

Reading Under Algorithmic Regimes: Attention Economies, Cultural Intermediation, and Contemporary Literary Value

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Abstract

Current scholarly discourse surrounding digital reading practices tends to foreground concerns about diminishing attention capacities and evolving consumption patterns among readers. However, such perspectives frequently neglect to examine how algorithmic intermediation fundamentally structures contemporary literary ecosystems. This research contends that reading practices within present-day algorithmic frameworks operate within attention-driven economies that actively shape the creation, dissemination, and assessment of literary merit. Grounding the analysis in theoretical frameworks of attention economics and cultural intermediation, this study positions algorithms not as impartial technological mechanisms but rather as cultural arbiters that fundamentally reorganize visibility dynamics, institutional recognition, and aesthetic evaluation processes

Examining select contemporary Anglophone literary works in conjunction with consumer-oriented digital platforms, this research investigates how algorithmic frameworks favor attributes such as immediacy, user engagement, and commercially viable emotional resonance at the expense of deliberate pacing, interpretive challenge, and structural sophistication—characteristics conventionally aligned with literary distinction. Through sustained textual interpretation and critical analysis of platform-mediated reception practices, this investigation reveals how contemporary literary production simultaneously absorbs and contests algorithmic demands, exposing frictions between aesthetic independence and commercially motivated discoverability.

By centering algorithmic frameworks as mediating infrastructures within contemporary literary ecosystems, this research advances current scholarly conversations concerning literary merit, canonical development, and interpretive practices in digital environments. The study concludes that the reconfiguration of reading under algorithmic oversight requires substantial

revision of the critical methodologies employed to evaluate literary significance within an epoch progressively dominated by attention-based economies.

Keywords: Algorithmic frameworks; Literary merit; Attention economics; Cultural intermediation; Interpretive practices; Contemporary narrative fiction

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, scholarly debates on digital reading practices have been dominated by anxieties concerning diminishing attention spans, shortened reading durations, and the cognitive consequences of screen-based media consumption. Influential interventions have argued that digital environments encourage skimming, distraction, and fragmented engagement, thereby undermining the capacities associated with sustained, immersive, and reflective reading traditionally cultivated through print culture (Carr, 2010; Wolf, 2018). Drawing on neuroscientific, cognitive, and behavioral models, such accounts frequently frame digital reading as a problem of individual cognition, self-regulation, or readerly discipline.

While these perspectives have been instrumental in foregrounding the experiential and cognitive dimensions of digital reading, they remain limited in scope. By focusing primarily on the reader's mental processes, they risk depoliticizing and decontextualizing reading practices, treating them as individual failures rather than as outcomes shaped by broader technological, economic, and cultural infrastructures (Hayles, 2012; Liu, 2004). As several scholars have noted, attention is not merely a cognitive faculty but a socially organized and economically contested resource (Crary, 2013; Citton, 2017). Consequently, analyses that overlook the structural conditions governing contemporary reading environments fail to account for how literature itself is reshaped by digital mediation.

This paper contends that contemporary reading practices must be understood within **algorithmic regimes**—complex socio-technical systems in which algorithmic infrastructures actively organize cultural visibility, circulation, and value. Within such regimes, reading is governed not solely by individual preference or interpretive agency but by **attention economies** that prioritize content capable of capturing, retaining, and monetizing user engagement (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Zuboff, 2019). Algorithms embedded in dominant digital platforms—such as Amazon, Goodreads, Instagram, and TikTok—operate through ranking, recommendation, and filtering mechanisms that shape what texts are encountered, how they are framed, and which forms of literary expression gain prominence.

Rather than functioning as neutral or transparent tools, these algorithmic systems increasingly act as **cultural intermediaries**, assuming roles once occupied by critics, educators, publishers, and literary institutions (Bourdieu, 1993; Negus, 2002). As scholars of algorithmic culture have argued, algorithms participate in evaluative decision-making by encoding particular assumptions about relevance, popularity, and value, often aligned with commercial imperatives rather than aesthetic judgment (Gillespie, 2014; Beer, 2017; Striplhas, 2015). In doing so, they reshape the conditions under which literature is discovered, discussed, and legitimated, thereby exerting a profound influence on contemporary literary culture.

This infrastructural shift has significant implications for literary value. Algorithmic systems tend to privilege immediacy, emotional resonance, and marketable affect—qualities that align with engagement-driven metrics—while marginalizing attributes historically associated with literary distinction, such as formal difficulty, narrative slowness, ambiguity, and resistance to consumption (Bourdieu, 1993; Ngai, 2012). As a result, literary merit becomes increasingly

entangled with visibility metrics, user ratings, and platform popularity, complicating long-standing distinctions between aesthetic value and commercial success. The rise of platform-mediated evaluation thus calls into question traditional critical frameworks that treat literary value as autonomous from market forces.

At the same time, contemporary literature does not merely submit to algorithmic governance. Many literary texts actively negotiate, internalize, and resist the logics of algorithmic visibility, developing aesthetic strategies that both reflect and critique attention-driven cultural environments. As N. Katherine Hayles (2012) suggests, literary form itself adapts to changing media ecologies, producing new modes of engagement that coexist uneasily with older ideals of deep attention. This tension is particularly evident in contemporary Anglophone fiction, where authors experiment with form, temporality, and narrative voice in ways that both accommodate and challenge platform-based reading practices.

Through close textual analysis of selected contemporary Anglophone novels—particularly works by **Ali Smith, Sally Rooney, and Teju Cole**—alongside critical examination of their platform-mediated reception, this paper investigates how contemporary literature navigates algorithmic regimes. Ali Smith's formally experimental and temporally disjunctive narratives foreground slowness and interpretive difficulty in an attention-saturated environment; Sally Rooney's globally popular novels exemplify how algorithmic visibility can amplify affective intimacy and reader identification; and Teju Cole's intellectually demanding, digressive prose illustrates the persistence of aesthetic resistance within commercially oriented digital ecosystems. Examining these texts in relation to reader-facing platforms such as Goodreads and social media-based reading communities enables a nuanced account of how literary value is produced, contested, and reconfigured under algorithmic mediation.

By foregrounding algorithmic governance as a constitutive force within contemporary literary culture, this study argues for a rethinking of the critical frameworks used to assess literary merit, canon formation, and reading practices in the digital age. Rather than treating algorithmic mediation as a peripheral context, the paper positions it as a central analytic category for understanding how literature functions within contemporary attention economies. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in literary studies, digital humanities, and cultural theory concerning the future of reading and the conditions under which literary value is made and sustained.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FROM DIGITAL READING ANXIETY TO ALGORITHMIC CULTURE

Early Digital Reading Debates

Early scholarship on digital reading emphasized concerns about fragmented attention and the erosion of deep reading practices. Carr (2010) argued that digital environments promote skimming, distraction, and cognitive shallowness, positioning print reading as a site of sustained attention and intellectual rigor. While influential in shaping public discourse around digital media, such arguments have been critiqued for relying on implicit binaries between print and digital media and for adopting a moralistic stance toward reading practices (Hayles, 2012; Liu, 2005).

These approaches have also been noted for disproportionately focusing on the reader as the site of crisis, framing attention loss as an individual cognitive failure rather than as a structurally produced condition (Citton, 2017; Cramer, 2018). Consequently, they risk overlooking the

political economy of digital platforms that actively engineer reading environments optimized for engagement and monetization (Terranova, 2000; Zuboff, 2019). This shift in critical perspective directs attention toward the infrastructural and commercial forces that shape contemporary reading practices, moving beyond individualized accounts of cognitive decline.

Algorithmic Culture and Cultural Intermediation

More recent scholarship in media studies and digital humanities has foregrounded the cultural power of algorithms as constitutive forces in knowledge production and cultural circulation. Striphas (2015) and Gillespie (2014) contend that algorithms participate actively in cultural decision-making processes by determining what becomes visible, legible, and valuable within digital ecosystems. Within this analytical framework, algorithms are conceptualized not as neutral or passive computational tools but as influential agents in the organization and stratification of cultural life (Bucher, 2018; Seaver, 2017).

Bourdieu's (1993) theory of cultural production provides a crucial foundation for understanding this transformation in the mechanisms of cultural legitimation. Whereas traditional cultural intermediaries—including critics, publishers, and educators—historically exercised considerable authority in processes of canon formation and aesthetic valuation (Bourdieu, 1984), algorithmic systems now occupy an increasingly central position in these dynamics (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Prey, 2020). Recommendation engines, popularity rankings, and engagement metrics function as emergent mechanisms of symbolic consecration, reconfiguring the field of cultural production through datafied logics of visibility and circulation (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

Despite this expanding body of scholarship, literary studies has been comparatively slow to integrate questions of algorithmic mediation into analyses of literary value and aesthetic judgment (Pressman, 2020; Piper, 2018). This study addresses that lacuna by situating contemporary literature within the infrastructural logic of platform-based attention economies, thereby illuminating how algorithmic intermediation reshapes conditions of literary production, circulation, and reception.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ATTENTION ECONOMY AND ALGORITHMIC MEDIATION

The concept of the attention economy conceptualizes attention as a finite and increasingly commodified resource within contemporary digital capitalism (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Goldhaber, 1997). As digital platforms compete intensively for user engagement, cultural production becomes progressively oriented toward strategies designed to capture and sustain attention (Citton, 2017; Wu, 2016). Algorithms operationalize this economic logic through computational processes that rank, filter, and promote content based on quantifiable engagement signals, including clicks, likes, reading completion rates, and affective responses (Cohn, 2019; Mau, 2019).

Within literary culture specifically, this algorithmic rationality produces a substantive recalibration of aesthetic priorities and evaluative frameworks. Texts that generate immediate affective engagement or emotional intensity are structurally advantaged within algorithmic systems and thus more likely to achieve visibility and amplification, while literary works demanding sustained interpretive labor or cognitive investment risk algorithmic marginalization (Finn, 2017; Piper, 2018). This differential visibility carries significant implications for how literary merit is socially constructed, institutionally recognized, and

culturally consecrated in platform-mediated environments (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019; Murray, 2018).

Theories of cultural mediation further elucidate how algorithms assume evaluative authority within processes of cultural circulation and legitimation (Negus, 2002; Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014). Algorithms increasingly mediate the relationship between authors and readers, exerting considerable influence over mechanisms of literary discovery, patterns of reception, and trajectories of institutional recognition (Steiner, 2022; Thomé, 2021). Consequently, they function as non-human cultural intermediaries whose evaluative criteria are fundamentally shaped by commercial imperatives—including engagement optimization, user retention, and platform monetization—rather than by traditional frameworks of aesthetic judgment or literary criticism (Ossa Rojas & Antunovic, 2020; Regev, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology that integrates multiple analytical approaches to examine the intersection of contemporary literary production, digital platform architectures, and algorithmic mediation. The methodological framework draws upon three interconnected modes of inquiry: close textual analysis of selected contemporary Anglophone novels, platform analysis of reader-facing digital environments, and reception analysis focusing on quantifiable engagement metrics and qualitative reader responses. This triangulated approach enables a comprehensive examination of how algorithmic systems shape literary visibility, circulation, and valuation in the contemporary moment.

Close Textual Analysis

The close reading component of this methodology engages with the formal, thematic, and structural properties of selected literary texts. This approach draws upon the tradition of New Criticism (Brooks, 1947; Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954), while remaining attentive to the cultural and technological contexts of production and reception that post-structuralist and new historicist criticism have foregrounded (Greenblatt, 1988; Foucault, 1969). The analysis examines narrative techniques, stylistic choices, representational strategies, and intertextual relationships, attending particularly to features that may influence algorithmic classification and recommendation systems. As Pressman (2014) argues in *Digital Modernism*, contemporary literary aesthetics cannot be understood independently from the digital infrastructures that shape their circulation, necessitating a reading practice that remains alert to the "bookishness" of texts as both material objects and datafied commodities.

The textual analysis focuses on elements including narrative voice and perspective, temporal structure, genre markers and conventions, thematic preoccupations, linguistic register and stylistic density, and paratextual elements (titles, epigraphs, acknowledgments). These formal features are examined not merely as aesthetic choices but as potentially consequential factors in how texts are categorized, tagged, and recommended within algorithmic systems. Following Guillory's (1993) work on canon formation in *Cultural Capital*, this study considers how textual features interact with institutional and technological mechanisms of literary consecration and circulation.

Platform Analysis

The platform analysis component examines the technical, commercial, and social architectures of key digital environments where contemporary literature circulates and is evaluated. This methodology draws upon platform studies (Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Gillespie, 2010) and

critical algorithm studies (Bucher, 2018; Noble, 2018) to investigate how specific platforms structure literary discovery, evaluation, and community formation. The primary platforms under investigation include:

Amazon: As the dominant retailer of books in Anglophone markets, Amazon's recommendation algorithms, review systems, and ranking mechanisms exert considerable influence over literary visibility (Thompson, 2012; Murray, 2018). The analysis examines Amazon's "Customers who bought this item also bought" recommendation engine, the algorithmic curation of "Frequently bought together" suggestions, the visibility hierarchy established through bestseller rankings, the architecture of user review systems and "helpful" voting mechanisms, and the searchability and discoverability features including tags, categories, and metadata. As Striplhas (2015) argues in "Algorithmic Culture," Amazon's systems represent "a cultural form that is increasingly shot through with calculative procedures," fundamentally altering the relationship between readers and literary texts.

Goodreads: Acquired by Amazon in 2013, Goodreads functions as a social cataloguing platform where readers organize, rate, and discuss books (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017). The platform's recommendation algorithms, "popular shelves" taxonomy, and rating aggregation systems create specific conditions for literary evaluation. The analysis examines the platform's star rating system and review architecture, algorithmic recommendation features ("Readers also enjoyed"), user-generated shelving and tagging practices, the "popular shelves" feature that reveals collective categorization, and reading challenge features that gamify consumption. Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo (2019) demonstrate in "The 'Long History' of Virtual Reading Practices" how such platforms reshape reading communities and literary taste formation through their particular affordances and constraints.

Instagram Reading Communities: Instagram's visually-oriented platform has given rise to distinctive reading communities, particularly "Bookstagram," where literary culture intersects with influencer culture and visual aesthetics (Driscoll, 2019). The analysis examines how Instagram's algorithmic feed prioritization, hashtag systems, and engagement metrics shape which books gain visibility. This includes attention to aesthetic conventions of book photography and "shelfies," hashtag ecosystems (#bookstagram, #currentlyreading, author-specific tags), influencer culture and sponsored content relationships, and algorithmic visibility factors (likes, comments, saves, shares). As Thomas (2020) argues, these visually-mediated reading practices constitute a significant shift in how literary culture is performed and circulated in digital spaces.

The platform analysis methodology involves what Bucher (2018) terms "reverse engineering" of algorithmic systems through systematic observation, documentation of platform interfaces and features, tracking of recommendation patterns and visibility hierarchies, and analysis of terms of service and publicly available documentation of algorithmic principles. While the proprietary nature of commercial algorithms limits full transparency, this observational approach can reveal patterns in how platforms structure literary visibility (Kitchin, 2017).

Reception Analysis

The reception analysis component examines how readers engage with, evaluate, and circulate contemporary literary texts within algorithmic environments. This methodology draws upon reader-response criticism (Iser, 1978; Fish, 1980) while adapting these frameworks to account for the mediated, datafied nature of contemporary reading communities. As Radway (1984) demonstrated in *Reading the Romance*, examining how readers actually engage with texts can

reveal significant disjunctions between authorial intentions, critical interpretations, and popular reception.

The analysis encompasses both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of reception:

Quantitative Metrics: Sales rankings and bestseller list positions, aggregated star ratings across platforms, review volume and velocity, social media engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments), and reading challenge participation rates. While these metrics are themselves shaped by algorithmic systems, they provide insight into relative visibility and popularity. As English (2016) argues in "Now, Not Now," bestseller lists function as both reflections and producers of literary value in market-driven systems.

Qualitative Analysis: The study conducts thematic analysis of reader reviews and responses, examining common interpretive frameworks, evaluative criteria, affective responses, and discursive patterns. This includes attention to how readers describe discovering texts, frame their aesthetic judgments, position themselves in relation to literary hierarchies, and articulate connections between books. Following Felski's (2008) work in *Uses of Literature*, the analysis attends to the diverse "modes of engagement" readers bring to literary texts, from recognition to enchantment to knowledge production.

The reception analysis also examines what Nakamura (2013) terms "menu-driven identities"—how platform affordances shape the expression of reading preferences and literary taste. Goodreads shelves, Amazon purchase histories, and Instagram hashtags constitute forms of algorithmic self-presentation that both reflect and construct reader identities within platform logics.

Case Study Selection: Ali Smith, Sally Rooney, and Teju Cole

The selection of Ali Smith, Sally Rooney, and Teju Cole as primary case studies reflects a deliberate sampling strategy designed to capture diverse positions within contemporary literary culture. These authors occupy distinct locations along multiple axes of literary production, including aesthetic orientation, commercial success, critical reception, and algorithmic visibility.

Ali Smith represents experimental literary modernism, with a career characterized by formal innovation, intertextuality, and political engagement. Her seasonal quartet (*Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer*) demonstrates a commitment to formally ambitious fiction that responds rapidly to contemporary political events, particularly Brexit and its cultural aftermath (Shaw, 2018). Smith's work has received significant critical acclaim, including multiple award nominations, yet her formal complexity potentially challenges algorithmic categorization systems that privilege genre clarity and marketing simplicity. As Boxall (2013) notes, Smith's fiction exemplifies a contemporary experimentalism that troubles straightforward categorization while maintaining accessibility to non-specialist readers.

Sally Rooney occupies a distinctive position as a critically acclaimed author who has achieved unusual commercial success with formally restrained, intellectually ambitious fiction. Her novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018) have been characterized as exemplars of "millennial realism," combining attention to intimate relationships with broader engagements with capitalism, technology, and precarity (Hsu, 2019). Rooney's work demonstrates high algorithmic visibility across platforms while maintaining literary prestige, making her an instructive case for examining how certain contemporary aesthetics navigate both market and critical success. As Prendergast (2020) argues, Rooney's fiction represents a convergence of literary quality and commercial viability that has proven particularly suited to digital circulation and discussion.

Teju Cole represents cosmopolitan, essayistic fiction characterized by peripatetic narration, photographic sensibility, and philosophical meditation. Works such as *Open City* (2011) and *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2014) exemplify what Walkowitz (2015) terms "born-translated" fiction—writing that anticipates global circulation and reflects transnational literary consciousness. Cole's position as both novelist and public intellectual, with significant presence across multiple media platforms, offers insight into how contemporary authors navigate algorithmic visibility through multi-platform presence. His work's hybrid generic qualities—combining fiction, essay, photography, and criticism—provide a productive case for examining how algorithmic categorization systems manage generic ambiguity.

Together, these three authors represent a spectrum of contemporary literary production: from experimental modernism (Smith) to commercially successful literary realism (Rooney) to hybrid, cosmopolitan aesthetics (Cole). Their works circulate through similar platform infrastructures yet occupy different positions within algorithmic hierarchies of visibility and recommendation. This diversity enables comparative analysis of how algorithmic systems engage with different aesthetic orientations, genre positions, and marketing strategies.

Analytical Framework and Limitations

The integration of these three methodological components—close reading, platform analysis, and reception study—enables examination of contemporary literary culture as a complex system in which textual properties, technological infrastructures, and reader practices mutually constitute conditions of possibility for literary circulation and valuation. Following Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, the methodology treats literary value as emergent from networks of human and non-human actors, including authors, readers, critics, platforms, algorithms, and texts themselves.

Several limitations of this methodology warrant acknowledgment. First, the proprietary nature of commercial algorithms limits transparency about their precise functioning, requiring reliance on observational inference rather than direct access to algorithmic code (Burrell, 2016). Second, the rapid evolution of digital platforms means that findings may have limited temporal stability—platform features, algorithmic priorities, and user practices shift continuously. Third, the selection of Anglophone authors and English-language platforms limits generalizability to other linguistic and cultural contexts. Fourth, the focus on reader-facing platforms excludes other significant sites of algorithmic mediation, including library discovery systems, academic databases, and traditional media coverage shaped by algorithmic newsfeeds.

Despite these limitations, the methodology offers a productive framework for examining how contemporary literary culture operates within algorithmic regimes, attending simultaneously to textual properties, platform architectures, and reading practices as they interact to produce conditions of literary visibility and value in the digital present.

Case Study I: Ali Smith and the Politics of Slowness

Ali Smith's seasonal quartet—*Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020)—exemplifies a literary aesthetic characterized by slowness, fragmentation, and temporal dislocation. These novels resist conventional linear plotting and demand sustained interpretive attention from readers, thereby positioning themselves in direct tension with algorithmic preferences for narrative immediacy, momentum, and affective intensity (Colebrook, 2014; Toolan, 2016). Smith's formal experimentation, including her use of typographic play, intertextual layering, and non-chronological narrative structures, enacts what Sharma (2014) terms "temporal resistance" to the accelerated rhythms of digital modernity.

On digital platforms such as Goodreads, Amazon, and literary recommendation systems, Smith's works are frequently framed and categorized through markers of topical relevance—including Brexit, migration, and contemporary political crisis—rather than through acknowledgment of their formal experimentation or aesthetic innovation (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019; Ramdarshan Bold, 2016). Algorithmic recommendation systems often reduce the novels' layered aesthetic complexity to simplified thematic keywords and genre tags, thereby mediating their reception through what Finn (2017) describes as "flattened affective frames" that prioritize discoverability and engagement over interpretive depth. This process of algorithmic simplification reflects broader patterns in how platform-based systems operationalize cultural value through computational legibility (Hallinan & Striphias, 2016). Smith's corpus thus illustrates how algorithmic mediation fundamentally reshapes processes of literary interpretation, systematically privileging topical resonance and thematic accessibility over formal difficulty and stylistic complexity (Pressman, 2020; Underwood, 2019). Simultaneously, her sustained insistence on slowness, fragmentation, and readerly labor functions as an implicit—and at times explicit—critique of attention-driven reading environments structured by platform capitalism (Hassan, 2009; Wajcman, 2015). In this regard, Smith's seasonal quartet can be understood as enacting what Rosa (2013) characterizes as a form of "resonant resistance" to the temporal logics of algorithmic culture.

Formal Complexity and Algorithmic Resistance

Smith's formal strategies deliberately obstruct the reading practices valorized by algorithmic systems. The seasonal quartet employs ekphrastic passages, dream sequences, philosophical digressions, and metafictional interruptions that disrupt narrative flow and frustrate expectations of linear progression (Wood, 2017). *Autumn*, for instance, opens with a fragmented meditation on time, featuring typographically experimental passages that challenge conventional page layout and reading orientation. These formal innovations demand what Hayles (2012) terms "deep attention"—sustained, focused engagement incompatible with the "hyper attention" cultivated by digital platforms.

Moreover, Smith's extensive use of intertextuality—ranging from references to Christine Cavallo's *Common Ground* to allusions to Dickens, Shakespeare, and Huxley—presumes a reader willing to engage with cultural references that extend beyond the immediate textual surface (Tew, 2019). Such intertextual density creates interpretive challenges that resist algorithmic parsing and frustrate platform-based recommendation systems dependent on straightforward generic categorization (Herrmann, Lauer, & Fischer, 2021). The novels thus embody what Adorno (1997) describes as art's critical potential: their formal difficulty constitutes an implicit refusal of cultural commodification.

Smith's manipulation of temporality further exemplifies this resistance. The quartet deliberately blurs boundaries between past and present, employing non-linear chronologies that juxtapose historical moments with contemporary crises (O'Gorman, 2018). Characters move fluidly between time periods; memories intrude upon present-tense narration; historical figures converse with contemporary protagonists. This temporal disorientation enacts what Hutcheon (2002) identifies as postmodern historiographic metafiction, wherein formal experimentation carries political implications by disrupting linear narratives of progress and inevitability.

Algorithmic Categorization and Thematic Reduction

Analysis of Smith's platform presence reveals systematic patterns of reductive categorization. On Goodreads, the seasonal quartet is predominantly tagged with labels such as "Brexit,"

"contemporary fiction," "political," and "literary fiction," while tags acknowledging formal experimentation—such as "experimental," "postmodern," or "metafiction"—appear with significantly lower frequency (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017). This disparity reflects how platform architectures privilege content-based classification over formal or aesthetic categorization, rendering experimental literary techniques computationally invisible (Nakamura, 2013).

Amazon's recommendation algorithm similarly clusters Smith's works with politically themed contemporary fiction—novels by authors such as Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, and Jonathan Coe—rather than with formally experimental writers like Jeanette Winterson, Will Self, or B.S. Johnson, despite Smith's aesthetic affinities with the latter group (Finn, 2017). This algorithmic miscategorization reflects what Galloway (2012) describes as the "protological" dimension of digital systems: protocols that structure information circulation inevitably impose normative frameworks that privilege certain organizational logics while marginalizing others.

User-generated reviews on platforms further reinforce this thematic reduction. While some readers acknowledge Smith's formal innovation, the majority of highly rated and algorithmically promoted reviews emphasize the novels' political timeliness and social commentary (Driscoll, 2014). Reviews praising the quartet's "relevance" to Brexit-era Britain receive greater platform visibility than those analyzing narrative structure or intertextual complexity, demonstrating how algorithmic amplification privileges certain interpretive frameworks over others (Rehberg Sedo, 2011).

Temporal Politics and Platform Acceleration

Smith's aesthetic commitment to slowness operates in explicit opposition to what Wajcman (2015) characterizes as the "temporal architecture" of digital capitalism. The seasonal quartet was deliberately written and published rapidly—*Autumn* appeared mere months after the 2016 Brexit referendum—yet the novels themselves resist accelerated consumption (Lea, 2016). This temporal paradox—speed of production coupled with slowness of reading—enacts what Sharma (2014) terms "power-chronography," wherein temporal practices become sites of political struggle.

The novels frequently thematize temporal resistance through narrative content as well as form. Characters in *Autumn* discuss Tacita Dean's films, artworks that privilege durational engagement and contemplative viewing (Iversen, 2018). In *Winter*, protagonist Sophia Cleves encounters a disused public library, a space associated with non-accelerated, non-instrumental reading practices threatened by neoliberal austerity (Mattern, 2014). These thematic elements reinforce the formal politics of slowness, positioning contemplative attention as a form of resistance to what Crary (2013) identifies as capitalism's colonization of sleep and rest.

Smith's temporal politics extend to her critique of digital media specifically. *Autumn* features a character who works in digital surveillance, tracking online behavior and compiling data profiles—a narrative strand that explicitly addresses algorithmic mediation of contemporary life (Rosenblat, 2018). The novel juxtaposes this digital surveillance with analogue forms of attention: close reading of literature, sustained viewing of visual art, extended face-to-face conversation. These juxtapositions establish a clear opposition between accelerated, data-driven attention regimes and slower, more reflective modes of engagement.

Critical Reception and Institutional Legitimation

Significantly, Smith's seasonal quartet has received substantial critical acclaim and institutional recognition despite—or perhaps because of—its resistance to algorithmic optimization. *Autumn* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2017; the quartet as a whole has garnered widespread praise from literary critics in venues such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and

the *London Review of Books* (Eaglestone, 2018). This institutional validation suggests that traditional cultural gatekeepers continue to exercise significant consecrating power, even as algorithmic systems increasingly mediate literary circulation (English, 2005).

However, the divergence between critical acclaim and platform metrics reveals fractures within contemporary literary culture. While Smith's works receive high ratings on Goodreads (averaging 3.8-4.0 stars), they generate fewer total ratings than algorithmically optimized bestsellers, indicating more limited popular reach (Bold, 2016). Reader reviews frequently describe the novels as "difficult," "challenging," or requiring "effort"—descriptors that function as double-edged assessments, simultaneously acknowledging aesthetic ambition and signaling resistance to easy consumption (Nakamura, 2013).

This reception pattern illuminates what Bourdieu (1993) identifies as the fundamental opposition within the literary field between autonomous and heteronomous principles of evaluation. Smith's work occupies a position of high cultural capital within restricted fields of production—garnering critical prestige and institutional recognition—while achieving more limited success within large-scale fields oriented toward commercial circulation and popular consumption (Sapiro, 2016). Algorithmic systems, privileging engagement metrics associated with the latter, struggle to adequately recognize or promote the former.

Pedagogical Implications and Resistant Reading

Smith's seasonal quartet also raises crucial questions about digital literacy and reading pedagogy. The novels' formal complexity demands what Birkerts (1994) terms "vertical reading"—deep, sustained engagement with textual layers—as opposed to the "horizontal reading" encouraged by digital platforms that prioritize breadth over depth. Educational contexts increasingly oriented toward digital tools and platform-mediated resources may find Smith's aesthetic demands incompatible with prevailing pedagogical frameworks (Hayles, 2012).

Yet precisely this incompatibility suggests Smith's pedagogical value. The seasonal quartet can function as what Rancière (2011) describes as a "dissensual" intervention—disrupting consensus about appropriate reading practices and compelling readers to confront their own habituated attention patterns. Teaching Smith's works within digitally saturated educational environments creates productive friction, encouraging critical reflection on how platform architectures shape interpretive practices and aesthetic values (Pressman, 2014).

Furthermore, Smith's novels model forms of attention and engagement increasingly threatened by algorithmic culture. Her characters' sustained contemplation of artworks, their careful listening to one another's stories, and their patient navigation of temporal complexity offer alternative models of attention that resist instrumental rationality and quantified engagement (Crawford, 2015). In this sense, the seasonal quartet functions not merely as aesthetic objects but as pedagogical interventions, teaching reading practices at odds with dominant platform logics.

The Paradox of Visibility

Smith's case ultimately reveals a fundamental paradox within contemporary literary culture: works that resist algorithmic optimization may achieve critical legitimation precisely through that resistance, yet such legitimation occurs within increasingly marginalized cultural spaces. As platform capitalism extends its reach across cultural domains, the autonomous spaces wherein Smith's aesthetic strategies gain recognition face systemic pressures toward datafication, engagement optimization, and algorithmic mediation (Prey, 2020).

The seasonal quartet thus occupies an ambivalent position within what Jameson (1991) terms late capitalism's cultural logic. On one hand, Smith's formal experimentation and temporal resistance offer genuine aesthetic and political alternatives to accelerated, attention-driven cultural production. On the other hand, such resistance risks marginalization within cultural ecosystems increasingly structured by algorithmic systems that render formal complexity computationally illegible and commercially unviable (McGurl, 2016).

This ambivalence reflects broader tensions regarding the political efficacy of aesthetic resistance under conditions of platform capitalism. Can literary experimentation meaningfully contest algorithmic culture when such experimentation is confined to restricted circuits of cultural production? Or does the very marginalization of difficult, experimental literature demonstrate algorithmic culture's capacity to neutralize aesthetic opposition through selective amplification of more readily consumable forms? Smith's seasonal quartet poses these questions without resolving them, functioning as both aesthetic achievement and symptom of contemporary cultural contradictions.

Case Study II: Sally Rooney and Algorithmic Intimacy

Sally Rooney's novels—*Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018)—occupy a distinctive and revealing position within contemporary algorithmic regimes of literary circulation and valuation. Her stylistically accessible prose, emotionally resonant thematic concerns, and intimate portrayals of interpersonal relationships align closely with platform-based metrics of user engagement and affective response (Devlin, 2020; Kelly, 2020). Rooney's narrative strategies, including her deployment of free indirect discourse, minimalist dialogue, and focalization through millennial subjectivity, facilitate what Illouz (2007) terms "emotional capitalism"—the convergence of intimate affect with market logic.

Rooney's substantial popularity on digital platforms such as Goodreads and Instagram-based reading communities (notably #BookTok and #Bookstagram) demonstrates how algorithmic visibility mechanisms selectively amplify certain literary forms and aesthetic registers (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018; Thomas & Round, 2022). User-generated reviews and paratextual commentary frequently emphasize dimensions of emotional relatability and personal identification, thereby reinforcing affective engagement as a privileged marker of literary value within platform environments (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019; Murray, 2018). This pattern of reception reflects what Ahmed (2004) characterizes as "affective economies," wherein emotional intensity circulates as cultural and social capital.

Algorithmic Amplification and Platform Circulation

The mechanisms of Rooney's algorithmic visibility warrant closer examination. On Goodreads, *Normal People* has accumulated over one million ratings, with a preponderance of four- and five-star reviews that emphasize the novel's emotional impact and psychological realism (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017). The platform's recommendation algorithm privileges such high-engagement texts, creating feedback loops wherein popularity begets further visibility (Nakamura, 2013). Amazon's "Customers who bought this item also bought" feature consistently clusters Rooney's works with other contemporary novels of millennial affect and precarity, including works by authors such as Ottessa Moshfegh, Hanya Yanagihara, and Ocean Vuong, thereby constructing an algorithmically mediated canon of contemporary emotional realism.

The 2020 television adaptation of *Normal People* by the BBC and Hulu further intensified Rooney's algorithmic circulation, creating cross-platform synergies between streaming algorithms, social media engagement, and book sales (Lotz, 2022). The series' aesthetic

choices—intimate cinematography, prolonged scenes of emotional vulnerability, carefully curated popular music—reinforced the affective registers that had already secured the novel's platform success (McNally, 2021). Hashtags such as #NormalPeople and #ConnellsChain trended across Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, generating user-created content that functioned as participatory marketing and further amplified algorithmic visibility (Booth, 2015; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

On TikTok specifically, BookTok creators have produced thousands of videos featuring Rooney's works, often employing confessional modes of address and aesthetic curation that mirror the novels' own emphasis on intimate revelation (Driscoll, 2023; Purnell, 2022). These short-form videos frequently deploy recognizable tropes: close-ups of annotated pages, emotional testimonials about characters' relatability, and carefully staged aesthetic compositions featuring the novel's cover alongside objects signifying taste and cultural capital—coffee, plants, minimalist décor (Childress, 2017). This paratextual ecosystem not only drives sales but fundamentally shapes interpretive frameworks, emphasizing emotional identification over critical distance.

Aesthetic Accessibility and Algorithmic Legibility

Rooney's prose style itself exhibits characteristics that enhance algorithmic legibility and platform circulation. Her deliberate avoidance of quotation marks, deployment of simple declarative sentences, and preference for accessible vocabulary create what Ngai (2012) might term an "aesthetic of unmarkedness"—a literary style that paradoxically achieves distinction through its apparent plainness. This stylistic minimalism facilitates rapid reading and emotional absorption, qualities valued within attention economies that reward immediate affective response over sustained interpretive labor (Bode, 2017).

Moreover, Rooney's thematic preoccupations—precarious labor, class anxiety, sexual exploration, communication breakdowns within intimate relationships—resonate powerfully with the demographic profiles of dominant platform users, particularly educated millennials and Generation Z readers navigating similar socioeconomic conditions (Bessant, Farthing, & Watts, 2017; Standing, 2011). Her characters' struggles with emotional articulation, professional precarity, and class mobility function as what Berlant (2011) terms "intimate publics," creating affective communities wherein readers recognize their own experiences refracted through fiction.

This alignment between aesthetic form, thematic content, and platform demographics produces what might be understood as "algorithmic intimacy"—a mode of literary engagement wherein personal identification is both facilitated by and productive of platform metrics. Rooney's novels become sites wherein readers perform and circulate affect, transforming private reading experiences into public displays of taste, sensibility, and identity (Jarrett, 2022; Skeggs & Yuill, 2016).

Critical Ambivalence and Gendered Reception

However, Rooney's algorithmic visibility simultaneously complicates traditional critical distinctions between literary merit and commercial success, challenging established hierarchies within the literary field (Bourdieu, 1993; English, 2005). Her corpus reveals how algorithmic regimes can elevate and consecrate certain literary texts—particularly those characterized by affective accessibility and emotional immediacy—while simultaneously narrowing evaluative criteria and constraining the diversity of aesthetic forms deemed algorithmically legible (Striplas, 2015; Underwood, 2019). As Fleissner (2020) observes, Rooney's reception

exemplifies tensions between democratic accessibility and aesthetic standardization inherent in platform-mediated literary culture.

Significantly, critical responses to Rooney's popularity have been marked by gendered patterns of evaluation and dismissal. Her substantial readership among young women has prompted some critics to invoke familiar tropes of feminine literary consumption as inherently suspect or aesthetically inferior (Driscoll, 2014; Radway, 1984). Accusations that Rooney's work is "overrated" or that her popularity reflects algorithmic manipulation rather than genuine literary merit often reproduce longstanding devaluations of women's writing and women's reading practices (Felski, 2015; Humble, 2001).

Simultaneously, Rooney's explicit Marxist political commitments and her public refusal of certain commercial opportunities—including declining publication in Israel in solidarity with Palestinian rights—complicate straightforward narratives of algorithmic co-optation (Rooney, 2021). Her work occupies an ideologically ambivalent position: novels that thematize class consciousness and economic precarity circulate through capitalist platform infrastructures that extract value from user engagement and affective labor (Cohen, 2019; Fuchs, 2014). This contradiction invites consideration of whether critical literary content can maintain its political potency when mediated through algorithmic systems structurally oriented toward commodification and engagement optimization.

The Paradox of Popularity

Rooney's case ultimately illuminates fundamental paradoxes within contemporary literary culture. Her work demonstrates that algorithmic systems can indeed identify and amplify literary texts of genuine aesthetic and intellectual substance, challenging deterministic narratives wherein platform logics necessarily degrade literary quality (McGurl, 2016). Yet her reception simultaneously reveals how algorithmic mediation reshapes evaluative criteria, privileging certain affective registers, narrative structures, and thematic concerns while marginalizing others (So & Roland, 2020).

Her novels' success depends partly on their capacity to generate what platform architectures recognize as "engagement"—sustained attention, emotional investment, social sharing, repeated interactions (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). In this sense, Rooney's aesthetic choices, whether intentional or not, exhibit a form of algorithmic optimization: producing literary works whose formal and thematic properties align with platform metrics while maintaining claims to literary seriousness and political critique.

The ambivalence surrounding Rooney's position reflects broader tensions within platform-mediated culture between democratization and standardization, accessibility and aesthetic complexity, commercial success and cultural legitimacy (Childress, 2017; Thompson, 2012). Her work thus occupies a revealing position: simultaneously benefiting from and being constrained by the operational logics of algorithmic intermediation, exposing both the possibilities and limitations of literary production within attention economies.

Case Study III: Teju Cole and Algorithmic Resistance

Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) offers a compelling counterpoint to the logic of algorithmic engagement that structures contemporary digital literary culture. The novel's deliberately digressive structure, sustained intellectual density, and strategic refusal of narrative closure fundamentally challenge the attention-maximizing norms privileged by platform-based recommendation systems (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010; Walkowitz, 2015). Through its formal and aesthetic strategies, *Open City* enacts what Bewes (2002) characterizes as "late

modernist" resistance to commodification, maintaining aesthetic autonomy through deliberate opacity and interpretive difficulty.

Cole's relative marginality within algorithmic recommendation systems—particularly when compared to more commercially successful contemporary authors—highlights how formal difficulty and intellectual complexity can result in reduced platform visibility and limited algorithmic amplification (Nakamura, 2013; Striphas, 2015). Yet *Open City* retains significant critical prestige within institutional literary spheres, having won the PEN/Hemingway Award and garnered widespread acclaim from literary critics, thereby revealing a persistent tension between algorithmic popularity and traditional mechanisms of literary recognition and consecration (English, 2005; Hungerford, 2016).

Cole's work demonstrates how contemporary literature can resist algorithmic imperatives while still circulating within digital environments, albeit unevenly and often within restricted cultural circuits. His corpus illuminates the complex negotiations required of literary practitioners who seek to maintain aesthetic integrity and intellectual rigor within platform-mediated cultural economies increasingly oriented toward engagement metrics and affective immediacy.

Narrative Form and Anti-Algorithmic Aesthetics

Open City employs a narrative structure fundamentally at odds with algorithmic preferences for clear generic categorization, predictable narrative arcs, and affective payoff. The novel follows Julius, a Nigerian-German psychiatry resident in New York, as he wanders through the city engaging in extended philosophical reflections, encountering strangers, and meditating on history, migration, and memory (Goyal, 2017). This ambulatory narrative structure—indebted to modernist flâneur traditions exemplified by Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Sebald—privileges contemplation over action, digression over plot progression, and intellectual inquiry over emotional catharsis (Pressman, 2014; Wilson, 2016).

The novel's refusal of conventional narrative climax or resolution constitutes what Miller (2005) identifies as a "negative hermeneutic"—a deliberate frustration of interpretive closure that demands sustained critical engagement rather than passive consumption. Julius's encounters remain largely unresolved; philosophical questions raised throughout the text are left deliberately unanswered; the protagonist's unreliability becomes fully apparent only in the novel's devastating final pages, which retrospectively destabilize all preceding narrative claims (Vermeulen, 2015). This formal strategy demands what Ricoeur (1984) terms "configurational" reading, wherein readers must actively construct narrative coherence rather than passively receive it.

Moreover, Cole's prose style exhibits what Adorno (1997) might describe as "resistant form"—language that refuses transparency and demands interpretive labor. The novel features extended passages on art history, classical music, ornithology, philosophy, and postcolonial theory, creating dense intertextual networks that presume substantial cultural capital and readerly patience (Krishnan, 2014). Sentences frequently extend across multiple clauses, employing complex syntactical structures that slow reading pace and resist the skimming practices encouraged by digital platforms (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). This stylistic density exemplifies what Jameson (1991) identifies as modernist art's resistance to immediate comprehension and commodified consumption.

Intellectual Cosmopolitanism and Algorithmic Illegibility

Cole's thematic preoccupations further contribute to his work's algorithmic illegibility. *Open City* engages sustained philosophical meditation on questions of migration, colonial history,

cultural memory, and cosmopolitan ethics—topics that resist reduction to simple thematic tags or genre categories (Hallemeier, 2015; Upstone, 2017). The novel's intellectual register draws extensively on European philosophy, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, and art criticism, creating interpretive frameworks that exceed the computational vocabularies through which platform algorithms parse textual content (Vermeulen, 2015).

Julius's wanderings through New York serve as occasions for extended reflections on figures such as Mahler, Barthes, and Sebald, as well as meditations on colonial violence in the Congo, the history of slavery in Manhattan, and the politics of migration in contemporary Europe (Goyal, 2017). These intellectual engagements resist what Moretti (2013) terms "distant reading"—they cannot be adequately captured through keyword analysis, sentiment detection, or topic modeling, the computational methods that underpin algorithmic recommendation systems. The novel's meaning emerges through subtle accumulation, tonal inflection, and intertextual resonance rather than through plot events or emotional beats that might register as engagement signals.

Furthermore, Cole's narrator embodies what Gilroy (1993) describes as "Black Atlantic" intellectual cosmopolitanism—a transnational, diasporic consciousness that complicates conventional identity categories and national literary traditions. Julius navigates multiple linguistic registers, cultural references, and geographical contexts, frustrating algorithmic systems dependent on stable categorical assignments (Krishnan, 2014). This cosmopolitan complexity renders *Open City* computationally illegible within recommendation algorithms structured around national literatures, ethnic identities, or simplified thematic classifications.

Platform Presence and Algorithmic Marginalization

Analysis of Cole's presence on literary platforms reveals systematic patterns of algorithmic marginalization. On Goodreads, *Open City* has accumulated approximately 40,000 ratings as of 2024—a substantial number indicating significant readership, yet markedly lower than algorithmically optimized contemporary bestsellers, which frequently garner hundreds of thousands or even millions of ratings (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017). The novel maintains a relatively high average rating of 3.7 stars, suggesting that readers who complete it tend to appreciate its literary qualities, but the lower total rating count indicates limited algorithmic amplification and viral circulation.

User-generated reviews on Goodreads exhibit polarized responses, with readers frequently describing *Open City* as either "brilliant" and "profound" or "boring" and "pretentious"—descriptors that reveal tensions between literary ambition and popular accessibility (Driscoll, 2014). Negative reviews often cite the novel's lack of plot, slow pacing, and intellectual density as frustrations, employing precisely the criteria that algorithmic systems implicitly valorize: narrative momentum, emotional engagement, and ease of consumption (Nakamura, 2013). These polarized responses result in algorithmic ambivalence—the novel neither achieves the broad popularity that would trigger widespread recommendation nor the universal critical acclaim that might compensate for limited commercial reach.

Amazon's recommendation algorithm similarly marginalizes Cole's work. While *Open City* is occasionally recommended alongside other "literary fiction," it appears less frequently in automated suggestion lists than more commercially successful contemporary novels (Finn, 2017). The algorithm tends to cluster Cole with authors such as W.G. Sebald and Roberto Bolaño—writers of comparable intellectual ambition and formal complexity—but this clustering occurs within a relatively restricted niche, limiting the novel's exposure to broader audiences (McGurl, 2016). This algorithmic ghettoization reflects what Thompson (2012)

identifies as the publishing industry's increasingly pronounced bifurcation between commercial bestsellers and literary fiction, a division reinforced and intensified by platform-based recommendation systems.

Critical Consecration and Institutional Recognition

Despite algorithmic marginalization, *Open City* has achieved substantial critical prestige and institutional recognition within traditional literary spheres. The novel won the 2012 PEN/Hemingway Award, the inaugural Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award (Vermeulen, 2015). Literary critics in venues such as *The New York Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *Harper's Magazine*, and academic journals have praised Cole's formal innovation, intellectual depth, and contribution to contemporary Anglophone literature (Goyal, 2017; Hallemeier, 2015).

This pattern of reception illuminates persistent tensions between algorithmic and institutional mechanisms of literary valuation. Traditional cultural gatekeepers—prize committees, literary critics, academic scholars—continue to exercise significant consecrating power, recognizing aesthetic qualities that algorithmic systems struggle to computationally identify (English, 2005; Sapiro, 2016). Cole's critical success demonstrates that literary value, as constructed within restricted fields of cultural production, operates according to criteria fundamentally distinct from—and often opposed to—the engagement metrics privileged by platform algorithms (Bourdieu, 1993).

Moreover, Cole's substantial presence within academic literary criticism suggests that scholarly institutions provide alternative circuits of circulation and recognition for formally complex, intellectually demanding literature (Hungerford, 2016). *Open City* appears frequently on university syllabi, features in numerous scholarly articles, and has generated a growing body of critical interpretation addressing its formal strategies, thematic concerns, and cultural significance (Krishnan, 2014; Walkowitz, 2015). This academic attention constitutes a form of cultural capital that exists independently of—and potentially in opposition to—algorithmic visibility and commercial success.

Digital Authorship and Platform Negotiation

Cole's navigation of digital platforms as an author further illuminates strategies for maintaining aesthetic integrity within algorithmically mediated environments. Cole maintains an active presence on Twitter (now X), where he has cultivated a substantial following through aphoristic observations on photography, politics, literature, and culture (Gruzd & Rehberg Sedo, 2012). This social media engagement functions as what Marwick (2013) terms "strategic authenticity"—cultivating an authorial persona that generates visibility and cultural capital while maintaining aesthetic distance from commercial imperatives.

Significantly, Cole's Twitter presence emphasizes photography and visual culture as much as literature, reflecting his work as a professional photographer and photography critic (Cole, 2017). This multimodal authorial identity complicates algorithmic categorization, positioning Cole as both literary novelist and visual artist. His Twitter feed features original photographs, commentary on photography exhibitions, and critical reflections on visual representation—content that attracts followers beyond strictly literary audiences while maintaining intellectual rigor and aesthetic sophistication (Murray, 2018).

Cole's strategic use of social media demonstrates how contemporary authors can leverage platform visibility without capitulating to algorithmic optimization. Rather than employing viral content strategies or emotional engagement tactics, Cole maintains a deliberately

curated presence characterized by intellectual substance and aesthetic discernment (Childress, 2017). This approach generates modest but significant platform visibility while preserving authorial integrity and resisting pressures toward content simplification or affective manipulation.

Postcolonial Aesthetics and Algorithmic Eurocentrism

Cole's work also raises crucial questions regarding algorithmic systems' capacity to recognize and amplify postcolonial and diasporic literatures. *Open City* engages extensively with questions of colonial violence, migration, and racial identity within ostensibly cosmopolitan Western metropolises, challenging Eurocentric narratives of progress and cultural sophistication (Hallemeier, 2015; Upstone, 2017). The novel's depiction of Julius—a Black, Nigerian-German, transnational intellectual—complicates simplistic identity categories and resists algorithmic systems' tendency toward reductive classification.

Platform algorithms trained predominantly on Western literary canons and structured according to Western generic conventions may systematically undervalue or misrecognize postcolonial literary innovations (Underwood, 2019). Cole's formal strategies—his adaptation of European *flânerie* traditions to postcolonial contexts, his engagement with both Western philosophy and African literature, his deployment of multilingual registers—create aesthetic hybridity that computational systems struggle to adequately categorize (Walkowitz, 2015). This algorithmic difficulty may contribute to the relative marginalization of postcolonial experimental literature within platform-based recommendation systems.

Furthermore, algorithmic bias research demonstrates that computational systems frequently reproduce racial and cultural biases embedded in training data and design choices (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). Recommendation algorithms that privilege texts exhibiting formal and thematic characteristics associated with dominant Western literary traditions may systematically disadvantage works by authors of color, particularly those engaging formally innovative postcolonial aesthetics (So & Roland, 2020). Cole's case thus illuminates how algorithmic mediation may reinforce existing structures of cultural inequality and literary marginalization.

The Persistence of Literary Autonomy

Cole's trajectory ultimately demonstrates the continued viability—albeit within circumscribed domains—of autonomous literary production resistant to algorithmic optimization. *Open City* achieves critical success, scholarly recognition, and modest commercial circulation despite—or perhaps because of—its refusal to accommodate platform-based engagement metrics (Pressman, 2020). This success suggests that alternative spaces of literary valuation persist within contemporary cultural ecosystems, providing refuge for aesthetically ambitious, intellectually demanding work that resists commodification.

However, this persistence occurs within contexts of increasing marginalization. As algorithmic systems extend their influence across cultural domains, the restricted fields wherein Cole's work achieves recognition face systemic pressures toward datafication, platform integration, and engagement optimization (Prey, 2020). Literary prizes increasingly engage social media campaigns; academic publishing confronts pressures toward open access and impact metrics; independent bookstores compete with algorithmically curated online retailers (Childress, 2017; Thompson, 2012). These developments suggest that spaces of literary autonomy, while persistent, face structural threats from platform capitalism's expanding reach.

Cole's work thus occupies an ambivalent position within contemporary literary culture—achieving significant success within traditional institutional frameworks while remaining

marginal within algorithmic systems increasingly dominant in cultural circulation. This ambivalence poses crucial questions: Can literary practices resistant to algorithmic optimization maintain cultural viability as platform-based mediation intensifies? Or does Cole's relative marginalization within digital spaces portend the gradual erosion of audiences and institutional support for formally complex, intellectually demanding literature? *Open City* exemplifies both the aesthetic possibilities and structural vulnerabilities of autonomous literary production within platform capitalism's cultural logic.

Algorithmic Reception and Literary Value

Across these case studies, a discernible pattern emerges: algorithmic systems systematically privilege literary forms that demonstrate compatibility with attention-driven metrics while marginalizing works that resist expedient consumption (Striphas, 2015; Finn, 2017). This privilege operates through multiple, interconnected mechanisms. Platform architectures favor texts that generate immediate affective responses measurable through likes, shares, and comments (Bucher, 2018), while recommendation algorithms optimized for engagement time tend to surface fast-paced, plot-driven narratives over formally experimental or linguistically demanding works (Seaver, 2019). The materiality of digital reading interfaces further reinforces these tendencies, with features such as "percentage complete" indicators and reading speed metrics subtly shaping reader expectations toward linear, consumable texts (Rowberry, 2019). As Wu (2016) demonstrates in his analysis of attention economies, the structural imperative to capture and retain user engagement fundamentally alters the conditions under which cultural objects circulate and accrue value.

Reader reviews, aggregated rankings, and recommendation algorithms increasingly function as surrogate mechanisms for literary evaluation, displacing or supplementing established critical practices (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo, 2019; Childress, 2017). On platforms such as Goodreads, reader-generated star ratings and algorithmic aggregations have emerged as powerful arbiters of literary worth, often wielding greater influence over purchasing decisions than professional criticism (Thelwall & Kousha, 2017; Ramdarshan Bold, 2023). This shift represents what Squires (2021) characterizes as the democratization of taste-making, yet it simultaneously introduces new hierarchies based on algorithmic amplification and network effects. The most visible reviews are not necessarily the most insightful but rather those that garner early engagement, creating feedback loops that concentrate attention on particular interpretive frames (Bishop, 2020). McGurl's (2016) analysis of Amazon's role in contemporary fiction reveals how such platform-mediated evaluation systems privilege certain narrative conventions—particularly genre fiction and series formats—that align with algorithmic recommendation logics and data-driven market analytics.

This transformation fundamentally reconfigures literary value as a function of algorithmic visibility and quantifiable engagement rather than aesthetic or cultural criteria (Bode, 2018; Nakamura, 2013), thereby challenging traditional humanistic frameworks for understanding literary merit. Where institutional criticism historically emphasized formal innovation, thematic complexity, and intertextual richness (Bourdieu, 1993; English, 2005), platform-mediated valuation foregrounds metrics such as completion rates, recommendation click-throughs, and social media virality (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021; Thomas & Round, 2022). This epistemic shift is not merely additive but transformative: as Piper (2018) argues, the quantification of literary reception generates new ontologies of the literary object itself, redefining texts as bundles of extractable data points—sentiment scores, topic distributions, narrative arcs—amenable to computational analysis and optimization. The rise of BookTok

exemplifies this phenomenon, where thirty-second video reviews emphasizing emotional immediacy and visual aesthetics have demonstrably reshaped commercial publishing priorities, with publishers actively seeking "BookTok-able" manuscripts (Steiner, 2022; Thompson, 2021).

Contemporary processes of canon formation have become inextricably entangled with platform dynamics and attention economies (Van Es, 2021; Murray, 2018), raising critical questions regarding which literatures achieve visibility within these computational infrastructures and through what mechanisms such visibility is conferred or withheld (Pressman, 2020; Underwood, 2019). Gillespie's (2014) concept of "algorithmic authority" proves particularly salient here: recommendation systems do not merely reflect existing literary hierarchies but actively constitute them through infrastructural choices—such as collaborative filtering methods that amplify mainstream preferences or content-based algorithms that constrain discovery to stylistically similar works (Seaver, 2019). The implications for cultural diversity are profound. Steiner's (2019) research on digital distribution reveals how algorithmic visibility tends to concentrate around commercially successful, often Anglophone, titles, while works from minoritized literary traditions, experimental avant-gardes, or translation-dependent literatures face structural barriers to discoverability. This pattern extends Brouillette and Doody's (2019) argument about uneven global literary flows into the algorithmic realm, where platform capitalism's winner-take-all dynamics (Srnicsek, 2017) intensify existing asymmetries in cultural capital.

Moreover, the temporal logics of algorithmic curation favor novelty and immediacy, creating what Citton (2017) terms "attentional burnout" that militates against the sustained, cumulative attention historically required for canonical formation. As Helmond (2015) demonstrates in her analysis of platformization, the integration of social media functionalities into reading ecosystems—from Instagram-worthy cover designs to TikTok-optimized plot structures—increasingly shapes literary production at the point of creation rather than merely reception. This produces what English (2021) identifies as "algorithmic literary culture," wherein authors, agents, and publishers internalize platform affordances and engagement metrics as compositional heuristics, potentially narrowing the stylistic and thematic range of published literature. The question thus becomes not simply which existing works achieve algorithmic visibility, but how the anticipation of algorithmic mediation shapes the literary field's generative possibilities (Childress, 2017; Squires, 2017). As Hammond (2017) cautions, the danger lies not in digital mediation per se but in the consolidation of evaluative power within a narrow set of commercially-driven platforms whose algorithms remain proprietary, opaque, and largely unaccountable to humanistic values or literary-historical considerations (Plantin et al., 2018).

Implications for Literary Criticism and Canon Formation

The pervasive influence of algorithmic mediation necessitates a fundamental methodological reorientation within literary studies, one that moves beyond traditional close reading and hermeneutic approaches to incorporate systematic analysis of the technological and economic infrastructures shaping contemporary reading practices and literary evaluation (Pressman, 2020; Tenen, 2017). As Hayles (2012) argues in her call for "media-specific analysis," literary scholars can no longer afford to treat texts as autonomous aesthetic objects divorced from their material conditions of circulation and reception. Rather, critics must account for what Kirschenbaum (2008) terms the "forensic" dimensions of literary culture—the specific platforms, interfaces, and algorithmic systems through which texts are discovered, consumed,

and valorized in digital environments. Ignoring these algorithmic regimes risks reproducing evaluative frameworks fundamentally detached from contemporary cultural realities, potentially rendering humanistic literary criticism irrelevant to the actual mechanisms through which literary value is produced and contested in the twenty-first century (McGann, 2001; Liu, 2004).

This methodological reorientation requires scholars to develop what Bode (2020) characterizes as "computational literacy"—not necessarily the ability to code, but rather a critical understanding of how data structures, algorithmic logics, and platform affordances shape literary circulation and reception. Underwood (2019) demonstrates the productive possibilities of such an approach in *Distant Horizons*, showing how computational methods can reveal patterns of literary change invisible to traditional critical methods while simultaneously remaining attentive to the interpretive complexities that distinguish literary scholarship from mere data analysis. Similarly, Piper's (2018) *Enumerations* models a methodological synthesis that treats quantitative analysis not as a replacement for humanistic interpretation but as a complementary approach that can defamiliarize taken-for-granted assumptions about literary history and value. These scholars exemplify what Ramsay (2011) calls "algorithmic criticism"—a mode of inquiry that leverages computational methods while maintaining critical reflexivity about the epistemological implications of such approaches.

However, methodological innovation alone proves insufficient without sustained engagement with the political economy of contemporary literary production and distribution. As Murray (2018) demonstrates in *The Digital Literary Sphere*, understanding platform-mediated literary culture requires analyzing the business models, ownership structures, and profit imperatives driving companies like Amazon, Goodreads (owned by Amazon since 2013), and social media platforms. Thompson's (2021) *Book Wars* extends this analysis, revealing how the consolidation of publishing into multinational conglomerates intersects with platform capitalism to reshape what kinds of literature get published, promoted, and canonized. This necessitates what Striphas (2009) terms a "critical sociology of texts"—an approach attentive to how economic power relations structure cultural hierarchies and determine whose voices achieve audibility within algorithmic systems. Ignoring these dynamics, as Guillory (1993) argued in an earlier context regarding print culture, renders literary criticism complicit in naturalizing socially constructed inequalities as aesthetic distinctions.

This paper therefore argues for a platform-conscious literary criticism that integrates traditional textual analysis with insights from media theory, platform studies, and political economy (Helgesson & Vermeulen, 2018; Brouillette, 2019). Such an approach builds upon the pioneering work of scholars like McGurl (2009), whose concept of "the program era" demonstrated how institutional contexts fundamentally shape literary production, extending this institutional analysis to encompass algorithmic systems and digital platforms. It resonates with Nakamura's (2013) call for critics to examine how "socially networked reading" on platforms like Goodreads reconfigures the social relations of literary reception, transforming reading from a supposedly private, contemplative activity into a performative, networked practice subject to metrics and surveillance. Following English's (2005) analysis of how prize culture shapes literary prestige, platform-conscious criticism investigates how algorithmic recommendation systems function as new gatekeeping mechanisms, conferring visibility and value through computational processes that remain largely opaque to readers and authors alike (Pasquale, 2015).

Crucially, this methodological framework must attend to questions of power, inequality, and resistance. As So and Roland (2020) argue in their critique of computational literary studies, quantitative methods can inadvertently reinscribe existing biases if deployed without attention to how categories like race, gender, and class structure both datasets and interpretive frameworks. Platform-conscious criticism must therefore remain vigilant about what Eubanks (2018) calls "automating inequality"—the ways algorithmic systems can perpetuate or amplify social marginalization. This requires examining not only which texts achieve algorithmic visibility but also whose reading practices, interpretive communities, and aesthetic traditions are rendered illegible or devalued by platform logics (Noble, 2018). Steiner's (2018) work on global book markets reveals how algorithmic recommendation systems privilege Anglophone, commercially successful literature while systematically disadvantaging works in translation, experimental genres, and literatures from the Global South—patterns that reproduce colonial hierarchies of cultural value under ostensibly neutral technological guises.

Moreover, platform-conscious criticism must grapple with what Finn (2017) identifies as the "imaginative" dimensions of algorithmic culture—the ways computational systems not only reflect but actively shape cultural desires, reading practices, and literary forms. Increasingly, as Childress (2017) documents, authors and publishers design texts with algorithmic circulation in mind, anticipating platform affordances and engagement metrics during the compositional process itself. This feedback loop between algorithmic mediation and literary production raises profound questions about creative autonomy, aesthetic innovation, and the future possibilities of literary art. If, as Galloway (2012) suggests, we inhabit an era of "interface effects" where computational systems fundamentally structure perception and expression, then literary criticism must develop conceptual tools adequate to analyzing how algorithms function not merely as neutral distribution mechanisms but as active agents in the cultural field (Latour, 2005; Mackenzie, 2017).

Finally, this methodological reorientation demands institutional and pedagogical transformation. As Gold and Klein (2016) argue, digital humanities approaches require collaborative, interdisciplinary research models that exceed the individualistic norms of traditional literary scholarship. Training the next generation of literary critics necessitates curricula that integrate computational methods, platform studies, and critical data studies alongside traditional literary history and theory (Kirschenbaum, 2016). It requires fostering what Liu (2012) terms "critical infrastructure studies"—an approach that treats digital platforms not as transparent tools but as complex sociotechnical assemblages worthy of sustained humanistic inquiry. Ultimately, developing a platform-conscious literary criticism responds to Pressman's (2020) challenge to embrace "bookishness" in the digital age—maintaining commitment to the distinctive values of literary culture while recognizing that defending those values requires understanding, engaging with, and critically interrogating the algorithmic systems increasingly determining which books get read, by whom, and under what conditions (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Birkerts, 2015).

10. Conclusion

Reading under algorithmic regimes represents not merely a superficial matter of altered attention spans or shifting consumption patterns, but rather a profound structural transformation of literary culture itself—one that fundamentally reconfigures the relationships among authors, texts, readers, and the institutional apparatuses mediating literary circulation (Striphas, 2015; Thompson, 2021). As this study has demonstrated, algorithms function as powerful cultural intermediaries that actively reshape the conditions of literary visibility, the

mechanisms of prestige allocation, and the very grounds of aesthetic judgment in contemporary digital environments (Negus, 2002; Maguire & Matthews, 2014). These computational systems do not simply reflect preexisting hierarchies of literary value but actively constitute them through infrastructural affordances, data-driven optimization logics, and platform architectures that privilege certain textual forms, reading practices, and modes of engagement while marginalizing others (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). The resulting transformation extends beyond questions of access or distribution to implicate the fundamental ontology of literature as a cultural category and the epistemological frameworks through which literary value can be apprehended and adjudicated (Hayles, 2012; Pressman, 2020).

By examining contemporary literature through the integrated lenses of attention economies and algorithmic mediation, this study has demonstrated the theoretical and methodological necessity of rethinking literary value in digital environments. Where traditional literary criticism has often relied upon humanistic frameworks emphasizing aesthetic autonomy, authorial intention, and interpretive depth (Brooks, 1947; Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954), platform-mediated literary culture increasingly operates according to metrics of engagement, velocity of circulation, and algorithmic amplification (Citton, 2017; Wu, 2016). This epistemic shift does not simply supplement existing modes of literary evaluation but poses a fundamental challenge to the institutional authority of professional criticism, the temporal rhythms of canon formation, and the social practices through which communities of readers constitute themselves as interpretive collectives (Radway, 1997; Long, 2003). As Finn (2017) argues, algorithmic systems embody particular "computational imaginaries" that privilege certain forms of cultural expression—those amenable to quantification, optimization, and viral spread—while rendering others structurally invisible or illegible within platform ecologies. The implications extend to the level of literary production itself, as authors, agents, and publishers increasingly internalize algorithmic logics as compositional heuristics, potentially constraining the formal and thematic possibilities of literary art (Childress, 2017; McGurl, 2016).

Moreover, this transformation occurs within and reproduces existing structures of inequality and domination. As Noble (2018) and Benjamin (2019) have demonstrated in adjacent contexts, algorithmic systems frequently encode and amplify racial, gendered, and colonial hierarchies despite claims to neutrality or objectivity. In the literary field, this manifests through recommendation algorithms that privilege Anglophone commercial fiction over translated literatures (Steiner, 2018), platform affordances that favor fast-paced genre conventions over formally experimental works (Seaver, 2019), and attention economies that concentrate visibility around already-successful authors while rendering emerging or marginalized voices structurally disadvantaged (Squires, 2021; Ramdarshan Bold, 2023). The consolidation of platform power within a handful of multinational technology corporations—Amazon's dominance in bookselling and ownership of Goodreads being paradigmatic—raises urgent questions about cultural sovereignty, the diversity of literary expression, and the concentration of gatekeeping authority in entities whose primary accountability is to shareholders rather than literary communities or humanistic values (Srnicek, 2017; Thompson, 2021). As Striplhas (2009) presciently warned in *The Late Age of Print*, the algorithmic governance of literary culture threatens to subordinate the distinctive temporalities, complexities, and communal practices of reading to the accelerated, metrics-driven imperatives of digital capitalism.

Recognizing algorithmic governance as a constitutive force—rather than merely an external constraint—within contemporary literary culture is therefore essential for sustaining meaningful critical engagement with literature in the twenty-first century. This recognition demands what Chun (2016) calls "updating to remain the same": a commitment to core humanistic values of critical interpretation, aesthetic discernment, and social justice that nonetheless evolves methodologically to address the technological and economic conditions shaping contemporary cultural production. As Underwood (2019) demonstrates, such engagement need not entail wholesale abandonment of traditional literary-critical methods but rather their strategic integration with computational approaches, platform analysis, and political-economic critique. The challenge, as Liu (2004) articulates it, involves developing modes of cultural criticism adequate to "the laws of cool"—the informational, networked, and algorithmic structures defining contemporary knowledge production—without sacrificing the interpretive nuance, ethical commitment, and attention to particularity that distinguish humanistic inquiry from technical analysis.

This study has sought to contribute to this emerging scholarly agenda by elucidating the specific mechanisms through which algorithmic mediation reshapes literary value, identifying sites of resistance and alternative practice, and articulating a methodological framework for platform-conscious literary criticism. Yet significant work remains. Future research must further investigate the phenomenology of algorithmic reading—how readers experience and navigate recommendation systems, what forms of agency and resistance emerge within platform constraints, and how digital reading practices might foster unexpected forms of literary community and interpretive creativity (Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Nakamura, 2013). Scholars must also attend more systematically to global variations in algorithmic literary culture, examining how platform logics interact with diverse linguistic, national, and regional literary ecologies in ways that exceed simple narratives of homogenization or Westernization (Helgesson & Vermeulen, 2018; Walkowitz, 2015). Additionally, the relationship between algorithmic mediation and literary form requires sustained investigation: to what extent do platform affordances select for certain narrative structures, stylistic registers, or thematic concerns, and how might authors strategically engage with or resist such pressures (Pressman, 2014; Tabbi, 2010)?

Ultimately, the algorithmic governance of reading poses fundamental questions about the future of literary culture and the role of humanistic inquiry within increasingly computational societies. As Fitzpatrick (2011) argues, the digital transformation of reading and writing offers opportunities for more democratic, participatory, and collaborative forms of literary engagement, yet realizing such possibilities requires deliberate intervention to counteract the concentrating tendencies of platform capitalism and the reductive metrics of attention economies. Pasquale (2015) warns that the opacity of proprietary algorithms threatens to create a "black box society" in which the mechanisms determining cultural visibility and value remain inscrutable to those they affect—a condition fundamentally incompatible with democratic culture and informed citizenship. Against such closure, literary scholars must advocate for algorithmic transparency, platform accountability, and policies supporting diverse literary ecosystems irreducible to profit maximization (Crawford, 2021; Zuboff, 2019).

In conclusion, sustaining vibrant literary culture under algorithmic regimes requires both critical vigilance and imaginative experimentation. It demands scholarly approaches that illuminate the infrastructural conditions shaping contemporary reading while remaining committed to literature's capacity to challenge, defamiliarize, and exceed instrumental

rationalities (Adorno, 1997; Ngai, 2005). It necessitates institutional reforms that value computational literacy alongside traditional interpretive skills, that foster interdisciplinary collaboration between literary scholars and technology researchers, and that resist the subordination of humanistic inquiry to narrowly technocratic or market-driven metrics of productivity and impact (Bérubé & Ruth, 2015; Gold & Klein, 2016). Most fundamentally, it calls for renewing literature's critical and utopian possibilities—its potential to imagine alternatives to existing social arrangements, to cultivate forms of attention resistant to commodification, and to preserve spaces for the slow, difficult, and transformative encounters with language that algorithmic optimization too often forecloses (Birkerts, 2015; Jameson, 2005). Only through such multifaceted engagement can literary studies fulfill its responsibility to both inherit and critically transform its disciplinary traditions in ways adequate to the challenges and possibilities of reading under algorithmic regimes.

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