



**Yambo Ouologuem Reconsidered  
Interview with Olivia Snaije**

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KENNEALLY: The conquest of the French literary world by one African novelist in 2021 has led to the reconsideration of another Francophone African novelist who first emerged in the 1960s with a similar triumph, only to be denounced for plagiarism and then abandoned.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Paris-based journalist Olivia Snaije recently contributed the absorbing account of how a French literary event in 2021 brought author Yambo Ouologuem back to life to *New Lines Magazine*. The reporting reads like its own novel, with a plot that sees literary celebrity lead to rejection, all layered in themes of colonialism and racism. Olivia Snaije joins me now with the details. *Salut, Olivia.*

SNAIJE: *Bonjour.*

KENNEALLY: *Bonjour*, indeed. This is a really fascinating story. It is, as I said, novelistic in its tones. Your reporting does take us back to Paris in the 1960s and 1970s, though it opens and closes in the present day.

In October last year, 31-year-old Senegalese writer Mohamed Mbougar Sarr won the country's most prestigious literary award, the Prix Goncourt, for his novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes – The Most Secret Memory of Men*. This was the first time an author from sub-Saharan Africa had won the prize and echoed a similar moment when Malian author Yambo Ouologuem, at age 28, won the 1968 Prix Renaudot, France's second-most prestigious literary prize, for his own novel, *Le devoir de violence – Bound to Violence*.

And apart from their origins and their literary accomplishments, these two novelists are linked by the fascinating relationship of their books. So, Olivia, how do the stories of Sarr and Ouologuem converge?

SNAIJE: Hi, Chris. Thanks for having me. As Mbougar Sarr has said, anyone who reads Yambo Ouologuem's novel and researches his story cannot help but be fascinated by it. It's a real rabbit hole. Mbougar Sarr, who grew up in Senegal and came to France to study, like Ouologuem, had started a thesis on postcolonial literature from the African continent,



which he didn't finish, because he ended up having his novels published. His thesis included a study of Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence*.

This fascination resurfaced in his fourth novel, the one that won the Goncourt Prize, and at its heart is Ouologuem's story. Mbougar Sarr's character, a young Senegalese author living in Paris, becomes obsessed with a mysterious author who published a single book in 1938 and was called the Black Rimbaud. He was then accused of plagiarism and disappeared. That's the basic framework of his novel.

That said, Mbougar Sarr's novel, although it was inspired by Ouologuem's story, and their books are sort of a conversation with each other, I think the two writers are completely different personality-wise. I've only met Mbougar Sarr, of course, but he's very calm, discreet, reserved, reflective. And it seems to me that from speaking to people who met Ouologuem that he was larger than life and had a rather explosive and excitable character.

**KENNEALLY:** Of course, they are separated by a generation, and a generation that matters a great deal to Africans, to French people, and to the literary world. Ouologuem was born in 1940. He emigrated, just like Sarr, to France in 1960 for his studies. At that time, Mali and other west African nations were becoming independent from the colonial power, France, leading intellectuals to reconsider everything about the African experience. So what was the portrait that Ouologuem painted of Africa in his novel, and what was its reception in France and in Africa?

**SNAIJE:** Yeah, that's a really good question, because Ouologuem broke away from what was at the time still very much a thing in France and Francophone Africa, which was the *Négritude* movement, a literary and political movement founded by African and Caribbean writers – intellectuals, highly educated – living in Paris. For example, the poet and writer Leopold Senghor of Senegal, who became his country's president, was one of the founders. Their movement rejected the French colonial project and the idea that civilization and enlightenment had been brought to Africa by Europeans. So it was a Black pride movement.

But Ouologuem's historical novel, which runs from pretty much the 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century and tells the story of an imaginary empire and dynasty which is loosely based on history, contained a bombshell for the time. I thought it might be appropriate to quote from Ouologuem himself from an interview with French TV in 1968. He says, "white colonialism is but a slim chapter in a series of crimes which begin with the dynasty of African dignitaries, then those of the Arab conquest, and finally the period specific to the French occupation." So on publication, his novel was highly praised, but it was also harshly criticized by Africans such as Senghor, or by Wole Soyinka when his novel



appeared in English, who felt that Ouologuem was minimizing the ravaging effects of colonization.

But others also thought it was the beginning of an exciting postcolonial literature that looked truthfully into the past. In fact, I was just listening to an interview with Yaa Gyasi, who brought up the issue of Africans selling other Africans into slavery in her historical novel, *Homegoing*. That took people by surprise in 2016.

But mostly, I think it was that Ouologuem spared no one. He wasn't less critical of Europeans and the French, either. He just painted an extremely rich portrait of the African continent's history and showed that a lot happened in Africa before the Europeans got there.

KENNEALLY: Well, the critical response to Ouologuem really ramped up, because in 1972, the *Times Literary Supplement* accused him of lifting and using several pages from Graham Greene's *It's a Battlefield*. What was the impact of these complaints on the author and his work?

SNAIJE: The book was published and won the Goncourt (sic) Prize in 1968, and it wasn't until 1972, as you said, that accusations of plagiarism were made. After that, things went very swiftly. But his borrowings, as I'm going to call them, had already been spotted in France even before the manuscript was published by his publisher, Le Seuil. But nothing had appeared in the press.

It was actually his American publisher who reacted very radically, because in the UK, Graham Greene didn't press charges, and he was quite happy to have the book published just with an acknowledgment. In fact, I spoke to his publisher, who said he found the whole thing annoying, irritating, Graham Greene did. But it was his American publisher, William Jovanovich, who was the chairman at the time of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, who stopped publishing the book. He withdrew all copies and asked for damages from the French publisher, Le Seuil. That really put a bad taste on the whole affair.

And then in 1982, Le Seuil stopped publishing the book, and Ouologuem's British publisher stopped as well. So you couldn't find the book until it was re-edited in the early 2000s in French and in 2008 in a new translation in English. Then in 2018, Le Seuil brought the book out once again in its original collection. But by then, the author had died, so he didn't see that happen.

KENNEALLY: 50 years later, Olivia, how does the literary world view those charges of plagiarism?



SNAIJE: I think plagiarism is still taken very seriously, but today with the internet, it's much easier to check. That said, borrowings or intertextuality have existed since Shakespeare and before, whether in literature or art. And in Ouologuem's case, his borrowings from other works were a very small portion of his novel. I'm not excusing plagiarism in the least. It was just that he was an incredible writer on his own, and he wasn't properly defended by his publisher or other figures in the publishing world at the time. So was it racism? Probably. Was it the fact that he rubbed people the wrong way? Yes, also. But I do think, and most people think, that a Franco-French author would likely not have been abandoned the way he was.

KENNEALLY: After Ouologuem returned to Mali, he adopted a religious lifestyle and followed Tijaniyya, a mystical form of Islam with roots in Africa. Many believe that he had quit writing, but you learned otherwise recently while attending a two-day conference on Ouologuem held in the Moroccan capital of Rabat.

SNAIJE: Yeah. Well, a research chair for African literature and art was just created at the Royal Academy in Morocco, and Yambo Ouologuem was the subject of their first conference. So when I was there, I was lucky to meet experts and also Ouologuem's youngest son, Ambibé, who's sort of taking over his father's estate and writings. Ambibé said that his father had never stopped writing and that he worked every single day and wrote, and that there were piles of papers in the family home, but that he and his siblings hadn't gone through them yet. There's also part of a manuscript in Le Seuil files, but apparently it needs a lot of work.

KENNEALLY: How can English readers satisfy their curiosity about Ouologuem? Are his books available in the US?

SNAIJE: Readers in the US are in for a treat, because in 2023, they'll get Mbougar Sarr's book translated by Lara Vergnaud, and then hopefully in 2024, once their appetites have been whetted by reading Mbougar Sarr's book, they'll get a reworked edition of the original inspiration, which is, of course, Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, both from Other Press in New York, and in the original English translation by Ralph Manheim, who was a really well known translator at the time. But of course, because it was in the early 1970s, the translation will be reworked with academics and so on. There's also the academic Christopher Wise's *The Yambo Ouologuem Reader*, which is available and includes his translation of the novel as well as excerpts from two other Ouologuem books.

KENNEALLY: Olivia Snaije, thank you for your very fascinating reporting about Yambo Ouologuem. Appreciate you joining us today.

SNAIJE: Thank you very much, Chris.



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