Prix Goncourt and that of the academy, whose central role is to promote and crown literature written by women and men." Court favor, then infamy.

But why this novel and this author? The Orélien case did not unfold in a vacuum. His fall, both brutal and public, seems less conditioned by properly literary questions (is the novel good?) than by the workings of a global anti-woke "manosphere" that is, let us say it clearly, anti-Black. This dimension must be reconciled with the (legitimate) concerns raised by the use of AI in literary production.

"Balance ton Claude" and the Anatomy of a Media Campaign

In Orélien's case, the accusations first emanated from an X account that had fewer than a hundred followers at the start; they were then spread with formidable efficiency. (The name Balance ton Claude obviously echoes #BalanceTonPorc, the French version of #MeToo. A revealing hijacking: it borrows the lexicon of feminist denunciation to put it at the service of a reactionary anti-woke crusade, while creating the veneer of a moral cause.) The initial post turned out to be the work of Samuel Fitoussi, a conservative columnist at *Le Figaro* trained at the University of Cambridge, who then reshared it with his 34,500 followers. Questioned by *Le Monde*, he said he had wanted to avoid the affair being read as a question of political left or right. Fitoussi is notably the author of *Woke Fiction*, in which he denounces what he considers the "ideological transformation" of the media, evidenced, he claims, by prominent Black characters and stories driven by women. His latest book, *Pourquoi les intellectuels se trompent*, could have served as a subtitle for the entire Goncourt controversy.

I have a hard time believing that the people behind Balance ton Claude ran every novel of the *rentrée littéraire* through Pangram. I have even more trouble believing that, if they did, Orélien's book was the only one flagged. At a time when the far right is increasingly dictating cultural policy in France, we should not be surprised that one of the first targets of this anti-AI vigilantism is the novel of a Black writer who, in his book, takes on global inequalities, Euro-American imperialism, and Trumpism.

The script is nonetheless familiar. The French and Canadian press has pointed to parallels with other attacks on Black intellectuals, in particular the Cambridge sociologist Jason Arday. Arday was found dead this summer, shortly after resigning following accusations that he had plagiarized part of his academic work and invented parts of his biography. According to *Byline Times*, a "race science" network linked to the University of Cambridge directly targeted him. These parallels probably mask a greater complexity and often sidestep questions of wrongdoing. They are also hard to ignore. In both cases, media coverage took on the look of a witch hunt, or a lynching.

A History That Repeats Itself

Orélien is far from the first. The six AI-related scandals of the year that I consider the most significant, largely because they were the most widely covered, all target Black or racialized writers.

The most recent case? *The Atlantic* relayed unverified accusations that "The Blue Fighter," a short story by the Zimbabwean writer Simbarashe Kundizeza that won the Caine Prize, had been generated by AI. Kundizeza recently spoke out on X to deny the accusations: "To dispel any doubt on the matter, I affirm that I wrote 'The Blue Fighter.' I did not use generative artificial intelligence to write it. It is entirely my own work." The Caine Prize is reserved for African writers and has helped, in recent years, to launch several international careers. The "proof" put forward by the journalist Vauhini Vara: her own tests of the story with Pangram, backed by claims about the software's reliability... published by Pangram. (Vara admits to having made AI a co-writing tool in the writing of her book *Searches: Selfhood in the Digital Age*, 2025.)

In July, *The Atlantic* had already relayed unverified accusations targeting *Daggermouth*, the bestseller by H. M. Wolfe; its publisher, Simon & Schuster, stood by the novel. That same month, Jerry Falade's two-million-dollar contract with Macmillan collapsed after his agents withdrew his novel amid suspicions of AI use. In March, Hachette Book Group had canceled the American release of Mia Ballard's *Shy Girl* and pulled the British edition already on sale.

In May, a scandal shook the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. "The Serpent in the Grove" by Jamir Nazir had been named regional winner. But on social media, internet users were mocking sentences from the text such as "She had the kind of walking that made benches become men" and pointing out turns of phrase said to be characteristic of AI. Yet after a thorough analysis of the accusations, Nazir was cleared by the Commonwealth Foundation, which named him the new winner of the prize. Jamir Nazir is Trinidadian of Indian origin; Mia Ballard, H. M. Wolfe, Jerry Falade, and Simbarashe Kundizeza are Black.

What We Will Not Know

Most articles on the Orélien affair omit one fact: earlier this year, Grasset, Orélien's French publisher, saw the exodus of nearly two hundred authors after the ouster of its director, Olivier Nora. Many writers and publishers saw in this proof of the efforts of the conservative billionaire Vincent Bolloré to weigh on the editorial line of the house, which came under his control in 2023. Was Grasset's enthusiasm for a rather unknown novelist and a possibly flawed book driven by a desire to show that the house had not changed course? Or that it was correcting it? A Black, Haitian, anti-Trump author, backed by a house in the midst of an identity crisis, becomes an ideal target for conservative networks: his fall discredits at once the novel, the house that defended it, and the juries that honored it.

None of this absolves an author of accusations of plagiarism, if one holds AI-generated writing to be a form of large-scale plagiarism. Nor does any of it mean that they should be taken less seriously because the writer in question belongs to an underrepresented group. The allegations against Orélien are serious and troubling. But they do not come out of nowhere.

It is unlikely that we will ever know with certainty whether, and to what extent, AI was used in writing *C'était ça ou mourir*. Orélien claims to have completed a version of the novel in 2019, before these tools were widely commercialized. And a novel is the work of many hands over many years. Other writers and critics surely received proofs or press copies. Without a meticulous investigation into the book's journey, its preparation and its production, it will be difficult to say at which stages AI may have intervened, and through whose hands.

Here we touch on an aspect that the sensationalist discourse on "AI novels" seems to want to ignore or avoid: a novel does not appear in the world as is. Its path to publication is long and complex. Publishing houses themselves use automated tools (proofreading, rewording, manuscript summaries, etc.). A "flagged" passage may bear the trace of editorial intervention as much as authorial. Yet under French copyright law, originality and authenticity are defined above all as the "imprint of the author's personality," a notion that

presupposes a single person behind the text, even though the publishing world has always tolerated books written "by several hands" under a single name. The current outrage seems to stem less from the plurality of hands than from the identity of the one who signs.

What If We Read the Book?

C'était ça ou mourir is not a novel I would have wanted to teach in my courses. Critics have characterized it as "lyrical," and Orélien, in a statement denying any use of AI, invoked a certain *antillanité* in his language, its repetitions, its images. The juries of the Fnac Prize and the Goncourt, like thousands of readers (more than 60,000 to date), considered the novel exceptional. In reality, the book is rather linear and not very complex, compared with what the Antillean novel often is. One would be hard-pressed to call it innovative in the manner of, say, the works of René Depestre, the Franco-Haitian writer whose books the narrator carries with him in his flight from Haiti. The novel uses Haitian Kreyòl with an ease that would no doubt make Frankétienne turn in his grave. But in my view the book does not read like "*AI slop*." Yet that is the label that will now stick to it. It is a reportage-novel: precisely the novel a former journalist would write.

In his book *Impostors: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity* (2018), Christopher L. Miller poses the question that probably haunts more than one editor and more than one critic right now: "Can reading alone detect a fraud?"[2] As Miller has shown, some of the most celebrated works in the French language are the products of plagiarists, impostors, or ghostwriters. That did not prevent them from being widely read, taught, and translated. For example, Toni Morrison praised in Camara Laye's *Le Regard du roi* (1954) a totally "authentic" African voice. Yet scholars now argue that this most "African" of African novels was written by a white Belgian.

I find profoundly depressing the idea that a novel whose prose is, by some estimates, "100% AI" impressed editors at two historic and reputable houses, not to mention the juries of the Fnac and the Goncourt. But I fear just as much a future in which we would approach literature, and especially so-called "minor" literatures, with suspicion. A future in which our stance before a novel would be that of the medical examiner, rather than that of a reader ready to be inhabited, and transformed, by a text.

The Orélien case indeed renews a long history of some of the most coveted literary prizes in France. Among these episodes, the Ouologuem affair, thanks to recent efforts at rehabilitation, is the most famous. In 1968, the very year Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" appeared in French, a little-known Malian writer, Yambo Ouologuem, received the Prix Renaudot for *Le Devoir de violence*. Hailed as an "African Proust," he was soon denounced as a plagiarist: first by an anonymous article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, then by the novelist Graham Greene, who attacked Ouologuem and his publisher, Le Seuil, claiming that passages had been taken verbatim from his novel *It's a Battlefield*. Ouologuem maintained that his manuscript contained quotation marks that were removed in editing. But Le Seuil pulled the book from the shelves, and Ouologuem vanished from public life. His reputation never recovered. (Mohamed Mbougar Sarr retraces the scandal in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, crowned with the Goncourt in 2021 and dedicated to Ouologuem.)

There are other cases. In 1996, Calixthe Beyala received the Académie française's Grand prix du roman for *Les Honneurs perdus*. Beyala was subsequently convicted of copyright infringement for an earlier novel. The affair fueled a press campaign whose violence went far beyond the facts.

There is a certain irony in seeing the book world in France struggle so openly with the notions of author and authenticity. It was Roland Barthes who declared the author "dead" and made the text a "tissue of quotations"; it was Michel Foucault who borrowed from Samuel Beckett the question: "What does it matter who is speaking?" The Surrealists bequeathed us "automatic" writing. The Oulipo produced texts with the help of algorithms, lipograms, and other formal constraints: the principle of Georges Perec's *La Disparition* is to write a novel of some three hundred pages without the letter "e." That is precisely the kind of exercise at which Claude and other generative models might excel.

The Orélien case is troubling for other reasons. It is not a matter of identity usurpation: the novel closely follows the biography of its author. It is a matter of something less identifiable. If the linguistic abilities of AI were built, for the most part, on the massive pillaging of other writers' work, would a novel written by AI be the theft of a theft?

When the news broke, I hoped for a more interesting story: an AI-generated novel slipped into the race for the major prizes to mock a world that has long marginalized African and Caribbean writers. An "Ouologuemian" revenge, so to speak. But Orélien's novel, unfortunately, is not a Trojan horse.

A Literary Fortress

By focusing on very visible cases, the anti-wokists mask a broader reality. French-language racialized writers are not simply being offered distinctions and six-figure contracts by well-meaning publishers eager to atone for the past. Black writers, like Black academics, remain largely underrepresented, in France as elsewhere, and Black publishers are rarer still.

Those with the most to lose in these public disgraces are young writers from underrepresented backgrounds. Their work will now be received with acute suspicion; they are being asked to choose between success and a target on their back. The world of letters is today becoming a fortress. And those who guard its ramparts have found a new weapon in Pangram and other "verification tools." I cannot help wondering to what extent this focus on racialized writers is part of a broader reactionary movement: a growing distrust of and contempt for cultural institutions.

One can acknowledge the obvious problems with Orélien's novel, and with Orélien the novelist, while condemning the relentlessness with which the press and media have gone after Orélien, the person. AI-generated novels may soon become the norm; the reaction to this one should not be. Unmasking Black writers will cease to be a bloodsport the day it no longer finds willing spectators.

A shorter version of this article appeared on October 11, 2026, in the New York Times under the title "When Black Writers Are Guilty Until Proven Human".

[1] Reissue, Éditions du Serpent à Plumes (Paris: 2003).

[2] Christopher L. Miller, *Impostors: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

— Doyle D. Calhoun

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE (MLA)

Calhoun, Doyle D. "From the Ouologuem Affair to the Orélien Affair." French Press, October 17, 2026, https://frenchpress.media/publications/de-l-affaire-ouologuem-a-l-affaire-orelien.