

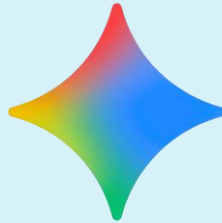
Environmental History in the Age of AI

Rachel Ameen
Syracuse University
ASEH 2026

AI: Universal. Scary.
Seductive.

AI: Universal. Scary. *Seductive.*

Proliferation of models and uses



AI: Universal. Scary. *Seductive.*

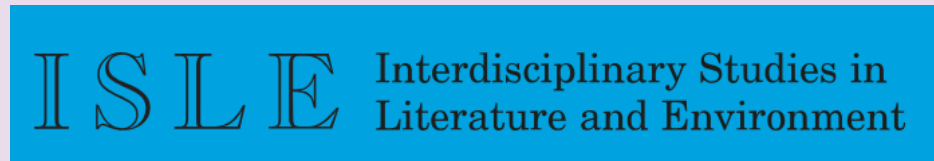
Proliferation of models and uses
Derision vs. obsession

AI: Universal. Scary. *Seductive.*

Proliferation of models and uses
Derision vs. obsession
Academic integrity and pedagogy

Ambivalence + Uncertainty = Silence

Ambivalence + Uncertainty = Silence



UPDATE SEARCH

artificial intelligence (ε

Filter ▾

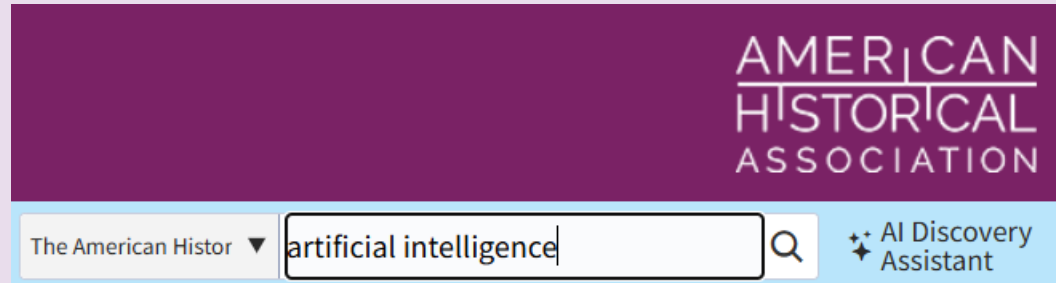
ADD TERM

UPDATE

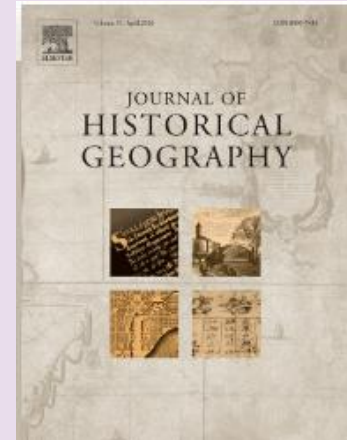
FORMAT

☐ Journal Article
(2)

A Field-Wide Silence



*Environmental History,
Journal of Historical
Geography, American
Historical Review*



Journalism abounds; peer reviewed work, less so

20 results

Environmental History / Search results

20 results

artificial intelligence

Sort by: Relevance ▾

☐ JOURNAL ARTICLE

The Greening of America, Catholic Style, 1930-1950

Christopher Hamlin, John T. McGreevy
Environmental History, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Jul., 2006), pp. 464-490

...called into existence **intelligence** and creativity. The farmer was a "scientific" "pioneer" and "to-worker with God"; his life was better because it was varied, challenging, and vastly more interesting than the "laxative" life of a factory worker, who must "punch, punch, punch" till his eyes grow dim, till his very soul...

☐ JOURNAL ARTICLE

Review: [Untitled]

Henry David Thomas: A Life by Laura Dassow Wells

Review by: Robert M. Thomson
Environmental History, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October 2018), pp. 922-924

...increased precision became both the pilot's and the chemical industry's response to the challenge of ecological health, and this unrelenting focus continues to resonate within agriculture today. Whether it is the fertilizer industry's 40 strategies, genetically modified organisms, or the rapid growth of automation and **artificial intelligence**...

NEWS / BUSINESS

Artificial Intelligence

Alibaba

How to mitigate legal risks when using **generative AI** in Europe

model,

Five Reasons to Use **Generative AI**

Sectors Business Data & Analytics Digitalisation Energy & Grid Management Features and Analysis In

Technology News Regional News North America Renewable Energy

How **generative**

energy sector

Alibaba joins **generative AI** race

call

than Spencer Jones - Apr 11, 2023

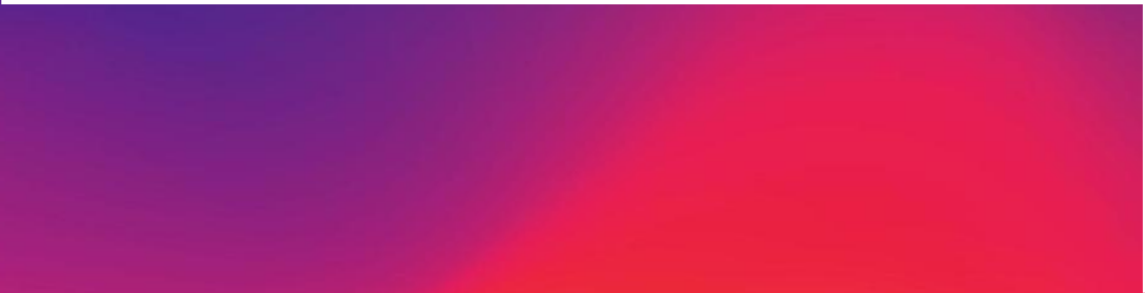
China prop

generative AI serv

SEJ • News

ChatGPT And **Generative AI** Tools Face Legal Woes Worldwide

The ChatGPT case in Italy is the tip of the legal iceberg. Litigation involving OpenAI and companies with generative AI tools is rising.



**AI appears in margins and
methods, not as the primary
subject of academic inquiry**

Why Environmental Historians?

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Vital disciplinary insights:

Why Environmental Historians?

Vital disciplinary insights:

- Long temporal arcs

Why Environmental Historians?

Vital disciplinary insights:

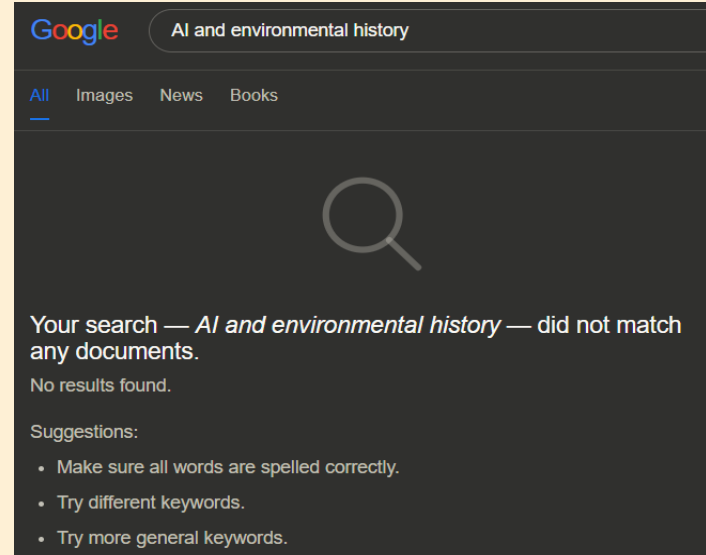
- Long temporal arcs
- Attention to material infrastructure

Why Environmental Historians?

Vital disciplinary insights:

- Long temporal arcs
- Attention to material infrastructure
- **How power shapes nature's meaning across time**

Silence cedes ground: uncritical and dangerous



Pressing need to define EH's relationship to AI

Where can EH Intervene?

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1. Boundaries & Ethics of Human/Nonhuman Life

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1. Boundaries & Ethics of Human/Nonhuman Life
2. Material Waste & Digital Remains
3. Acceleration & Slow Scholarship
4. Situated Knowledge & Data Sovereignty
5. **Environmental Imaginaries & Visual Culture**



1. Boundaries and Ethics of Human and Nonhuman Life

“Human” is a political category, not a natural one



AI is the newest frontier of arguments about sentience

“Human” is a political category, not a natural one





**“Human” as exclusionary, collaborative,
and contingent (Tsing, TallBear)**



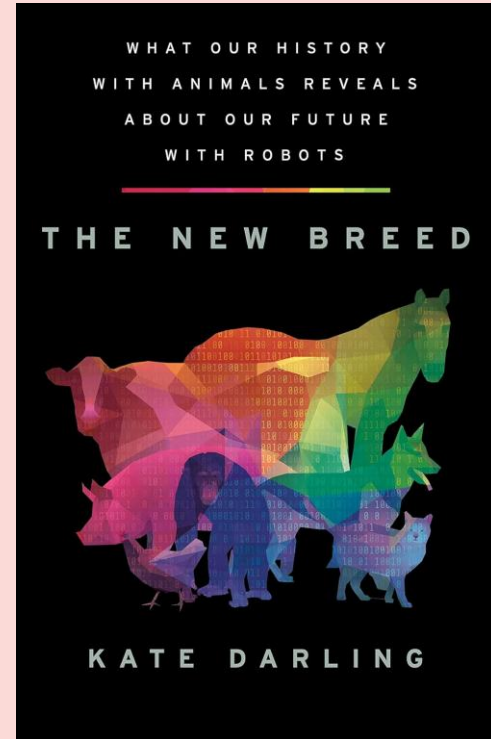
Moral consideration (Sebo, Birch)



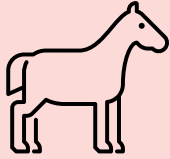
Emotional entanglement (Turkle, Haraway)

The Animal Analogy

Our history
with animals is
our best moral
reference point
for robots.

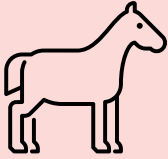


The Animal Analogy

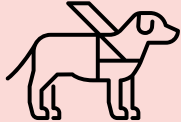


- Training, domestication, selective improvement

The Animal Analogy

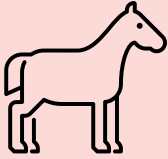


- Training, domestication, selective improvement

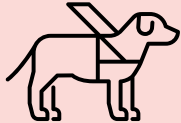


- Valued for obedience, service

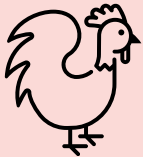
The Animal Analogy



- Training, domestication, selective improvement



- Valued for obedience, service



- Uncritical consumption, opaque systems of production

What kinds of relationships will we cultivate with both technological and animal others?

History offers vital context for new moral complexities.

2. Material Waste and Digital Remains

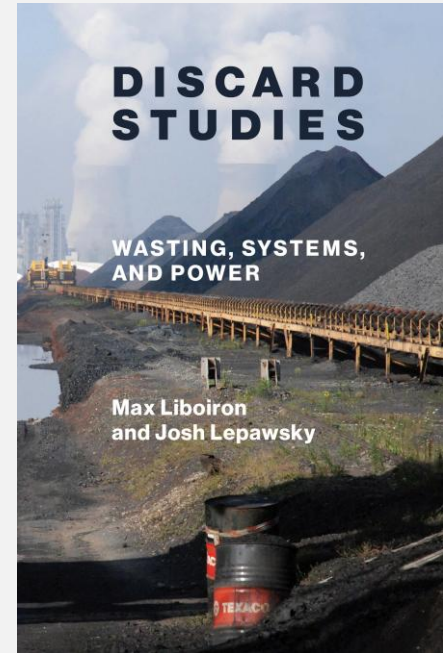
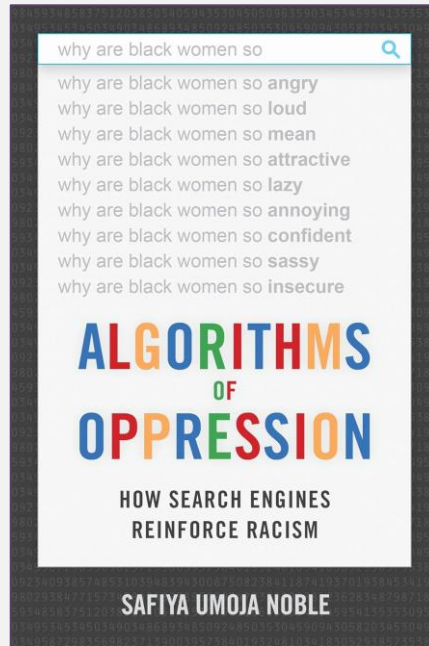
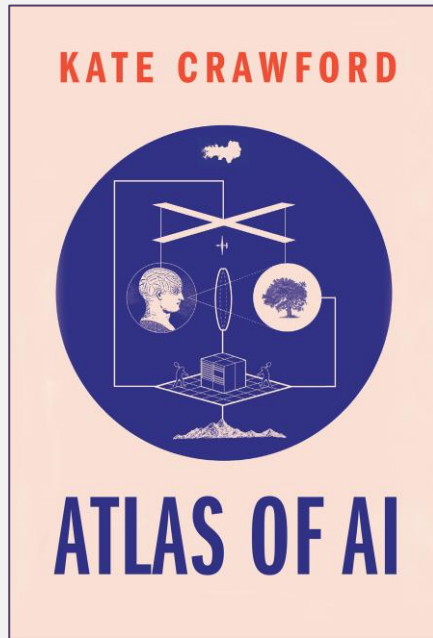
Environmental Cost of AI



- AI rests on servers, energy grids, rare earth minerals, high-cost water systems. (Crawford, Dawson, Smith)

- AI rests on servers, energy grids, rare earth minerals, high-cost water systems. (Crawford, Dawson, Smith)
- E-waste streams processed under hazardous and exploitative conditions.

***While generative AI is novel,
it continues patterns of
environmental harm
embedded in our current
energy systems***



History can help us map the uneven geographies of extraction, discard, and decay of AI.

3. Slow Scholarship and Temporal Scale

AI is the technology of speed.



Reconfigures sense of timing, productivity, and attention. (Cardona, Rodriguez, and Ishmael)

***Historians must defend time
as a necessary condition for
ethical and intellectual life.***

(Hartman and Darab; Mountz and Bonds)



4. Situated Knowledge & Data Sovereignty

AI systems are trained on data scraped without transparency, consent, or attribution.

Requirements of AI transparency



Explainability



Interpretability



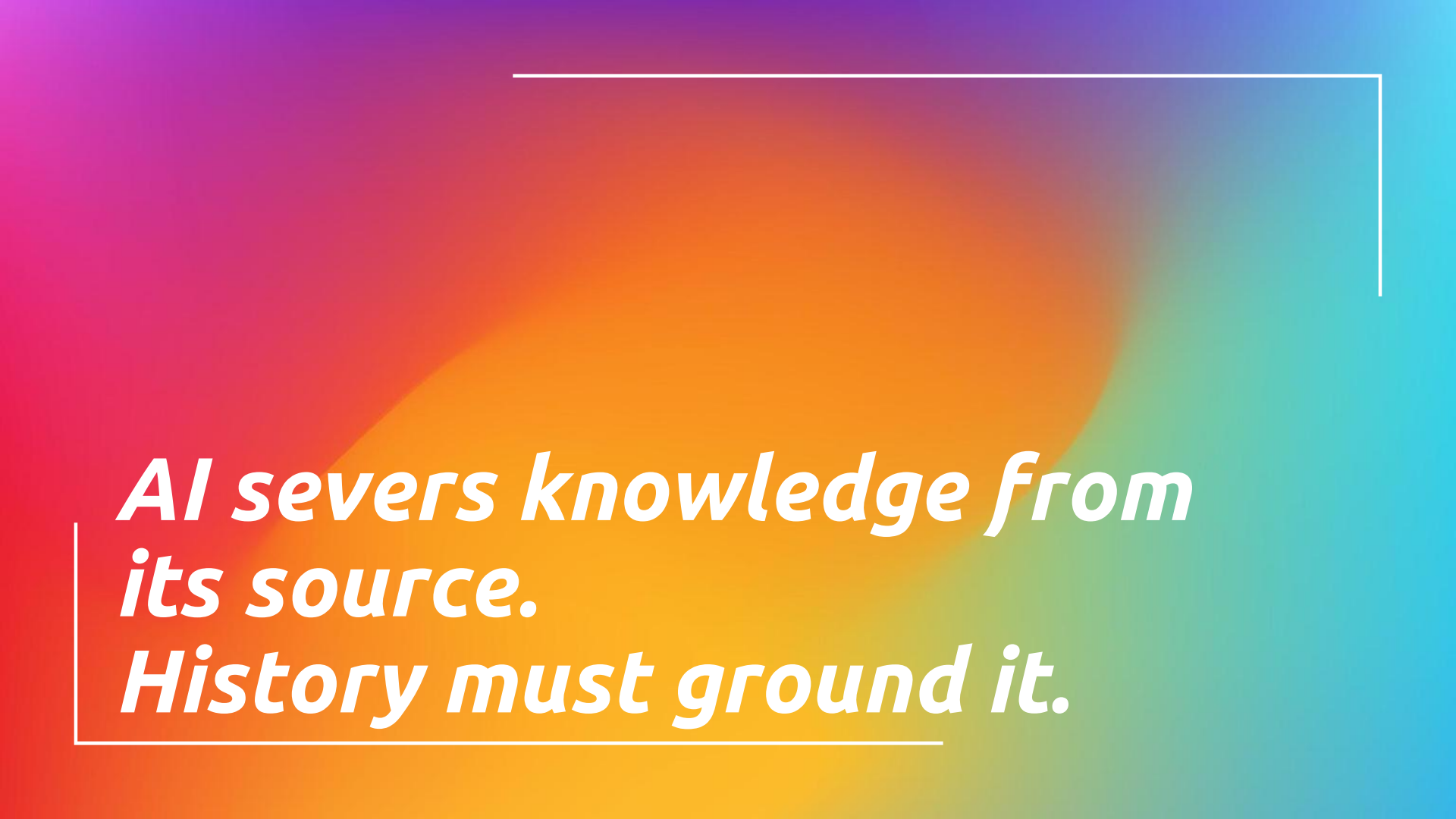
Accountability



Relational (Taylor and Kukutai)

Emerges from
specific people,
places, and
protocols (Noble)

Carries obligation



*AI severs knowledge from
its source.*

History must ground it.

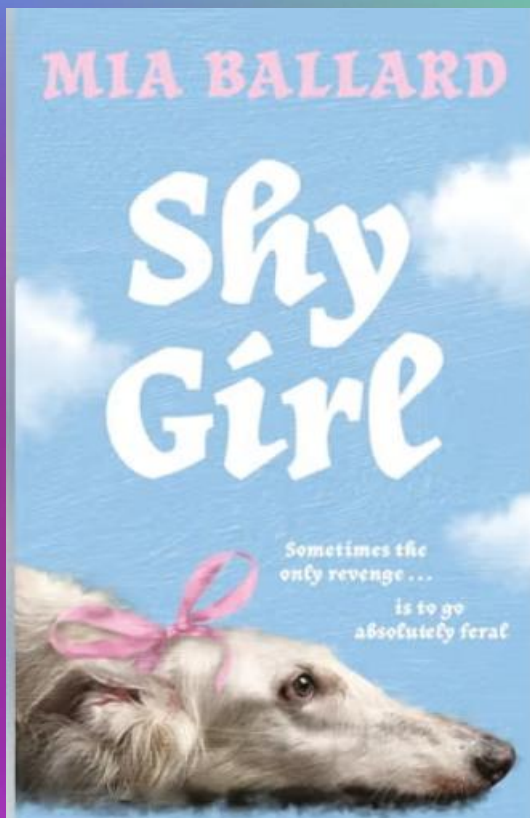


5. Environmental Imaginaries and Visual Culture



AI Slop

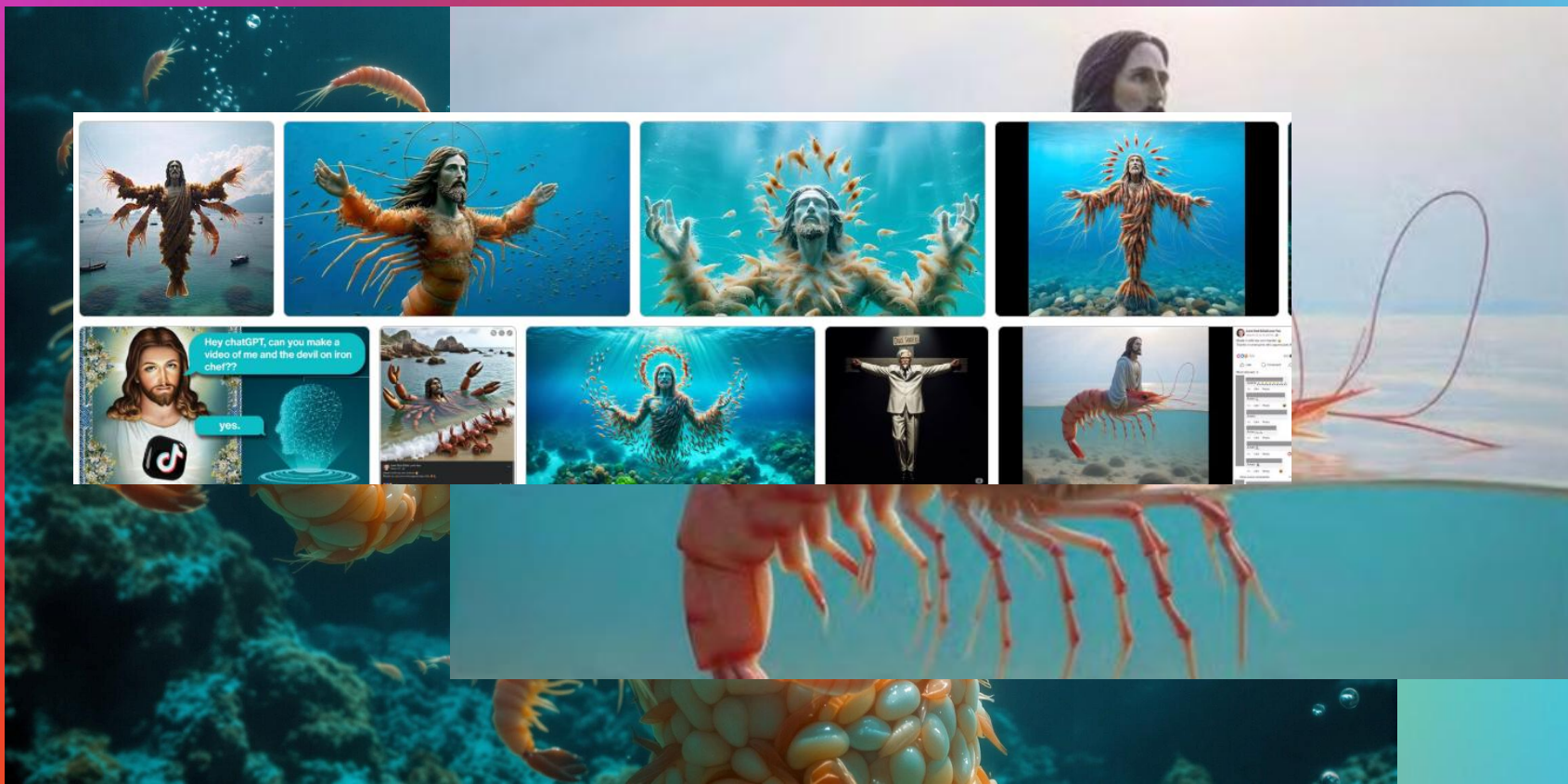




AI Slop







Hideous?
Humorous?
Harmful?

What can be done to stop generative AI art?

Features By [Tanya Combrinck](#) | Contributions from [Ian Dean](#) last updated 17 October 2023

These professional artists are fighting back against generative AI art and highlighting issues with the technology.

When you purchase through links on our site, we may earn an affiliate commission. [Here's how it works.](#)

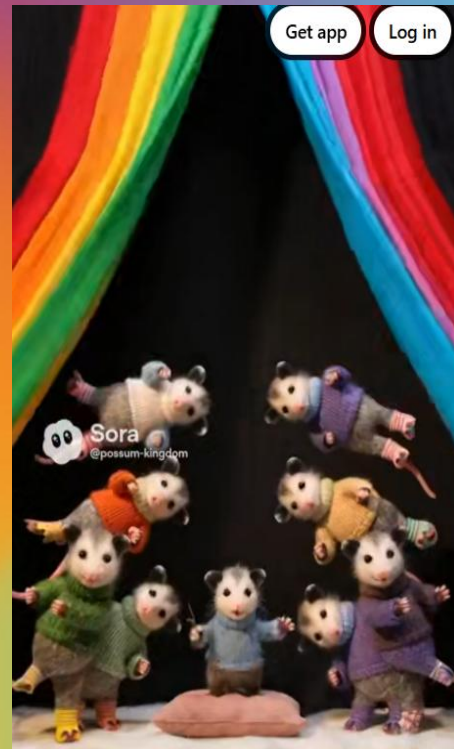


(Image credit: Deb JJ Lee)

Narrow and
dominant
lexicon

Misinformation

Misattribution



“

Historians must critically catalogue and decode these patterns and insist upon attribution and transparency.



So What?

AI poses an environmental, existential, even
extinction-level threat

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extinction-level threat

Environmental history has the theoretical tools
to meet this moment

AI poses an environmental, existential, even extinction-level threat

Environmental history has the theoretical tools to meet this moment

Historical perspectives vital to shape the direction of AI

Future Directions

Take on AI in scholarly discourse

Future Directions

Take on AI in scholarly discourse

Create theoretical scaffolding

Future Directions

Take on AI in scholarly discourse

Create theoretical scaffolding

Refine critique

Future Directions

Take on AI in scholarly discourse

Create theoretical scaffolding

Refine critique

Imagine alternatives

“

If environmental
historians won't challenge
the futures AI is
generating, who will?

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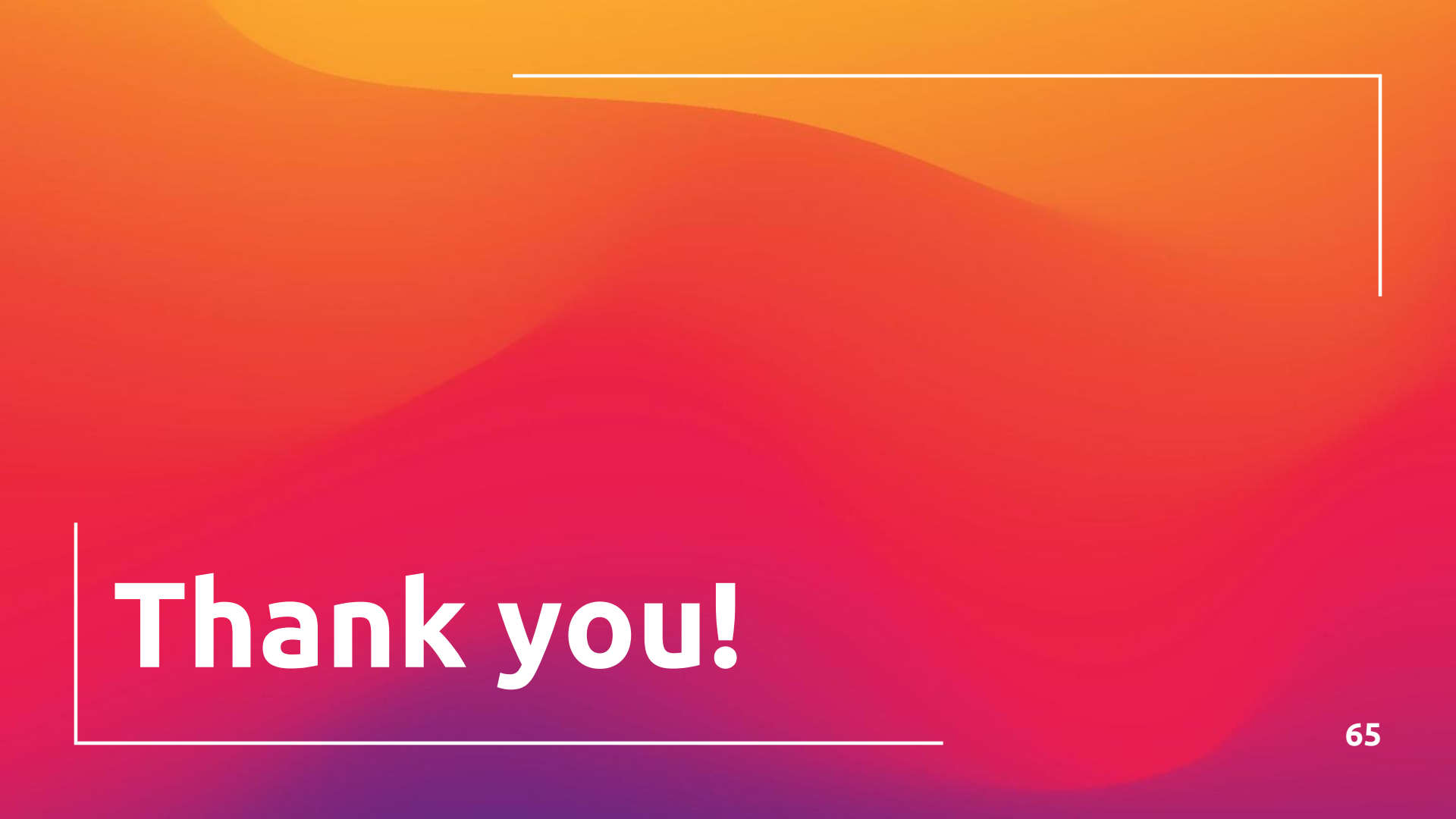
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Thank you!