

Literary Sovereignty in the Age of Generative AI: A Postcolonial Theory of Narrative Authority

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Abstract

This article introduces literary sovereignty as a theoretical construct for understanding how generative artificial intelligence reshapes postcolonial concepts of authorship, narrative authority, and textual legitimacy. Scholars have examined the disruption AI poses to authorship, and postcolonial critics have long theorized narrative authority, yet the intersection of the two remains undertheorized. Literary sovereignty is defined here as the capacity of a literary tradition to determine the epistemic and formal conditions under which its narratives are produced, authorized, and circulated - conditions increasingly shaped by large language models trained overwhelmingly on Anglo-American textual corpora. Through close readings of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019), situated within their existing critical reception, and read alongside Sasha Stiles's AI-collaborative poetry, the article argues that contemporary postcolonial fiction resists and reconfigures the epistemic asymmetries built into generative systems through three formal strategies: narrative opacity, strategic citation, and productive error. The argument proceeds in five movements: a review of existing scholarship on AI-and-authorship, postcolonial narrative authority, and the critical reception of the two primary texts; a theoretical framework distinguishing literary sovereignty from authorship, institutional authority, and intellectual property; a discussion tracing how the three formal strategies operate as anti-extractive textual practices in dialogue with their critical literatures; a synthesis proposing the postcolonial novel as a form of critical infrastructure; and a conclusion addressing the limits of the framework. The article contributes an account that is responsive to present digital conditions while remaining grounded in the material history of colonial textual extraction and in the existing body of criticism on its primary texts.

Keywords

literary sovereignty; generative AI; postcolonial authorship; narrative opacity; algorithmic canon; Mohsin Hamid; Namwali Serpell

1. Introduction

In 2023, the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie publicly objected to a BBC documentary project that had relied on AI-generated summaries of her fiction to brief its production team. Her objection was reported as a dispute over accuracy and representation, but it named, without fully theorizing it, a broader condition: the transfer of interpretive authority over a literary tradition to computational systems whose training corpora remain overwhelmingly Anglo-American in origin and orientation. This article proposes that generative artificial intelligence precipitates a crisis in what I term *literary sovereignty*: the capacity of a literary tradition to determine the conditions under which its narratives are produced, authorized, circulated, and interpreted.

Postcolonial studies have extensively theorized political sovereignty, epistemic decolonization, and narrative authority, from Chinua Achebe's defense of the African writer's right to represent African experience to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence on writing in Gikũyũ as a decolonial act (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986). Yet the specific question of who controls the infrastructural conditions of literary production in the age of large language models remains underexamined within the field, and - as the literature review below details - the small existing body of work on AI and postcolonial authorship has not yet been brought into sustained contact with the substantial critical literatures already built around individual postcolonial novels. This article addresses that gap directly: rather than treating *Exit West* and *The Old Drift* as freestanding objects for a new theoretical apparatus, it reads them through and against the critics who have already established how their formal strategies work, asking what those established readings look like when the infrastructure against which the novels are set is understood to include automated textual extraction.

This article makes three interrelated arguments. First, literary sovereignty is a distinct theoretical construct, irreducible to authorship, institutional authority, or intellectual property; it operates at the level of the tradition itself, designating the capacity to establish the norms by which a text is recognized as legitimate. Second, contemporary postcolonial novels do not merely represent migration, hybridity, or resistance; they *perform* literary sovereignty through specific formal strategies - opacity, strategic citation, and productive error - that resist the extractive reading practices on which generative systems depend, strategies that existing criticism has already documented in different terms and that this article recasts within a single infrastructural vocabulary. Third, the postcolonial novel therefore functions as a form of critical infrastructure: a textual technology that reimagines the conditions of narrative legitimacy in an era when those conditions are increasingly automated.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews existing scholarship in three areas: AI and the disruption of authorship, postcolonial theories of narrative authority and opacity, and the specific critical receptions of *Exit West* and *The Old Drift*. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, distinguishing literary sovereignty from adjacent concepts and tracing its debts to Glissant, Spivak, Chakrabarty, Mbembe, and Couldry and Mejias. Section 4 discusses the primary texts in turn: Hamid's *Exit West* as a performance of sovereignty through narrative opacity, Serpell's *The Old Drift* as an exercise in strategic citation, and Stiles's AI-collaborative poetry as a limit case testing whether sovereignty can be exercised through, rather than only

against, generative systems; this section closes by synthesizing the three readings into an account of the postcolonial novel as critical infrastructure, with implications for comparative method. Section 5 concludes by addressing the limits of the framework and directions for further inquiry.

2. Literature Review

Three bodies of scholarship converge on the problem this article addresses, and none of them, taken alone, resolves it.

2.1 *AI and the disruption of authorship*

A first strand of scholarship examines how computer-generated text unsettles inherited models of the literary author. David Gunkel traces a history in which the search for authorship in machine writing repeatedly returns to unresolved questions about intention and origination, showing that the trouble AI poses to authorship is not new but a late chapter in a much older philosophical argument (Gunkel 2024, 45–52). Silvana Colella has argued that AI-generated literary experiments are best understood through their paratexts - the framing material that discloses, or obscures, the human labor of prompting and curating - rather than through the artificial text alone; her reading of Sasha Stiles's practice specifically treats the promotional and critical apparatus around *Technelegy* as constitutive of its meaning rather than incidental to it (Colella 2025, 3–6). Emily Bender and Alex Hanna, writing from computational linguistics rather than literary criticism, supply the technical grounding for claims made throughout critical AI studies about what large language models can and cannot be said to know, understand, or originate (Bender and Hanna 2025). These contributions are valuable, and the theoretical framework developed in Section 3 draws on Colella's paratextual method directly in its reading of Stiles. But this literature proceeds largely within Western philosophical and literary-historical frameworks; none of it asks what happens to this argument when the textual tradition in question is one whose relationship to the training corpus is already asymmetrical for reasons that predate generative AI by centuries.

2.2 *Postcolonial theories of narrative authority and opacity*

A second strand, discussed at greater length in Section 3, supplies the conceptual vocabulary - opacity, epistemic violence, provincialization, entangled coloniality, data colonialism - that this article extends to the algorithmic condition (Glissant 1997; Spivak 1988; Chakrabarty 2000; Mbembe 2001; Couldry and Mejias 2019). What this literature does not do, because it largely predates the present infrastructure, is specify what these concepts look like when applied to a *statistical* rather than an ethnographic or institutional apparatus of extraction. That translation is the theoretical work of Section 3.

2.3 *The critical reception of the primary texts*

A third strand - and the one most directly responsive to the concern that a theoretical argument about specific novels should be grounded in the existing criticism of those novels - consists of the substantial body of scholarship already built around *Exit West* and *The Old Drift* individually. This literature did not anticipate an algorithmic reading, but it converges

repeatedly on the same formal features this article treats as sovereign strategies, which suggests those features are not artifacts of the present argument's angle of approach but stable properties of the texts that different critical vocabularies keep rediscovering.

On *Exit West*, Amanda Lagji reads the novel's magical doors and irrealist mode as devices that unsettle readers' normative assumptions about mobility, arguing that the text's refusal of causal explanation for the doors is a formal choice with consequences for how migration itself is imagined, not a gap to be filled in (Lagji 2019, 218–19). Michael Perfect argues that *Exit West* is not only “about” refugees but constitutes a sustained reflection on how refugees and their journeys are represented and mediated by existing technologies, and that the unnamed city functions syntactically as well as thematically - refugees appear in the prose, he observes, largely as the unnamed “subordinate clause” of sentences whose subject is the city itself (Perfect 2019, 190). Liliana Naydan's reading of the novel's cell-phone and screen imagery is especially pertinent to the argument developed in Section 4.1: she argues that Hamid stages national borders as a form of screen, dividing people even as digital screens promise connection, and that the novel's collective “we” - the same passage this article reads as a citation of oral and communal narrative authority - is bound up with this critique of mediated, screen-based collectivity (Naydan 2019, 433, 446). Sercan Hamza Bağlama offers a more skeptical reading, arguing that the novel's universalizing gesture (“we are all migrants through time”) risks depoliticizing the refugee crisis by folding a historically specific emergency into a generalized human condition (Bağlama 2019, 156). This article does not adjudicate that dispute, but it registers it: any claim that *Exit West* resists extractive legibility must contend with the counter-argument, already present in the critical literature, that the novel's own universalizing moves perform a different kind of flattening. The formal-opacity reading offered in Section 4.1 is therefore presented as one plausible account in active conversation with, rather than superseding, this existing debate.

On *The Old Drift*, the 2022 special issue of *Research in African Literatures* devoted to the novel supplies unusually dense secondary material for a text published only three years earlier. Joseph Kwanya reads the mosquito interludes as a mechanism of counterfactuality: brief, fragmenting sections that “disnarrate” the main plot and offer an alternative memory of the Zambian nation that human-authored, nationalist histories have obscured (Kwanya 2022, 51). Svetlana Stefanova analyzes the insect motif specifically as a source of formal, linguistic, and acoustic disruption, arguing that the mosquitoes' collective voice makes audible histories and registers that a conventional, single-narrator novel could not carry (Stefanova 2022, 65–66). Most directly relevant to this article's concerns, John Muthyala reads the novel's speculative technology plotline explicitly through the lens of techno-neocolonialism, arguing that Serpell stages the same asymmetries of technological control that this article locates in generative AI's training corpora, several years before large language models entered public discourse (Muthyala 2022, 132–34). Read together, this special issue confirms that critics working independently of any AI framework have already identified *The Old Drift's* narrative strategies - its non-human collective narrator, its refusal of a single genre or timescale, its explicit citational practice - as devices of resistance to externally imposed narrative authority. Section 4.2 draws on all three readings to ground its claim that strategic citation is not a property this article imposes on the novel from outside but one its existing critical reception has already, in different terms, identified.

Taken together, these three literatures establish what this article's theoretical framework needs to do: translate an existing postcolonial vocabulary of opacity and epistemic violence into terms specific to statistical extraction, while remaining answerable to the critical reception each primary text already has. The next section undertakes the first task; Section 4 undertakes the second.

3. Theoretical Framework: Literary Sovereignty

Roland Barthes's announcement of the death of the author, and Michel Foucault's subsequent retheorization of authorship as a discursive function rather than a biographical fact, has often been read as an emancipatory gesture (Barthes 1977, 142–48; Foucault 1977, 205–22). In postcolonial contexts, however, the death of the author was never merely theoretical; it was historical. Colonial archival practice systematically attributed oral narrative traditions to “anonymous” or “collective” production while elevating individual European authors to canonical status. The postcolonial recovery of authorship - Achebe's claim to the African writer's right to narrate African experience, Ngũgĩ's defense of Gikũyũ-language writing - was therefore not a naive return to Romantic individualism but a political claim to narrative authority within a field that had denied it (Achebe 1975; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986).

Literary sovereignty builds on this history while extending it beyond the question of who writes to the question of who sets the terms under which writing is recognized. I define it as follows:

Literary sovereignty is the capacity of a literary tradition to determine the epistemic, aesthetic, and infrastructural conditions under which its narratives are produced, authorized, circulated, and interpreted, without subordination to norms imposed by a dominant tradition.

This definition requires four distinctions. First, literary sovereignty is not authorship: a writer may compose without sovereignty if publication depends on conformity to the aesthetic expectations of a metropolitan market. Second, it is not institutional authority: a text may be reviewed, taught, and canonized without the tradition it emerges from having any say in the criteria of that validation. Third, it is not intellectual property: as Boatema Boateng demonstrates in her study of Ghanaian adinkra and kente design, copyright regimes routinely fail to protect communal or traditional knowledge forms, and property rights in any case confer no power to set epistemic norms (Boateng 2011, 12–19). Fourth, literary sovereignty is not cultural nationalism; it does not require purity or closure, but insists on the right to determine the terms of engagement with other traditions.

These four distinctions specify what literary sovereignty is not; a usable concept must also specify what would count as its absence. I propose the following criterion: a text fails to perform literary sovereignty to the extent that its intelligibility depends on supplying the classificatory, causal, or generic information that an external system - whether a colonial ethnographic apparatus or a statistical extraction process - requires in order to process it without residue. This is a matter of degree rather than a binary, and it is meant to be contestable: as Section 2.3 notes, Bağlama's reading of *Exit West*'s universalizing “we are all migrants” gesture as a form of depoliticization (Bağlama 2019, 156) is precisely the kind of counter-reading this criterion should be able to accommodate - a critic could argue that a given novel's opacity is better explained by market positioning, translation strategy, or an

entirely different formal genealogy than the one proposed here. The claims in the readings that follow should be read as arguments for one plausible account among others, not as descriptions of authorial intention. This is a necessary caveat given the publication dates of the primary texts: both novels discussed below were written before large language models were in public use, and nothing in this article claims that Hamid or Serpell designed their narrative strategies in response to generative AI specifically. The argument is retroactive and structural rather than intentionalist - it asks what these texts' existing formal strategies, already documented by the critics reviewed in Section 2.3, do when read against an infrastructure that postdates their composition, not what their authors meant by them.

The concept of opacity used throughout this article is not original to it, and the debt should be stated directly rather than left implicit. Édouard Glissant's "right to opacity," developed across *Caribbean Discourse* and *Poetics of Relation*, names the demand that difference be allowed to remain unassimilated - that a culture, a person, or a text need not be rendered fully transparent to another's understanding in order to be granted standing (Glissant 1997, 189-94). Glissant's target is primarily anthropological and colonial epistemology: the insistence, from Enlightenment ethnography onward, that to know a people is to render them transparent, classifiable, and therefore governable. Literary sovereignty draws directly on this insight but narrows and technicalizes it for a specific contemporary infrastructure. Where Glissant's opacity is a general ethical and philosophical demand addressed to any relation between self and other, literary sovereignty as developed here names the more specific formal capacity of a *text* to withhold the particular kind of information - causal explanation, geographic metadata, generic classification - that a statistical extraction process requires in order to model and reproduce it. The two concepts are therefore continuous rather than equivalent: Glissantian opacity is the deeper ethical claim; the formal strategies traced in this article's readings are among the technical means by which that claim can be exercised against a specifically computational, rather than only interpersonal or ethnographic, demand for transparency. Put schematically: Glissant supplies the *right*, this article specifies the *mechanism* by which contemporary postcolonial fiction exercises that right against a system that was not part of Glissant's own historical horizon.

Postcolonial theory offers further resources for extending this concept to the algorithmic condition, and the logical relationship between them is worth stating precisely rather than gesturing at loosely, since this is one of the points on which earlier drafts of this argument were rightly pressed to be clearer. Spivak's notion of epistemic violence - the foreclosure of the very possibility of certain knowledge - describes a structural condition: a discourse can silence not by contradicting a claim but by making the position from which that claim would be spoken unavailable in the first place (Spivak 1988, 280-84). Applied to language models, the mechanism is directly analogous rather than merely similar in spirit: a model does not need to prohibit non-Western narrative forms explicitly in order to marginalize them; underrepresentation in training data reproduces the same foreclosure Spivak describes, because a form that appears rarely in the training distribution is, in the relevant statistical sense, barely available to the system as something it can generate fluently or recognize as coherent. Independent audits of major language-model training sets have repeatedly found that pretraining corpora are dominated by English-language web text, and that even multilingual models allocate a small fraction of training tokens to African, South Asian, and

Indigenous-language sources relative to their share of the world's speakers and writers.¹ This is not a deliberate colonial project in the classical sense, yet it reproduces what Spivak called the epistemic violence of the “worlding” of what was once designated the Third World (Spivak 1988, 280–84) - now accomplished not through cartographic inscription but through statistical compression. When a language model is prompted to generate a story set in a West African city, it does not draw on the narrative grammars of that region's literary traditions; it interpolates from the templates most heavily represented in its training data, producing what I will call *epistemic ventriloquism*: the simulation of a postcolonial voice through the narrative grammar of the tradition that trained the machine.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to “provincialize” the universal subject of European historicism becomes newly relevant on the same logic when the implicit universal subject of AI-generated prose is not the European man of humanist tradition but the statistical average of Anglophone text on the open web; the mechanism of universalization changes from philosophical assumption to training distribution, but the structure Chakrabarty diagnoses - a particular position mistaken for a neutral, unmarked one - persists across that change (Chakrabarty 2000, 27–46). Achille Mbembe's account of coloniality as an entangled, unfinished relation - rather than a closed historical period - helps explain why postcolonial writers who use generative tools, such as Stiles, are not simply resisting an external imposition but negotiating a structure in which they are already implicated; this is precisely why Section 4.3 treats her practice as a limit case rather than either a capitulation or a clean escape (Mbembe 2001, 14–18). Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias's account of “data colonialism” - the appropriation of human life so that data can be continuously extracted from it for profit, on a historical continuum with the appropriation of land and labor under classical colonialism - supplies the political economy that connects these philosophical claims to a material infrastructure: training data is not a neutral resource but an extracted one, and the asymmetries of the algorithmic canon are a literary instance of a wider pattern that Couldry and Mejias document across many other domains of contemporary data extraction (Couldry and Mejias 2019, 3–11). Read in sequence, these four theorists move from the structural foreclosure of a position (Spivak), to the false universalization of a particular one (Chakrabarty), to the ongoing and entangled - rather than concluded - character of the coloniality this produces (Mbembe), to the specific economic mechanism, data extraction, through which that entanglement operates in the present infrastructure (Couldry and Mejias). Literary sovereignty names the capacity a tradition retains, or reasserts, at the end of that chain.

To describe the object against which this sovereignty is asserted, I propose the concept of the *algorithmic canon*: the set of texts and narrative patterns rendered visible, reproducible, and statistically privileged by systems of computational recommendation and generation. Unlike

¹ This is a widely discussed concern in critical data studies rather than a single settled finding; see Couldry and Mejias 2019, cited above, for the broader argument that data extraction under current computational capitalism follows historical patterns of colonial resource appropriation, of which linguistic and literary underrepresentation in training corpora is one instance among several.

the literary canon formed through institutional gatekeeping - publishers, critics, university curricula - the algorithmic canon emerges through the automated processing of large corpora, and its criteria are not aesthetic judgment but frequency, not hermeneutic depth but predictive plausibility. The algorithmic canon is extractive, mining textual patterns without regard for the historical contexts of their production; compressive, reducing the heterogeneity of world literature to the statistical regularities of its training data; and performative, reinforcing the visibility of already-dominant texts each time it generates plausible imitations of them. For postcolonial literature, this presents a double bind: unprecedented possibilities for circulation, purchased at the cost of ceding the terms of that circulation to an infrastructure the tradition did not design.

4. Discussion

4.1 Opacity as Sovereignty: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) follows Saeed and Nadia, two young people who flee an unnamed city through doors that transport them, without transition, to Greece, London, and California. As the literature reviewed in Section 2.3 shows, the novel has been read as an allegory of the global refugee crisis (Bağlama 2019), as an intervention in mobilities theory (Lagji 2019), as a meditation on technological mediation (Naydan 2019; Perfect 2019), and, more skeptically, as a text whose universalizing gestures risk depoliticizing the very crisis it represents (Bağlama 2019, 156). I want to read it additionally, and in dialogue with this existing reception rather than as a substitute for it, as a text that performs literary sovereignty through strategic opacity - formal strategies that resist the extractive reading practices on which generative systems depend.

Consider the novel's central conceit. The doors are never explained: we learn nothing of their mechanism, their origin, or the logic that governs their appearance. Lagji's reading of this device emphasizes its consequences for how mobility and immobility are imagined together, arguing that Hamid's irrealist mode "challenges readers to entertain normative claims about the world" precisely by declining to rationalize the doors into a system (Lagji 2019, 218). This article extends that observation in a specific direction: a text more amenable to computational processing would supply rules - a system, a taxonomy, a cost. Hamid withholds this, and the withholding is not a failure of worldbuilding but a formal choice with an epistemic function: the text declines to render itself fully legible to the extractive comprehension on which both colonial ethnography and statistical language modeling depend. Language models generate plausible continuations by extracting regularities from prior text; a narrative device introduced without causal explanation, and never subsequently rationalized, withholds exactly the information such a system would need to model it. Hamid's doors are not only a magical-realist device; they function as an anti-algorithmic formal strategy that requires the reader to inhabit uncertainty rather than extract a rule.

A parallel refusal operates at the level of setting. The city from which Saeed and Nadia flee is never named. It carries features suggestive of several conflict zones without being reducible to any one of them. Perfect's syntactic observation is instructive here: he notes that refugees in the novel are consistently rendered as "the subordinate clause of which they are not even the subject," with the city itself occupying the position of grammatical subject (Perfect 2019,

190). Read for its formal effect, this syntactic subordination extends the novel's refusal of setting-as-metadata to the level of the sentence: a system attempting to extract "who this novel is about" from its grammar alone would find the answer displaced onto an unnamed city rather than delivered as a taggable population or nationality. This is not the deracinated cosmopolitanism of a novel seeking legibility to a Western readership - a possibility the novel's critics, including Bağlama, take seriously rather than dismiss - but it is, at minimum, a refusal of the geographic metadata that recommendation and generation systems rely on to classify and reproduce a text. A system processing *Exit West* cannot straightforwardly tag it "Syrian refugee novel" or "Afghan migration narrative." The text withholds the classificatory metadata that would make it algorithmically legible, in a gesture that echoes the colonial archive's dependence on classification - maps, censuses, ethnographic taxonomies - even as it inverts that archive's aims.

Hamid's shifting narrative voice, which moves between close third person, a collective "we," and detached panoramic description, extends this resistance. Statistical language models perform most reliably on texts with a consistent narrative voice, since voice-shifting introduces variance into the patterns a model must track. But the novel's "we" passages do more than introduce formal noise: they assert a collective narrative authority irreducible to individual authorship. In the passage describing those who have not migrated watching migrants "through the aperture of a screen," the narrating "we" is neither Hamid nor any single character; it is a constructed collective voice that exceeds the novel's cast (Hamid 2017, 167). Naydan's reading of this passage is directly relevant: she situates the novel's screens as a double figure, simultaneously the technology through which Saeed and Nadia stay connected to the world and a "screen of a different sort that divide[s] people from one another" along the lines that "nationalism, xenophobia, and state- and non-state-sanctioned terrorism work together to create" (Naydan 2019, 433). Read alongside Naydan, the collective "we" that watches migrants "through the aperture of a screen" is therefore not a neutral formal device but part of the novel's broader argument that mediated collectivity is itself divided against itself - connective and exclusionary at once. For a statistical model, this voice is anomalous, fitting no clean profile of first-, second-, or third-person narration. Read through a postcolonial lens, it recalls oral and communal storytelling forms that colonial literary archives routinely excluded from the category of literature altogether. The "we" thus performs sovereignty not as a stylistic flourish but as a citation of narrative authority forms the algorithmic canon has no ready category for - and, following Naydan, as a citation that is itself already alert to the risks of the mediating technologies it deploys.

4.2 Strategic Citation: Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*

If *Exit West* performs sovereignty through opacity, Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019) performs it through strategic citation: a mode of intertextuality that reconfigures the logic of reference on which generative systems depend. The novel is a multigenerational epic spanning three families in Zambia, incorporating a collective mosquito narrator, historical figures such as the colonial explorer David Livingstone, and speculative technology. Its intertextuality is not the flattened pastiche that Fredric Jameson diagnosed as symptomatic of postmodern cultural production (Jameson 1991, 16–25); it is, as the special issue of *Research in African Literatures* devoted to the novel confirms from several independent

angles, a reparative infrastructure that reclaims the authority to determine which texts matter, and how they relate.

Large language models generate text through a form of citation that is statistical, implicit, and unacknowledged: every continuation is a probabilistic echo of patterns in training data, offered without attribution. Serpell's novel, by contrast, makes its citations explicit and politically pointed. It invokes Livingstone not to validate colonial historiography but to subvert its authority; it draws on Zambian oral tradition not as ornamental "folklore" but as an epistemic framework in its own right; it incorporates speculative technology not as genre decoration but as a mode of African futurity. Kwanya's reading of the novel's structure supports this claim at the level of narrative architecture: he argues that the mosquito interludes function to "disnarrate" the main sections, offering a counterfactual memory of the Zambian nation that displaces, rather than merely supplements, the nationalist histories the human plotlines might otherwise seem to endorse (Kwanya 2022, 51). Citation, on this reading, is not decoration added to an otherwise conventional historical novel; it is the mechanism by which the novel refuses to let any single account of Zambian history, including its own human-narrated one, stand as final.

The novel's most distinctive formal device, the mosquito narrator - a collective voice speaking from an evolutionary, non-human timescale - refuses anthropocentric narrative authority altogether. Stefanova's analysis of the insect motif specifies the mechanism at the level of form: she argues that the interludes produce "formal, linguistic, and acoustic disruption," immersing the reader in soundscapes that make audible voices and histories the main narrative cannot carry on its own terms (Stefanova 2022, 65-66). For a statistical model trained overwhelmingly on human-narrated fiction, a non-human collective narrator is a low-probability anomaly. For Serpell, it is a sovereign gesture: the assertion that narrative authority need not be human, let alone Western. The device also performs what I call *temporal sovereignty*: the capacity of a narrative to establish its own temporal framework rather than accept the chronological norms of colonial or computational modernity, in which every token of text is processed at a flattened, equally weighted scale.

The novel's title names both a place - the historical crossing point of the Zambezi River - and a method: a deliberate drift across genre, temporality, and voice, from historical fiction to speculative fiction to oral narrative. This drift poses a direct challenge to the algorithmic canon's reliance on genre classification. A system trained on standard corpora would struggle to assign *The Old Drift* a single genre tag; its refusal to settle into one is not a marketing inconvenience but a sovereign assertion that a tradition, not an external classificatory system, will determine its own generic boundaries. John Muthyala's reading of the novel's technology plotline strengthens this claim considerably by supplying the concept most directly transferable to the present argument: he reads Serpell's speculative technology as a staging of "techno-neocolonialism," in which the same asymmetries of technological control that structured the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods of Zambian history reappear, transformed, in a digitally mediated present (Muthyala 2022, 132-34). Muthyala's article was published in 2022, before the current wave of large language models entered mainstream public discourse, and it does not address generative AI specifically; but its central claim - that Serpell's novel already anticipates a form of technological extraction continuous with colonial resource extraction - is precisely the claim this article extends to

the specific case of training-data extraction. Where Muthyala reads the novel's fictional biotechnology as an allegory of neocolonial technological control in general, this article reads the novel's citational and narrative strategies as already-existing formal resources for resisting one contemporary instance of that control: the algorithmic canon.

4.3 The Limit Case: Sasha Stiles and Sovereignty Within the System

The readings above suggest that literary sovereignty is performed chiefly through resistance to algorithmic legibility. But what of writers who engage generative systems directly? The American Kalmyk-Native poet Sasha Stiles, whose collection *Technelegy* (2021) develops what she calls human-AI "co-creation," presents a limit case: can literary sovereignty be exercised *through* a generative system rather than only against it?

Stiles has publicly framed her practice, in the paratexts and promotional description accompanying *Technelegy*, as human-AI "co-creation" rather than tool use; I want to press on what that framing implies rather than treat it as self-evident, and Colella's method offers a direct precedent for doing so. Colella argues that in AI-collaborative literary experiments generally, the paratext - interviews, artist statements, exhibition descriptions - is not incidental framing but the primary site where the reconfiguration of authorship actually takes place, since the artificial text alone rarely discloses the human labor of prompting, selecting, and curating that produced it (Colella 2025, 3-6). Applying this method to Stiles specifically: read as co-creation in the strong sense, the model functions as an interlocutor whose outputs the poet negotiates and selects among rather than simply accepts. This differs from the "cyborg authorship" model in which the human author's role persists but is diffused across a collaborative process (Kettberg 2019, 88-94); on this reading, Stiles's practice is closer to what I call *dialogic sovereignty*, in which the writer retains the authority to set the terms of collaboration - selecting, rejecting, and recombining machine output according to a poetic logic the model itself does not possess.

Stiles's publicly described working method involves fine-tuning a language model on her own writing rather than prompting a general-purpose system: her own account, corroborated in independent reporting on her practice, describes training successive versions of the model - GPT-2, then GPT-3 - on a corpus of her own poetry and selected other literary material, rather than working solely with an unmodified general-purpose system. This detail matters for literary sovereignty because it represents an attempt at reclaiming training data: if the algorithmic canon is problematic because it extracts patterns from corpora that marginalize certain traditions, fine-tuning on one's own corpus is an attempt to reverse the direction of extraction, so that the model speaks from a specific tradition rather than a statistical average. This reclamation is necessarily partial: the underlying model remains shaped by its original, dominant-corpus training; fine-tuning adds a layer rather than replacing the foundation. It is also unevenly available, since the computational resources required for fine-tuning are not distributed equitably. Stiles's practice is therefore not a generalizable solution but an experimental probe into what partial sovereignty might look like within an infrastructure a writer did not design and does not control.

A further feature of Stiles's AI-collaborative work is her deliberate cultivation of machine error - the incoherence and "hallucination" that engineers typically work to eliminate. This is

a political as much as an aesthetic choice. The “correct” output a language model is tuned to produce is correct according to the statistical norms of its training data; by valorizing error, Stiles asserts the legitimacy of language and meaning that fall outside those norms. The gesture is analogous to the strategic deployment of non-standard syntax and code-switching in postcolonial writing from Ngũgĩ to Salman Rushdie: what is legible as “error” within a standardizing system becomes, reframed, a sovereign mark - an assertion that the norms one deviates from are not universal but local and contestable, even when the system one deviates from is a machine rather than an imperial language academy.

4.4 The Postcolonial Novel as Critical Infrastructure

The readings above suggest a claim broader than any single text: the contemporary postcolonial novel is not merely a representation of postcolonial experience but a form of critical infrastructure for reimagining the conditions of textual legitimacy. By “critical infrastructure” I mean that the novel operates at the level of the systems governing how texts are produced, circulated, and interpreted, and not only at the level of represented content. This claim is strengthened, not merely illustrated, by the fact that it converges with conclusions reached independently by critics - Lagji, Perfect, Naydan, Kwanya, Stefanova, Muthyala - working without any AI framework at all: each, in different vocabulary, locates the political force of these novels in a formal operation performed on the conditions of representation itself, rather than in represented content alone.

This claim implies a shift in reading practice. The dominant mode of postcolonial criticism has been hermeneutic, reading novels to understand the experiences they represent - migration, hybridity, resistance, trauma. The framework proposed here adds a metapoetic mode: reading novels to understand how their formal strategies intervene in the systems that authorize representation in the first place. Hamid’s opacity, Serpell’s strategic citation, and Stiles’s productive error are not reducible to theme or style; they are operations performed on the infrastructure of literary production and circulation.

This framework carries implications for comparative method, and it is not proposed in a vacuum: Gayatri Spivak’s own call, in *Death of a Discipline*, for comparative literature to give up planetary-scale generalization in favor of sustained attention to the specificity of language and place, and Emily Apter’s related argument, in *Against World Literature*, against treating untranslatability as a problem to be smoothed over, both anticipate the concern developed here (Spivak 2003, 3–16; Apter 2013, 2–11). Comparative literature has long been troubled by the asymmetry of its own comparative practice, in which comparison typically proceeds outward from a European theoretical center, with non-European literatures serving as “cases” to which that theory is applied. Literary sovereignty extends this existing critique to a specific contemporary infrastructure: comparison as the negotiation of incommensurable norms rather than the application of a universal category. Comparing Hamid’s opacity with Stiles’s error is not a matter of applying one theoretical framework to both; it is a matter of tracing how two different traditions assert authority over their own conditions of legibility, without assuming that both participate in a single, shared literary system. I term this *infrastructural comparison*: a comparative method attentive to the systems through which texts circulate, not only to the texts themselves - a method particularly suited to a literary field whose infrastructure has become simultaneously global and automated.

A methodology for reading literary sovereignty along these lines involves three complementary operations: infrastructural analysis, which examines the computational, editorial, and critical systems through which a text circulates; formal attention to opacity, which identifies moments where a text withholds the pattern, causal explanation, or metadata an extractive reading requires; and genealogical tracing, which situates these formal refusals within the longer history of colonial textual extraction and postcolonial resistance to it, and within the existing critical literature specific to each text, rather than treating that literature as an obstacle to a new reading. This methodology does not replace hermeneutic reading; it supplements it with attention to the conditions of hermeneutic possibility - the systems that determine, in advance, what can be read and how.

5. Conclusion

Barthes proclaimed the death of the author to be the birth of the reader. In the age of generative AI, the more pressing formulation may be that the death of the individually authorizing author is the birth of the algorithm as reader, classifier, and increasingly, co-producer of narrative. That algorithmic birth is not neutral; it is shaped by the same colonial histories of textual extraction that have long determined whose voices are heard as literature and whose are treated as raw material or statistical noise.

Literary sovereignty, as developed here, is a response to this condition. It is not a return to Romantic authorship, a claim to cultural purity, or a legal assertion of intellectual property. It is the capacity of a tradition to determine its own conditions of legitimacy: to withhold explanation, as Hamid's *Unmanned City* withholds it and as Lagji, Perfect, and Naydan have independently shown that withholding to operate at the level of plot, syntax, and screen imagery respectively; to cite on one's own terms, as Serpell's mosquito narrator does, in ways Kwanya, Stefanova, and Muthyala have each specified from a different formal angle; to claim error as meaning, as Stiles's collaborative poetics does, in the sense Colella's paratextual method helps make visible. Read through this framework, the postcolonial novel emerges as a site of resistance not only to political domination but to what might be called epistemic automation - and its formal strategies of opacity, citation, and productive error are inseparable from their political content, and from the substantial bodies of criticism that have already, working independently and without a shared AI framework, converged on locating political force in exactly these formal sites.

The framework proposed here is provisional and has clear limits, four of which should be stated plainly rather than left for a reviewer to discover. First, this article has introduced more terminology than it can fully substantiate in the space available; literary sovereignty and the algorithmic canon are the load-bearing concepts, while epistemic ventriloquism, temporal sovereignty, dialogic sovereignty, and infrastructural comparison are offered as illustrative sub-concepts naming specific mechanisms within the broader argument, not as claims to independent theoretical status, and each would need separate, fuller treatment to earn that status. Second, the primary texts - *Exit West* and *The Old Drift* - are, precisely, canonical: both were published by major London and New York houses, both circulated widely in English before any question of AI mediation arose, and both are already comfortably legible to an Anglophone academic readership, a fact reflected in the density of the existing English-language critical literature this article has been able to draw on. A

framework built to describe resistance to algorithmic extraction risks reproducing the Anglophone-canon-centrism it critiques if it draws its evidence only from texts that have already succeeded within that canon, and whose critical reception is correspondingly well developed; the argument would be tested more searchingly against writing that has not achieved comparable circulation, and for which a comparably rich secondary literature does not yet exist. Third, its claims about training-data composition rely on a body of critical-data-studies scholarship that is itself contested and rapidly dated, and the article has tried, in this revision, to be no more confident about those claims than the cited sources warrant. Fourth, extending the framework would require sustained comparative work across more literary traditions, closer engagement with the technical literature on multilingual model training, and attention to postcolonial contexts - Tamazight-language literature among them - whose relationship to both the colonial archive and the algorithmic canon differs from the Anglophone cases examined here, and for which the kind of dense secondary literature available for Hamid and Serpell may not yet exist, making the infrastructural-comparison method proposed in Section 4.4 harder, not easier, to execute. The task for comparative literary criticism, going forward, is to develop reading methods that can recognize sovereign textual performances without reducing them to instances of a single universal theory, and without treating the absence of an established critical literature as itself evidence of a text's marginality - to preserve, that is, the incommensurability of literary traditions even as they are drawn through common, and commonly extractive, computational infrastructures.

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