

Obscuring the Mind-Computer:
A historiography of artificial intelligence

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This paper examines histories of artificial intelligence (AI) published in *BJHS Themes*' eighth volume. The decision to center my analysis on *Themes* is based on an online reading guide posted by the Royal Historical Society, which holds histories of the subject secondary to contemporary commentary on artificial intelligence's use in humanities and history scholarship. As a partial reflection of historical academic discourse, the study of the history of AI appears tangential to criticism in the face of its increasing implementation. I argue that an inquiry into the theoretical development of current notions of AI is necessary to support an encompassing critique of the subject, historically-grounding our present engagement with it. Utilizing the definition of AI given by the journal, which takes a Foucauldian approach relating contexts of power and knowledge, it explores histories of AI traced by the articles in *Themes*. *BJHS Themes* begins from the field of the history of science and, through concepts such as the mind-computer metaphor, data colonialism, and abductive reasoning, relates histories of AI to parallel narratives of computing and statistics, of American corporate capitalism, of European imperialism and colonial management, of mathematics and technology, and of Western epistemology. Following Sarah T. Hamid's reflections on the history of computing in "History as capture," the historiography of AI as portrayed by "guild historians" (professionals in the fields of AI or computer science rather than academic history) is a grafted one that obscures plural narratives.¹ Ungrafting it reveals contexts and perspectives that academic historians can speak to, creating relations by which a historical perspective on AI—as theoretical concept, as specific technologies, as academic discipline—can inform an encompassing critique.

¹ Sarah Hamid, "History as capture," *BJHS Themes* 8 (2023): 62–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/bjt.2023.13>.

Background Context

Academic history's discourse on AI can be introduced through a reading guide posted by the Royal History Society, "Generative AI, History and Historians, A Reading Guide."² The guide serves as an overview of recent writings on AI, separated into sections titled "General/Humanities-focused Reports and Commentaries," "History, Historians and AI," and "Histories of AI." Respectively, they compile reports on the use of AI from broader humanities scholarship, commentaries on contemporary AI by historians, and histories of artificial intelligence. Of the guide's thirty-four entries (not counting multiple works under the same entry), only three fall under the subject header of "Histories of AI." As a microcosm of history's academic discourse, the reading guide presents historians criticizing the use of artificial intelligence, working with AI as a component of research, and studying the history of artificial intelligence. These are distinct, but interrelated, perspectives that inform the orientations of historians' inquiry and criticism on the topic at hand. Furthermore, a distinction in inquiry can be made between those who study AI toward its application in research processes and those who study AI historiographically (the latter being my focus).

In the moment I write from, my peers are grappling with the implications of AI in classrooms, research, and issues of larger-scale related to global warming and academic values.³ Due to generative AI's increasing popularity within the settings of everyday life (*ex.* Google Search's AI Overview, Microsoft 365 Copilot, and the one hundred and fifteen AI features now

² "Generative AI, History and Historians, A Reading Guide," *Historical Transactions*, Royal Historical Society, last updated 2 October 2025, <https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2025/10/02/generative-ai-history-and-historians-a-reading-guide/>.

³ Mack Penner, "Flattened History," *Active History*, paras. 5–6, 14 November 2024, <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2024/11/14/flattened-history-ai>; Mark Humphries and Eric Story, "Today's AI, Tomorrow's History: Doing History in the Age of ChatGPT," *Active History*, para. 11, 1 March 2023, <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2023/03/01/todays-ai-tomorrows-history-doing-history-in-the-age-of-chatgpt>.

implemented across Adobe’s professional suites),⁴ approaching AI as a subject of criticism is driven by a real need to negotiate where it should and should not be used, after the fact of implementation.⁵ However, the perspectives in history scholarship highlighted through the Royal History Society’s reading guide identify a corresponding need to inquire into the historical contexts and narratives that inform our understanding of the term “artificial intelligence” and the technologies it refers to. In doing so, the lack of clarity surrounding AI can be dispelled in support of a clearer, historically-grounded reckoning.

“Histories of Artificial Intelligence”

Of the three entries offered in the Royal History Society’s reading guide as histories of AI, only one is an academic publication; the other two are blog posts from academic institutions.⁶

Published in 2023, the eighth volume of *BJHS Themes* is titled in the heading of this paper’s section and includes three research articles categorized as histories of AI.⁷ *BJHS Themes* is an open access journal co-published annually by the British Society for the History of Science and Cambridge University Press alongside the quarterly *British Journal for the History of Science*.⁸

The volume takes an explicitly Foucauldian approach in its genealogical conceptualization of artificial intelligence rather than through a conventional, semi-mythological

⁴ Reid, “Generative AI in Search,” sec. “Get quick answers with AI Overviews;” Jared Spataro, “Available today: GPT-5 in Microsoft 365 Copilot,” *Microsoft 365 Blog*, Microsoft, 7 August 2025, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/blog/2025/08/07/available-today-gpt-5-in-microsoft-365-copilot/>; “The ultimate list of Adobe AI features,” *AI at Adobe*, Adobe, accessed 21 November 2025, <https://www.adobe.com/ca/ai/overview/features.html>.

⁵ Humphries and Story, “Today’s AI, Tomorrow’s History,” paras. 12, 15.

⁶ “Generative AI, History and Historians, A Reading Guide,” *Historical Transactions*.

⁷ Syed Mustafa Ali et al., “Histories of artificial intelligence: a genealogy of power,” *BJHS Themes* 8 (2023): 9, 11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/bjt.2023.15>.

⁸ “About this journal,” *BJHS Themes*, Cambridge Core, last updated 7 February 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjhs-themes/information/about-this-journal>

historical account, defining AI as “a diffuse set of technologies and systems of epistemic and political power that participate in broader historical trajectories than are traditionally offered, expanding the scope of what ‘history of AI’ is a history of.”⁹ This is the definition this paper refers to when using the term. The contributors of *Themes* find that a semi-mythological account of AI starkly establishes its origin in the 1950s with two key events precipitated by the invention of the digital computer.¹⁰ First, the publication of Alan Turing’s article “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” in 1950 asked the question of whether machines could think (or, more specifically, imitate human thinking) and laid the framework for what would become the Turing Test. The second is the 1956 conference at Dartmouth College, co-organized by scholars such as John McCarthy and Marvin Minsky, who founded the MIT Artificial Intelligence Program in 1958 and coined the term “artificial intelligence” as it is popularly used today.¹¹ From there, the development of AI can be viewed as an exponential curve accelerated by further technological innovations into its current ubiquity, itself a single discrete step on a narrow line tracing towards loftier heights—of capacities, of intelligences, of control.

This is only one possibility, yet it dominates. Per *Themes* 8, a history of AI must be wider than the technologies the term describes in order to explore the specific, pre-existing socio-technical contexts (which I take as the interplay of discourse between human interaction and the systems/processes that undergird it)¹² and ideas that undergird the development of the

⁹ Ali et al., “Histories of artificial intelligence,” 1, 4; Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (1977; reis., Cornell University Press, 1980), 139–140.

¹⁰ Ali et al., “Histories of artificial intelligence,” 1–2.

¹¹ Jonnie Penn, “*Animo nullius*: on AI’s origin story and a data colonial doctrine of discovery,” *BJHS Themes* 8 (2023): 26–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/bjt.2023.14>.

¹² Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 199–200, 202.

plurality of distinct systems AI ambiguously refers to.¹³ The journal's introductory article foregrounds its historical study of AI in the histories of science and information, clarifying its Foucauldian approach to the history of AI and asserting AI systems as produced in relation to social and power dynamics that inform and are informed by its implementation.¹⁴ This approach to the history of AI allows it to be connected to histories of science and technology, as well as of American capitalism, of Western epistemology, and of colonialism, as explored in the articles below. Below, I examine the articles published in *BJHS Themes* 8 in a similarly genealogical fashion to review the theory that informs their own writing. These provide greater clarity to the contexts and themes invoked by the volume's definition, implicating narratives of hegemony and epistemic colonialism, and serve as the outset for understanding prevailing discourse on the historiography of artificial intelligence.

“Animo nullius”

Jonnie Penn's "*Animo nullius: on AI's origin story and a data colonial doctrine of discovery*," the first article in *BJHS Themes* 8, draws the most direct interpretation of the volume's definition of AI. He returns to documentation from the 1956 Dartmouth conference, co-organized by McCarthy, Minsky, Claude Shannon, and Nathaniel Rochester (early computer scientists now viewed as founding figures of AI), and investigates its institutional funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the International Business Machines (IBM).¹⁵ In doing so, Penn identifies both as expansionist corporations whose funding was motivated by imperial and military ventures—the Rockefeller Foundation, for its role in American foreign policy by hiring academics amidst the Cold War, and IBM, for its military production unit and frequent

¹³ Ali et al., "Histories of artificial intelligence," 6.

¹⁴ Ali et al., "Histories of artificial intelligence," 9–10.

¹⁵ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 24–25.

collaboration with the American military. The facilities at Dartmouth College used at the 1956 conference had been built by MIT with IBM's funding, attributed to the influence of Philip McCord Morse (credited as a founding figure of operations research, a field of applied mathematics first conceived for the US Navy during World War II).¹⁶ However, with archived inter-office and personal correspondence from company officials in the Rockefeller Foundation's archives, Penn shows that funding the study of the yet-unnamed field was hesitant at first, based on the Dartmouth organizers' ambiguous goals of a machine that could solve and learn with the same capacity as a human. What these goals did have in common was the foundational belief in a mind-computer metaphor that believed mental processes were capable of being replicated in the form of mathematical reasoning, arguing that cognition could be defined functionally and that those functions could be replicated with technology superceding human cognition.¹⁷

While the individuals defined as the founders of AI followed this assertion at Dartmouth and through the fifties, referring to artificial intelligence as such with little critique, it was not voiced in agreement. Anthropomorphizing technology in formal terms of human cognition was met with immediate rebuttal. Historian of science Ronald R. Kline's 2011 article, "Cybernetics, Automata Studies, and the Dartmouth Conference on Artificial Intelligence," explores archived correspondence between Dartmouth organizers McCarthy and Shannon to add greater detail to the Rockefeller Foundation's direct participation in funding the 1956 conference and the research in other fields that precipitated its proposal, guiding Penn's argument on *animo nullius* examined below.¹⁸ The article's examination includes archived material from Dartmouth's co-organizers

¹⁶ John D. C. Little, "Philip M. Morse and the Beginnings," *Operations Research* 50, no. 1 (January-February 2002): 147, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3088464>.

¹⁷ Penn, "Animo nullius," 20–21, 25.

¹⁸ Ronald R. Kline, "Cybernetics, Automata Studies, and the Dartmouth Conference on Artificial Intelligence," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 33, no. 4 (October-December 2011): 5–6, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MAHC.2010.44>; Penn, "Animo nullius," 25.

held by the Rockefeller Foundation Archives and MIT Institute Archives, which also informed Penn's discussion on institutional funding above: these include reports and grant amendments sent between McCarthy and Robert Morison, a director of the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as Shannon's letters to scholars such as MIT mathematician Norbert Wiener, Alan Turing, and W. Ross Ashby (a psychiatrist and cyberneticist).¹⁹ Kline's research centers the specific individuals involved to show that the mind-computer metaphor was applied to different technological fields by scholars with their own disciplinary approaches—automata studies, cybernetics, and AI—while sharing the underlying metaphor that animated artificial intelligence.²⁰ Penn identifies the mind-computer metaphor as utilized in the 1956 volume of *Annals of Mathematics Studies*, edited by Shannon and McCarthy, which centered on the questions “[how] does the brain function? Can we design a machine which will simulate a brain?”²¹ When considered with Kline's work, the use of the term “artificial intelligence” was initially contested and defined alternatively amongst peers in related fields and Dartmouth scholars. In accordance with the definition of AI postulated in the journal volume's introduction, each evoked particular social and technological contexts wherein they developed and were named.²²

Penn coins the term *animo nullius*, Latin for “no persons' mind,” to critically assess the metaphor of the mind-computer specifically in AI's development and economic growth from the fifties on. *Animo nullius* follows the “legal” concept of *terra nullius* (“no persons' land”) born out of Roman conquests and employed in fifteenth-century European empire-building to justify

¹⁹ Kline, “Cybernetics, Automata Studies, and the Dartmouth Conference,” 14–15.

²⁰ Kline, “Cybernetics, Automata Studies, and the Dartmouth Conference,” 12–13.

²¹ Claude E. Shannon and John McCarthy (eds.), Preface to *Automata Studies (AM-34)*, *Annals of Mathematics Studies*, vol. 34 (1956; reis., Princeton University Press, 1972): v.

²² Penn, “*Animo nullius*,” 22; Ali et al., “Histories of artificial intelligence,” 6.

global dispossession by declaring lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples as belonging to no one.²³ Penn argues that the development of artificial intelligence saw continued and increased participation from institutions that sought to forward personal agendas by backing AI, and, from the 1960s onwards, co-opted the mind-computer metaphor to naturalize AI's conceptual origins and growth within the context of American capitalism and Internet as commons.²⁴ In conjunction with the definition given by the journal's introductory article, the traditionally offered narrative does not only reflect a narrowed understanding of AI's development but a purposeful obfuscation that advanced the extraction and domination of information and activity online, a digital space characterized as democratic.²⁵

Penn notes three contexts that shaped the field of artificial intelligence's continued use of the mind-computer metaphor.²⁶ One of these is the corporate and state funding of AI research, such as in relation to the military ventures outlined above as well as in the monopolization of AI research funding by MIT and Stanford University. The fiscal growth of the field followed a concurrent technological trend that saw the widespread adoption of computers through the second half of the twentieth century. Thirdly, Penn argues that AI research to describe greater quantities and complexities in data followed the broader post-WWII economic expansion of the American economy from the fifties to the seventies. These trends pushed AI's early theoretical development, alongside the mind-computer metaphor that gave it its name.²⁷ Where the metaphor serves as the basis for the field, *animo nullius* is the narrative of AI's commercial propagation

²³ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 20.

²⁴ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 24, 28.

²⁵ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 24–25; Ali et al., "Histories of artificial intelligence," 1.

²⁶ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 28.

²⁷ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 28–29.

throughout the rest of administrative society built on that conceptual foundation. It is the act by which computers treat humans and their minds as extractable resources.²⁸

Penn uses Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias' concept of data colonialism to situate AI's development and *animo nullius* as a form of data colonialism within ongoing histories of domination; in the frame of historical colonialism, data colonialism represents the continuation of extractive relationships made possible by the production of social data that treats human interaction as resource and capital.²⁹ Social data reflects data produced by human relations online (such as through social media, e-commerce, and media streaming/downloading) and brings in its wake modes of surveillance, commodification, and commercialization that harkens to capitalism's long relationship with colonialism.³⁰ AI's role in the automation of social data extraction is obscured by the naturalization of the mind-computer metaphor and its continued usage, as Penn argues through *animo nullius*, legitimizes the study of AI as a "pure" academic discipline rather than as a subsector of the information industry. *Animo nullius* raises philological questions on the discourse that led artificial intelligence to be defined and named as it is—the metaphor that a human mind could be understood as a computer with its own programs and functions and, correspondingly, that a computer could emulate a mind's mental processes. The mind-computer enabled the language of human cognition to be applied to the technologies of AI, illustrating how the field's terminology developed selectively, in contact with the agendas of the plurality entities involved in the study of AI from the 1950s forwards, to naturalize a narrative of technological progress that omits from purview the confluence of greater cascades of institutional and corporate power that shaped and followed AI since.

²⁸ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 30–31.

²⁹ Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, "Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject," *Television & New Media* 20, no. 4 (2019): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418796632>.

³⁰ Couldry and Mejias, "Data Colonialism," 338–339.

“Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences”

Where Penn takes on the economic history of the broader field of artificial intelligence and anchors it in American imperial-colonial relationships of extraction, Luke Stark’s “Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences” engages with the specific AI technology of machine-learning (ML) from the perspective of a history of science, statistics, and Western epistemology.³¹ Stark uses a framework first posited by historian of science Carlo Ginzburg in the 1980 article “Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” which distinguishes between formal and informal forms of knowledge and recounts a history of science examining the role of abductive reasoning in the western European early Modern period.³² Stark treats formal/informal knowledge as a distinction between epistemological perspectives of empirical science and conjectural science. Empirical science follows deductive and/or inductive modes of reasoning in its production of knowledge, while conjectural science takes an abductive mode of reasoning based on an incomplete sample of observations that, thus, can only infer plausible explanations rather than arrive at logical conclusions.³³

Turning to Ginzburg’s article defines this distinction between empirical science and conjectural science in terms of philosophical logic. While inductive and deductive reasoning in empirical science involves conjecture to correspondingly generalize specific observations or articulate general principles, the abductive reasoning of conjectural science is purely conjectural in-so-far that it takes sets of observations to create generalized principles.³⁴ Those sets are

³¹ Luke Stark, “Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences,” *BJHS Themes* 8 (2023): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/bjt.2023.3>.

³² Carlo Ginzburg and Anna Davin, “Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980): 19–20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4288283>.

³³ Stark, “Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences,” 37–38.

³⁴ Ginzburg and Davin, “Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes,” 27–28.

ultimately always arbitrary, and grouping observations based on a conclusion made after the fact is a *non sequitur* appealing to probability. “Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes” was first written in Italian through 1978 and 1979, amidst a nascent discourse of sociologists seeking to quantify social phenomena and to bridge the construction of knowledge between the natural sciences and humanities. With respect to historical epistemology, Ginzburg traces conjectural science to Giovanni Morelli’s late nineteenth-century interpretation of art history, which involved attributing paintings based on details such as the style in which an ear was painted, and Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis.³⁵ In formulating this distinction, Ginzburg complicates the efforts of social scientists to apply empirical reasoning to abductive evidence; namely, the abductive evidence of what could be known about a given person.

Stark uses Ginzburg’s notion of abductive reasoning to argue that artificial intelligence is also a conjectural, not empirical, science. AI and ML technologies do not create knowledge empirically, according to principle or observation, but automate abductive reasoning based on the reconfiguration of the large volumes of data it was trained on in order to produce the most desirable, the “best,” responses.³⁶ Stark attributes AI’s abductive reasoning to parallel statistics scholarship in the 1950s—that which Ginzburg argued against— attempting to reduce knowledge and behaviour into manipulable variables that could be modelled. This would guide current conjectural approaches to ML, such as ground-truth data sets that pre-configure an AI or ML-trained technology towards particular results.³⁷ In the same vein that statisticians believed the complexity of human social relations could be abductively described in all-encompassing

³⁵ Ginzburg and Davin, “Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes,” 6–7, qtd. in Stark, “Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences,” 41.

³⁶ Stark, “Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences,” 40–41.

³⁷ Stark, “Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences,” 41.

sociological models of behaviour, the responses ML generates represent forms of abductive reasoning.

Quoting Ginzburg's discussion on knowledge "born of experience" that cannot be generalized by abstraction, Stark logically defines abstraction as the move from inductive evidence to abductive claims; in both machine learning and social data, abstraction could not be modelled as data or empirically calculated without losing the details that imbued it with meaning in the first place.³⁸ Ginzburg's own example is that of the scientific analysis of fingerprints as data by Francis Galton, christened "father of eugenics," and its use by British imperial-colonial management in the Indian subcontinent as a form of identification.³⁹ The practice of fingerprinting, as Galton notes in his 1892 monograph *Finger Prints*, was earlier used by the indigenous peoples of Bengal as part of a ritualized contract before witnesses called *tipsahi*; it was not used as a common form of identification until British administrator Sir William Herschel co-opted fingerprinting as a means of identifying a colonial population that was perceived from a Eurocentric perspective as indistinguishable from one another.⁴⁰ Thus, the British colonial administration appropriated fingerprinting in a fashion akin to AI research's appropriation of the mind-computer metaphor. Both require a flattening of meaning that disparages the usefulness of the data each seeks to represent.

Stark concludes his article with a more optimistic application of abductive reasoning, exploring its potential use in delineating the appropriate use of AI. Where the use of such technologies would need to draw on sets of data based on subjective values or perform

³⁸ Stark, "Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences," 43.

³⁹ Ginzburg and Davin, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes," 26–27.

⁴⁰ Francis Galton, "Previous Use of Finger Prints," in *Finger Prints* (Macmillan and Company, 1892), accessed 26 November 2025, <https://galton.org/books/finger-prints/index.htm>, qtd. in Ginzburg and Davin, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes," 27.

inferential analyses (Stark gives the examples of Freudian psychology and physiognomy), its results would consequently be abductive and inappropriate.⁴¹ Stark and Ginzburg's perspectives follow Foucault's interpretation of the Nietzschean challenge to origins. Each connotes a genealogical approach to knowledge and reason that foregoes the idea of an essential and discoverable truth in favour of a historically-grounded perspective, open to a multiplicity of narratives—an understanding of origins as discord, as a site tethering many threads that “makes possible a field of knowledge whose function is to recover it, but always in a false recognition due to the excesses of its own speech.”⁴² The obfuscation of historically and contextually informed narratives of AI allows its false portrayal as an empirical science, further concealed by the corporate representation of technological innovation as the domain of academia defined by Penn's *animo nullius* above.

“Making the history of computing”

The *BJHS Themes* volume closes its section on historical perspectives with “History as capture,” written by Sarah T. Hamid. “History as capture” critiques the idea of automated decision-making in computing history as well as in the field of mathematics to compare similarly linear traditional narratives between the history of computing and history of AI.⁴³ Taking *Themes*' Foucauldian stance further, Hamid asserts “that *there is no such thing as AI*,” and that the term intentionally advantages colonial control and domination with its ambiguity.⁴⁴ In a subsection titled “On mathematicians as exemplary anti-political, anti-historical subjects,” Hamid argues the use of mathematical functions in computing technology terminology grants the latter field an

⁴¹ Stark, “Artificial intelligence and the conjectural sciences,” 49.

⁴² Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice*, 142–143.

⁴³ Hamid, “History as capture,” 62–23.

⁴⁴ Hamid, “History as capture,” 53.

unquestioned historical neutrality that occludes its ties to industrialism and the management of the empire, harkening to the Foucauldian approach to AI laid out by *Themes*' guest editors.⁴⁵ Hamid's treatment of computing and mathematics echoes the mind-computer metaphor refined through Penn and Stark's article. A similar observation is made by Penn on the historiography of AI, pointing to Pamela McCorduck's 1979 *Machines Who Think* and Margaret A. Boden's 1977 *Artificial Intelligence and Natural Man*. Obituaries recognize both as looming figures in AI, whose works are viewed as canon in the field's literature.⁴⁶ It also expands this essay's initial query on the academic historical discourse on artificial intelligence to other technological fields, with Hamid arguing that the kinds of traditional historical narratives offered by such fields are internalist, and can be attributed to the work of "guild historians" written from an emic perspective as professionals within the disciplines in question produce.⁴⁷

Unlike Penn, a Cambridge historian of technology affiliated with Harvard,⁴⁸ and Stark, a historian of computing at the University of Western Ontario's Faculty of Information & Media Studies,⁴⁹ Hamid is not a historian. Hamid is an abolitionist community organizer whose advocacy focuses against carceral technology and bordering systems.⁵⁰ I note this explicitly to situate my own text as a historiographical essay intended to review historical accounts from

⁴⁵ Hamid, "History as capture," 60; Ali et al., "Histories of artificial intelligence," 1.

⁴⁶ Penn, "*Animo nullius*," 28–29; "Obituary: Professor Maggie Boden," University of Sussex, last updated 28 July 2025, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/broadcast/read/68608>; Aaron Aupperlee, "Pamela McCorduck's Contributions to the Birth of AI Continued Through Her Generosity," Carnegie Mellon University, 27 October 2021, <https://www.cmu.edu/news/stories/archives/2021/october/mccorduck-obit.html>.

⁴⁷ Hamid, "History as capture," 62–23.

⁴⁸ "Dr. Jonnie Penn," *Histories of Artificial Intelligence: A Genealogy of Power*, University of Cambridge, accessed 25 November 2025, <https://www.ai.hps.cam.ac.uk/co-organisers-0/dr-jonnie-penn>.

⁴⁹ "Luke Stark Profile," *Faculty of Information and Media Studies*, University of Western Ontario, accessed 25 November 2025, https://www.fims.uwo.ca/people/profiles/luke_stark.html

⁵⁰ "Sarah Hamid: Director of Strategic Campaigns," Electronic Frontier Foundation, accessed 25 November 2025, <https://www EFF.org/about/staff/sarah-hamid>.

academic historians. In fear of not obliging this, I return to the background of this paper—an analysis of *BJHS Themes* 8, the single entry on the Royal Historical Society’s reading guide representing an academic historiography. Hamid’s work corroborates the observation that histories of technology are not necessarily written by academic historians, in terms of its own authorship and argument on guild historians. However, “History as capture” stands in high contrast against the works of guild historians. It shows that histories on AI written by non-historians do not necessarily subscribe to a monolith and can provide valuable commentary. Rather than a traditional, linear mythos, Hamid’s article is a complicated narrative of technology obscuring historical context in favour of an ambiguity that conceals the sway of institutional and corporate entities. It also upsets a notion of historiography in bondage to the works of academic historians and questions the scope of secondary historiographical analysis, but that conversation is beyond this essay.

A section in Hamid’s paper titled “Making the history of computing” introduces an eponymous article written by Liesbeth De Mol and Maarten Bullynck in 2018.⁵¹ De Mol and Bullynck’s article mirrors its approach to the field of the history of computing (used interchangeably with computer science) with that of *BJHS Themes*’ and the history of artificial intelligence, highlighting scholars of computing’s reach to history in the process of legitimating its establishment as a field and the wider institutional contexts it omitted.⁵² The article takes for evidence the industrialization of computer science and engineering fields from the 1970s and projects related to those fields’ documentation (such as the joint Computer Oral History Collection project, first assembled by the Smithsonian Institution and American Federation of

⁵¹ Hamid, “History as capture,” 61–62.

⁵² Liesbeth De Mol and Maarten Bullynck, “Making the History of Computing. The History Computing in the History of Technology and the History of Mathematics,” *Revue de Synthèse* 139, iss. 3–4 (September 2018): 362–363, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19552343-13900017>.

Information Processing Societies (AFIPS) through 1969 to 1973)⁵³ the creation of academic organizations and journals, and the adoption of the microcomputer to capture the broad strokes of the history of computing's establishment.⁵⁴ "Making the history of computing" argues that the discipline emerged from a history of mathematics founded in the Göttingen tradition of history through the 1960s and 1970s that would colour the early historiographies of computing before a turn credited to Michael S. Mahoney's 1988 article "The History of Computing in the History of Technology" in AFIPS' *IEEE Annals for the History of Computing* that re-oriented the field as described in its title.⁵⁵ De Mol and Bullynck describe the Göttingen approach as technical in methodology and internalist in scope, prestiged by the American intellectual elite outside academic history to the extent that authors in computer sciences carried it into their historiographic forays into computing as related to math; the field's reorientation towards the history of technology in the mid-eighties was motivated, in part, for its relevance towards concurrent developments in software programming and computing systems.⁵⁶ In examining the history of computing, De Mol and Bullynck's article follows the approach outlined by *BJHS Themes* and expands on the socio-technical and academic contexts that informed its establishment in relation to the field of math history and later turn to the history of technology.

To historiographically examine the subject of AI, this essay surveyed *BJHS Themes* 8, a journal volume provided by the Royal Historical Society's reading guide on generative AI as the

⁵³ Alison Oswald, "Guide to the Computer Oral History Collection," *Smithsonian Online Virtual Archives*, Smithsonian Institution Archives Center, last updated May 2010, https://sova.si.edu/record/nmah.ac.0196#scope_and_contents.

⁵⁴ De Mol and Bullynck, "Making the History of Computing," 363–364.

⁵⁵ Michael S. Mahoney, "The History of Computing in the History of Technology," *IEEE Annals for the History of Computing* 10, no. 2 (April-June 1988): 113–114, <https://doi.org/10.1109/MAHC.1988.10011>, qtd. in De Mol and Bullynck, "Making the History of Computing," 367–378.

⁵⁶ De Mol and Bullynck, "Making the History of Computing," 365–366, 368.

only entry representing an academically-published historiography of the field of artificial intelligence. This essay expounded on *Themes* and its presence in a reading guide as a microcosm of discourse in academic history. The journal's articles took a Foucauldian perspective in order to dismantle a traditional narrative of AI originating from the 1950s that overtly focused on a metaphorical relationship between technological machine and biological human mind, based on a belief that the latter could be emulated by the former. As the study of AI ballooned with corporate and state institutional support, this metaphor became the *animo nullius* that pardoned a technological conquest rooted in extractive colonialism that took humans and their mental capacities as equivocal to empirical data. Per Stark, this is abductive reasoning, an approximate conclusion based on selected evidence, that is being implemented widescale; AI and its fields of history and research advantaged on a metaphor, cowering many historical narratives to form something like an academic parade puppet operated by entities thematically and strategically out of sight, out of mind. Hamid's article and its discussion on the history of computing both completes *Themes*' historiographies and returns us to the origin of this essay—where histories of AI are being written by guild historians, non-academic professionals in their own field, those histories should be interpreted with an attention to the socio-technical and technological contexts that framed its subject and writing.

From the perspective of our current moment, an encompassing critique of AI requires a recognition of its history, as well as a recognition of that history's historiography as complicated and itself contextually-situated. Abductive reasoning, as Stark illustrates, is not useless: if we can broaden the scope of evidence to include the facets of AI's history that have been forgone, our approximation of what to do can be better clarified.

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