

The Right to Opacity in the Age of Data Colonialism: Reading African Speculative Fiction through Glissant and Couldry–Mejias

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Abstract

In our current digital age, technology companies rely on “data colonialism”, a process where human experiences, cultures, and creative works are constantly mined for data to feed artificial intelligence. According to theorists Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, this system treats human life as a free resource to be extracted and categorized. This paper explores how modern African speculative fiction pushes back against this digital extraction by using Édouard Glissant’s concept of the “right to opacity”, which is the right to remain complex and not fully understood. Rather than just treating opacity as a theme within the story, this study argues that African authors use it as a core storytelling strategy. By playing with non-linear time, mixing languages that are difficult to translate, and building highly complex worlds, these novels actively resist being turned into simple, readable data. In doing so, African speculative fiction challenges the tech world’s demand for total transparency, showing how literary structure itself can be a powerful tool to protect cultural sovereignty from modern data colonialism.

Keywords: Data Colonialism, Édouard Glissant, Right to Opacity, African Speculative Fiction, AI Data Extraction, Literary Form, Digital Humanities.

1. Introduction

Today’s digital world runs on a simple, forceful rule: everything must be transparent, readable, and easy to process. Theorists Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias call this modern dynamic “data colonialism.” Just as historical empires once claimed physical land and resources, today’s tech empires claim our data. Through artificial intelligence and global algorithms, human life including art, culture, and literature is treated as raw material to be scraped, sorted, and turned into profit. For marginalized writers, particularly in African literature, this creates a familiar and dangerous pressure. They are increasingly expected to translate their complex, lived realities into simple, easily digestible formats that feed the very digital systems built to exploit them.

To fight back against this demand for total legibility, we need to look beyond *what* these stories are about, and focus on *how* they are told. This is where the Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant’s idea of the “right to opacity” becomes a vital theoretical tool. Glissant argued against the Western need to fully understand and categorize everything, stating that demanding total transparency is just another way to force people to fit into a dominant mold. Instead, he championed “opacity”, the basic human right to be complex, dense, and not easily explained to outsiders.

This paper argues that contemporary African speculative fiction uses Glissant's "opacity" not just as an abstract idea, but as a practical literary strategy to resist data colonialism. These authors build their stories in ways that intentionally confuse and block algorithmic systems. By scrambling traditional timelines, blending languages in ways that machine translators cannot easily process, and creating spiritual or futuristic worlds that defy Western logic, these texts refuse to be neatly categorized. They create a deliberate narrative "friction" that stops the easy extraction of data.

By shifting our focus to these formal choices; how time, language, and world-building are structured, this paper will demonstrate how African speculative fiction pushes back against tech extraction. When algorithms demand simple logic and easy categories to scrape meaning, these novels respond with stubborn, beautiful complexity. Ultimately, this structural opacity serves as a profound act of resistance, protecting the African imagination from being flattened into just another dataset.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on data colonialism has grown rapidly since Couldry and Mejias's foundational study, but its application to African speculative fiction specifically remains almost entirely unexplored. Abeba Birhane's work examines how Western tech monopolies share common characteristics with traditional colonialism, arguing that while historical colonialism was driven by political and government forces, algorithmic colonialism is driven by corporate agendas (Birhane, 2020). Her framework sharpens Couldry and Mejias's more general theory into a specifically African context, though her focus remains on technology policy rather than literary form a gap this paper addresses.

In postcolonial digital humanities, Roopika Risam's work traces the formation of postcolonial studies and digital humanities as fields, examining the role of colonial violence in the development of digital archives and the possibilities of postcolonial digital archives for resisting that violence (Risam, 2018). Risam's attention to how algorithms produce universalist notions of "the human" is directly relevant to this paper's argument about algorithmic illegibility, though her study does not extend to speculative fiction.

On Glissant, existing criticism has largely treated opacity as a political or ethical stance rather than a formal literary technique. One study argues that opacity is most fruitfully understood not as a built-in protection of a population but as a political accomplishment not a given but an achievement, relevant for ongoing decolonial work today (Allar, 2015). Celia Britton's monograph similarly reads opacity as an active strategy of resistance, in contrast to Spivak's account of the subaltern's inability to speak (Britton, 1999). Neither study, however, examines opacity as a *structural* device within contemporary genre fiction this is precisely the gap this paper fills.

Criticism on the primary texts themselves confirms this gap. Hugh Charles O'Connell's peer-reviewed reading of *Rosewater* situates the novel within debates on African futurism, globalization, and the Anthropocene (O'Connell, 2020), but does not address data extraction or Glissantian opacity. Matthew Eatough's study of African science fiction and the planning imagination (Eatough, 2017) and Peter Maurits and Thomas Waller's work on generic discontinuity and speculative form in the post-2008 African novel (Maurits & Waller, 2024) both examine formal innovation in African SF broadly, without connecting it to digital extraction. On Okorafor, Janet Seow's study of *Binti* focuses on environmental imaginaries and childhood studies rather than data politics (Seow, 2022).

This paper therefore fills a clearly demonstrable gap: no existing study reads African speculative fiction's formal strategies fragmented time, untranslated language, indigenous cosmology as a *direct, coordinated response to algorithmic data extraction*, using Glissant's opacity as the connecting theoretical framework.

3. The Mechanics of Extraction and the Right to Opacity

To understand the urgency of contemporary African speculative fiction, one must first examine the mechanics of digital extraction. In “The Costs of Connection,” Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias (2019) define data colonialism not as a mere metaphor, but as a direct evolution of historical exploitation. While historical empires extracted cheap nature and labor, the modern digital economy extracts human experience. As the authors note, this new colonial phase “appropriates human life so that data can be continuously extracted from it for profit” (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 11). Global digital archives and generative artificial intelligence models scan literature not to appreciate its cultural depth, but to extract patterns and readable data points.

This process forces a violent transparency upon the literary text. Algorithms require all cultural output to be highly legible, frictionless, and easy to categorize. For African writers, this demand mirrors historical colonial pressures, where indigenous cultures were expected to translate themselves into formats that made sense to European sensibilities. When an African text is too structurally complex or culturally specific, it risks being ignored by the global digital market or forcefully flattened into a consumable stereotype.

Tade Thompson’s novel “Rosewater” (2016) beautifully illustrates this exact threat. The novel centers on a near-future Nigeria where an alien biodome releases microscopic spores, connecting all human minds into a massive, invisible network called the xenosphere. This alien entity constantly scrapes the thoughts, memories, and personal data of the Nigerian citizens without their consent. The xenosphere operates as a literal manifestation of data colonialism, reflecting a system that views human cognitive labor as a free, extractable resource.

However, African speculative fiction does not simply dramatize this surveillance; it actively resists it by deploying what Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant termed the “right to opacity.” In his foundational text “Poetics of Relation” (1997), Glissant critiques the Western philosophical obsession with total transparency, arguing that the demand to fully “understand” and categorize the marginalized subject is an act of reduction. He asserts, “If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency” (Glissant, 1997, p. 190). In response, Glissant champions opacity, which is the fundamental right of a culture to remain dense, complex, and irreducible to a simple data point.

When applied to the digital age, this right to opacity transforms into a highly effective literary strategy. Nnedi Okorafor achieves this structural resistance in her novella “Binti” (2015) by building a cosmology that defies algorithmic legibility. Binti, a young Himba woman navigating an intergalactic university, relies on traditional practices, such as applying “otjize” (a mixture of clay and essential oils), to ground herself. Crucially, Okorafor refuses to pause the narrative to fully translate the deep spiritual weight of these practices for the Western gaze. Furthermore, Binti interacts with advanced alien technology through a meditative, spiritual state known as “treeing.” By seamlessly fusing indigenous spirituality with hard science fiction, Okorafor creates a worldview that Western, data-driven logic cannot easily map. Because algorithms are programmed to separate magic from empirical science, Okorafor’s narrative remains beautifully unreadable to the extracting machine.

Thompson similarly builds opacity directly into the formal structure of “Rosewater.” He does not merely tell a story about victims of data mining. Instead, he fragments the timeline, shifting constantly between different years to ensure the protagonist’s life cannot be consumed as a linear, straightforward dataset. Inside the Xeno sphere, characters learn to protect their thoughts by building mental firewalls out of specific Nigerian cultural references, memories, and local slang that the alien intelligence simply cannot

decode. The alien network can scrape the raw data, but it lacks the cultural context to digest it. Through this linguistic and temporal density, Thompson's work embodies Glissant's theories perfectly. It proves that when African narratives embrace their inherent opacity, their cultural density becomes an armor that actively short-circuits the machinery of extraction.

4. Linguistic Untranslatability as a Digital Firewall

The structural resistance found in "Binti" and "Rosewater" extends deeply into how these authors use language itself. In the modern digital economy, machine translation algorithms are designed to smooth over linguistic differences. Their goal is to turn diverse, regional dialects into standardized, easily consumed English. This is a core function of data colonialism, as it demands that all global voices speak in a format that the machine can effortlessly process and categorize.

To combat this, Okorafor and Thompson employ linguistic hybridity, constructing what we might call a digital firewall. Glissant (1997) argued that language must retain its unpredictability to survive the homogenizing forces of global systems. He celebrated "creolization," a blending of cultures and languages that creates something entirely new and stubbornly opaque to outsiders.

In her writing, Okorafor frequently integrates Igbo and Himba terminology without offering glossaries or italicizing the words. By treating these terms as the standard default rather than foreign deviations, she refuses to accommodate the Western reader or the scraping algorithm. The words remain culturally dense and grounded. Similarly, Thompson weaves Nigerian Pidgin and local slang throughout "Rosewater" (2016). When characters navigate the xenosphere, this localized language becomes a literal defence mechanism against the alien intelligence. The alien algorithm can record the words, but the cultural syntax remains completely opaque to it. Through these linguistic choices, both authors prove that untranslatability is not a failure to communicate. Instead, it is a deliberate, highly intellectual tactic used to protect the sovereign identity of the African text.

5. Conclusion

In the contemporary era of generative artificial intelligence, the threat of data colonialism is not a distant or futuristic concept. As Couldry and Mejias (2019) have shown, it is a very real, ongoing process that treats human culture as a raw material for corporate extraction. The algorithms powering this digital empire demand total transparency, requiring every narrative to be legible, categorized, and easily consumed.

However, contemporary African speculative fiction offers a powerful blueprint for resistance. By reading the works of Nnedi Okorafor and Tade Thompson through Édouard Glissant's concept of the right to opacity, this paper has demonstrated that true literary resistance is not just about the themes a story explores. Meaningful resistance is found in the very structure and form of the text.

Through the use of fragmented timelines, untranslatable linguistic hybridity, and deeply rooted indigenous cosmologies, these authors build narratives that actively reject digital legibility. They create a deliberate structural friction. Their texts stand as a testament to the fact that African identities, histories, and futures do not exist merely to be mined for global data sets. By fiercely guarding their right to opacity, authors like Okorafor and Thompson secure their authorial sovereignty, ensuring that the African imaginary remains complex, sovereign, and beautifully unreadable to the extracting machine.

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