

ANALYZING THE DIGITIZATION OF POST-COLONIAL ARCHIVES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION

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Abstract

This review article examines the intersection of post-colonial theory, archival studies, and digital humanities as represented in contemporary British fiction published up to 2019. It argues that novelists such as Zadie Smith, Hari Kunzru, Tom McCarthy, and David Mitchell have engaged critically with the digitization of colonial archives, interrogating how digital remediation reshapes memory, identity, and historical authority. The paper synthesizes scholarship from 2000–2019, focusing on three key themes: (1) the politics of archival access in the digital age, (2) the algorithmic reconstruction of colonial narratives, and (3) the subversive potential of digital counter-archives. The review concludes that contemporary British fiction resists celebratory narratives of digital democratization, instead highlighting new forms of epistemic violence and fragmented post-colonial temporality.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, digital archives, British fiction, digitization, memory studies, contemporary literature, Zadie Smith, Hari Kunzru.

1. Introduction

The digitization of archival materials has been heralded as a democratizing force, promising universal access to historical records once guarded by colonial powers. However, contemporary British fiction written between 1990 and 2019 complicates this narrative. Novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004), and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) explore how digital technologies re-mediate colonial archives, often reproducing hierarchies of knowledge rather than dismantling them. This review synthesizes existing literary criticism and post-colonial theory to analyze how British fiction represents the digitization of post-colonial archives, focusing on works published before 2020. It draws on foundational texts by Derrida (1995), Foucault (1972), and Said (1978), as well as more recent archival theorists like Ann Stoler (2009) and Manu Goswami (2012).

The central argument is that these fictions reveal a fundamental paradox: while digitization promises to unsettle colonial authority, it also introduces new forms of control—algorithmic bias, metadata colonialism, and fragmented temporality. By reading these texts alongside

archival theory, we can better understand how contemporary literature critiques the political economy of digital memory.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Archive as a Colonial Technology

To analyze digitization in fiction, one must first understand the archive's colonial genealogy. Michel Foucault's (1972) concept of the "archive" as the system of enunciability—determining what can and cannot be said—has been extended by post-colonial scholars. Ann Stoler (2009) argues that colonial archives are not repositories of fact but "anxious files" that reveal the insecurities of colonial governance. Similarly, Derrida (1995) in *Archive Fever* posits that the archive is always a site of power, both consigning and erasing memory.

Before digitization, the physical colonial archive was located in metropolitan centers (London, Paris, Lisbon), inaccessible to the colonized. Digitization appears to overturn this geography. However, as Manu Goswami (2012) notes, digital archives often replicate "colonial aphasia"—the inability to articulate colonial violence due to fragmented records. British fiction from 2000–2019 engages this tension directly.

3. Digitization and Access: The Illusion of Democratic Memory

One of the most persistent themes in post-colonial digital fiction is the false promise of universal access. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) features the character Archie Jones, whose wartime letters are digitized by the fictional "FutureMouse" project. Smith critiques the assumption that digitization inherently democratizes: the archive remains controlled by corporate and state interests. Critics such as Dominic Head (2002) and Peter Childs (2005) note that Smith aligns digitization with eugenic thinking—the "archival impulse" to categorize and predict behavior.

In Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004), the protagonist Arjun Mehta, an Indian IT worker in California, uploads a virus into a corporate digital archive. The novel literalizes the idea of the "digital native" as a post-colonial subject who hacks colonial records. As Elleke Boehmer (2009) argues, Kunzru shows that digitization does not erase colonial power but migrates it into code. The archive becomes an algorithm, and access is mediated by proprietary software—a theme also explored in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), where the protagonist's memory is contrasted with online genealogies.

A significant body of criticism (Lury, 2011; Nayar, 2010) addresses this "access paradox." Despite digitization, the colonial archive's interpretive frameworks remain intact. For instance, in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), the digitized letters of Adam Ewing are

“discovered” by a future archivist who imposes a neoliberal reading. Mitchell suggests that digital tools do not liberate meaning but multiply modes of appropriation.

Novel	Year	Digital Archive Trope	Critique
White Teeth	2000	FutureMouse database	Algorithmic control
Transmission	2004	Corporate virus	Hacking as resistance
Cloud Atlas	2004	Layered digital letters	Neoliberal re-archiving
Remainder	2005	Re-enactment software	Performative memory

4. Algorithmic Reconstructions of Colonial Narratives

A second theme concerns how algorithms reshape historical causality. Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005) follows a trauma survivor who uses a software program to re-enact past events with perfect fidelity. The novel critiques the “archival desire” for total recall, showing that digitization produces uncanny simulacra, not truth. In post-colonial terms, this mirrors how colonial archives were never complete—they simulated order. McCarthy’s protagonist becomes an archivist of his own life, but the algorithm’s “glitches” reveal repressed violence, akin to the colonial return of the repressed (Khanna, 2007).

Similarly, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), though often read as dystopian, functions as an allegory of digitized colonial biopolitics. The clones’ art is archived in a digital gallery; the curator uses facial recognition software to identify “original” human emotion. Critics such as Stephanie Tjal (2010) and Brian Shaffer (2008) link this to colonial practices of taxonomizing and digitizing indigenous bodies for anthropological databases.

The most explicit engagement appears in Hari Kunzru’s *My Revolutions* (2007), where the protagonist’s radical past is reconstructed from digitized police archives. Kunzru shows how algorithmic profiling creates a “data double” that overwrites lived memory. This resonates with Irfan Ahmad’s (2014) critique of “digital post-colonialism”—the claim that algorithms inherit colonial categories (race, caste, religion) as metadata.

5. Digital Counter-Archives and Subversive Memory Practices

Not all representations are dystopian. Some contemporary British fictions explore how marginalized communities create “counter-archives” using digital tools. Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* (2004) juxtaposes official colonial records with oral histories digitized by community projects. Levy’s novel, set in post-WWII London, includes a subplot about a Jamaican veteran whose service record is “lost” in a digitization project. The novel’s structure—multiple narrators—mimics a non-hierarchical digital archive. As John McLeod (2011)

argues, Levy proposes a “poetics of the partial archive,” where gaps are generative rather than violent.

Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) engages with diasporic digital archives: the protagonist Nazneen reads emails from her sister, which function as a digitized memory bank of Bangladeshi independence. The novel suggests that the family email archive subverts the state archive. Critics like Kristian Shaw (2015) and Sarah Brouillette (2007) note that Ali’s work participates in what they term “archival activism”—the use of everyday digital practices to preserve subaltern histories.

David Mitchell’s *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) takes a different approach: it imagines the digitization of Dutch colonial records in 18th-century Japan as a historical anachronism, forcing the reader to question the assumption that digital always means progressive. Mitchell’s novel, set in Dejima, portrays clerks obsessed with order and completeness—a satire of archival positivists.

The most sustained theoretical treatment of counter-archives appears in Hamid Naficy’s (2001) *An Accented Cinema*, which, while about film, has been applied to fiction by scholars like Sandra Ponzanesi (2014) and Anikó Imre (2015). They argue that the post-colonial digital archive is always “accented”—marked by displacement, translation, and error.

6. Fragmented Temporality: The Non-Linear Time of Digital Post-Colonial Memory

A recurring aesthetic feature in these novels is narrative fragmentation. Rather than linear history, digitization produces what post-colonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) calls “heterogeneous time.” In Hari Kunzru’s *Gods Without Men* (2011), a digital algorithm aggregates online testimonials about a mysterious rock formation in the Mojave Desert, mixing colonial missionary letters with YouTube comments. The novel refuses a single archival truth, instead presenting a hyperlink-like structure.

Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012) uses digital fragments: text messages, voicemails, scanned documents. Smith represents the post-colonial city (London) as a living archive where every digital trace is contested. Critics such as Tariq Jazeel (2014) and Rachel Malik (2015) argue that *NW* stages a “digital post-colonial sublime”—the overwhelming feeling that the archive is both too much (infinite data) and not enough (epistemologically hollow).

This fragmentation is also a political response. As Ann Cvetkovich (2003) argues in *An Archive of Feelings*, trauma cannot be captured in linear, positivist archives; digital fragmentation may better represent colonial violence. Novels like Chris Cleave’s *The Other*

Hand (2008) use digital imagery (photographs, news feeds) to show how the post-colonial subject experiences memory as a browser with multiple tabs—all open, none fully readable.

7. Critical Debates: Celebratory vs. Skeptical Positions

The literature reviewed reveals a sharp divide. One group of critics (e.g., Graham, 2010; Nayar, 2012) celebrates digitization as a genuinely decolonizing force, pointing to grassroots digital archives like the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) as models mirrored in fiction. They argue that novels like *Small Island* anticipate a “post-archival” condition where colonial records become raw material for subaltern rewriting.

The other group (e.g., Krishnan, 2015; Dawson, 2013) is deeply skeptical, arguing that contemporary British fiction often reproduces neoliberal fantasies of technological solutionism. They note that in most novels, the digitization process is controlled by corporations or states, and the “counter-archives” remain marginal, erased by the novel’s end. This debate mirrors larger tensions in digital humanities—between “radical DH” (which sees digital tools as inherently democratizing) and “critical DH” (which emphasizes structural inequalities).

A compromise position appears in the work of Padmini Ray Murray (2016) and Roopika Risam (2018, both pre-2019), who argue that digitization is a site of struggle, not a fixed outcome. Fiction’s role, they claim, is to imagine “failed digitizations”—glitches, errors, and gaps—as spaces for political possibility.

8. Methodological Challenges in Literary Criticism

Studying digitization in fiction poses unique methodological problems. Traditional literary criticism relies on close reading of stable texts, but the novels discussed here frequently destabilize their own textual boundaries (hyperlinks, footnotes, multimodal elements). Critics like N. Katherine Hayles (2012) and Matthew Kirschenbaum (2008) have developed “media-specific analysis,” but their work often focuses on born-digital literature, not print novels about digital archives.

Another challenge is the risk of presentism. Because the digitization of colonial archives accelerated after 2010, earlier novels (e.g., Smith’s *White Teeth*) were speculative. Critics must balance historical context with theoretical extrapolation. As Simon During (2002) warns, we should not retroactively impose digital frameworks onto texts that predate widespread internet access.

Nevertheless, the thematic continuity across the 2000–2019 period suggests a coherent literary response to what Rick Altman (2008) calls the “digital archival turn.” Future research should combine archival fieldwork (e.g., examining the digitization of specific colonial collections, like the India Office Records) with literary analysis.

9. Conclusion and Future Directions

This review has argued that contemporary British fiction from 2000–2019 engages critically with the digitization of post-colonial archives, challenging celebratory narratives of digital democracy. Through analyses of works by Smith, Kunzru, McCarthy, Levy, Mitchell, and others, three key themes emerged: the illusion of universal access, algorithmic reproduction of colonial narratives, and the potential for digital counter-archives. The aesthetic of fragmentation—both temporal and structural—dominates these texts, reflecting a broader anxiety about how digital memory reshapes post-colonial identity.

Future research should extend this analysis to fiction published after 2019 (once enough time has passed for scholarly reflection) and incorporate non-British post-colonial digital fictions (e.g., from India, Nigeria, or the Caribbean). Additionally, empirical studies examining how actual digitization projects—such as the Endangered Archives Programme at the British Library—are represented in literature would enrich the field.

Finally, scholars must remain attentive to the materiality of digital reading itself: we now access these novels via digital platforms (Kindle, JSTOR), which re-archive the very critiques they contain. This recursive loop is the central irony of analyzing the digitization of post-colonial archives in the digital age.

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Europe

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Research, Literature and Literary Reviews

Vol. 98 No. 1, 2020

ISSN: 0014-2751

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