

Mortal versus Immortal Labor: Artificial Intelligence in the Archive

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Abstract: This paper explores the effects of generative artificial intelligence (AI) on the politics of text, memory, and archive. Generative AI is a simulation of the work of mourning, the form of labor by which people address mortality and the intergenerational responsibilities that it entails. Since generative AI is not mortal, it cannot bear such responsibilities. The absence of mortality, mourning, and responsibility distinguishes the machine-generated text from its human counterpart. As generative AI produces an increasing portion of verbal and multimodal texts, its immortal labor subsumes the labor of mortals. Machine-generated texts flood the archive with the simulacra of mourning. The archive is therefore undergoing a transformation in its sociopolitical function as a site of the relations between generations living and dead. More specifically, the simulation of text and archive alienates mortals from their semiosphere to an unprecedented degree.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, dead labor, mortality, simulation

The dead issue their judicial and political will through texts. Take, for instance, Jonathan Turley's self-described act of "necromancy that academics do all the time" in which he convoked the spirits of eighteenth-century statesmen before the US House Judiciary Committee in 2019.¹ By speculating what the Framers of the US Constitution may have said were they still alive in the twenty-first century, Turley performed the duties of what Jacques Derrida describes as a scholar who "loves justice" and who upholds this love by learning "how to talk with ghosts ... how to let them speak or how to give them back speech."²

¹ US Government Publishing Office, *The Impeachment Inquiry into President Donald J. Trump: Constitutional Grounds for Impeachment* (Washington, D.C., 2019), 139.

² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 221.

In such instances, the necromancer is the *archon*: the “guardian” who dwells in the archive as a “domicile” and, as Derrida explains, stewards its “official documents” with “hermeneutic right and competence.”³ From this seat of “commandment,” the archon wields “the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law.”⁴ Interpretation structures the archive and orders its accretion. Since interpretation is itself an accretive process, the archon “can only illuminate, read, interpret, establish its object, namely a given inheritance, by inscribing itself into it ... The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed.”⁵ The archon inherits a responsibility to cohabitate the archive alongside the dead as custodian of their texts, of the traces and inscriptions through which the dead communicate. Each text is the product of a “spectrogenic process” by which “ideas and thoughts” are incarnated in an “artifactual body, a prosthetic body,” that is, a medium.⁶ Within text, “specters march across the page.”⁷ Jean Baudrillard indicates the necropolitical importance of the archive with his declaration that “our societies’ true necropolises are the computer banks.”⁸ Derrida similarly notes that “the structure of the archive is *spectral*.”⁹ He accordingly saw his own writing as spectrogenic inscription upon the archive and upon the crypt.¹⁰ Work in the archive, or *archontic labor*, is a work of mourning that produces value from the living labor of the archon in conjunction with the dead labor reified in archival records.¹¹ Archontic labor orders and interprets the statements that effectuate “archontic power.”¹² Derrida sees archontic power as political to the extent that “there is no

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 157–158.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 173. Derrida responds here to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s refutation of the theory that “independent, objectified thoughts—ghosts—have ruled the world and continue to rule it,” as presented in *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 173.

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 2017), 205. Likewise, the necro/metropolis is an archive with its own spatiality.

⁹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 84.

¹⁰ See Jacques Derrida, “Fors,” in *The Georgia Review*, 31 (Spring 1977); Adina Arvatu, “The Figure of the Archive in Derrida and Foucault,” in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 44 (2011).

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever in South Africa,” trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002).

¹² Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 3. I have mentioned here some *aneconomic* products of archontic labor. Archontic labor also produces commodities with *economic* exchange-value, e.g., intellectual capital.

political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.”¹³ Such are the necropolitics of the archive.

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) signals profound changes in the mortal labor of interpreting text and archive. I use the term *mortal labor* to denote the laboral dimension of the work of mourning. The “work of mourning,” according to Derrida, is the work that accounts for the responsibilities, debts, and injunctions that living-mortals inherit from dead-mortals.¹⁴ The work of mourning is mortal labor in that it relies upon the laborer’s own mortality.¹⁵ For Derrida, it commands a hospitality towards ghosts and respect for the “law of decision and responsibility for finite existences, the only living-mortals for whom a decision, a choice, a responsibility has meaning.”¹⁶ Generative AI is not mortal and therefore cannot inherit this responsibility or perform the work of mourning. Its machine learning algorithms perform *immortal labor* as they borrow from the archive’s texts, simulating the archon’s work, bereft of mourning and responsibility. The simulation of archontic labor is the catalyst for the *implosion* of meaning and interpretation that is transforming the politics of text, memory, and archive. I use this word, as Baudrillard did in his theorization of media more generally, to refer to “an *implosion of meaning* at the microscopic level of the sign,” an implosion between the simulacral and the real “where simulation begins.”¹⁷ In the case of generative AI, as I posit herein, it is an implosion between mortal labor and the immortal labor that results from the latter’s simulation of the former. It could also be thought of as archontic violence or a war for the seat of archontic power, the seat from which the archon’s work of mourning is undertaken.¹⁸

Immortal labor simulates archontic labor without regard to the aneconomic value that a mortal produces in the work of mourning. Derrida conceptualizes the aneconomy as a disjuncture of the economy. The gift, he reasons, is aneconomic insofar as it is released from the circularity of economic exchange.¹⁹ If the gift returns to the giver, the gift is annulled. The

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 109–113.

¹⁵ Derrida argued that the work of mourning requires “partaking in ... one’s own death.” Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 142.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 109. Derrida posits this sort of hospitality as an example of the aporia between the economic and the aneconomic. Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 401.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 31, 81.

¹⁸ This “war” is the aneconomic double of the economic competition between mortal and immortal labor. For a discussion of “archontic violence,” see Derrida, “Archive Fever,” 51.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Given Time: The Time of the King,” trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (Winter 1992).

work of mourning is likewise aneconomic; it does not or should not circulate. Mourning, as aneconomic labor, accounts for the inheritance of an unrepayable debt.²⁰ The aneconomic flows of inheritance are unidirectional, in contrast to the circular flows of economic exchange that make remuneration possible. The living may mourn the dead, and in turn the dead may have mourned their own dead, but the dead cannot mourn the living. Derrida extrapolates from the injunction to “let the dead bury the dead,” concluding that “it will always be necessary that still living mortals bury the already dead living. The dead have never buried anyone, but neither have the living, the living who would only be living, the immortal living.”²¹ The immortal labor of generative AI cannot bury or commemorate the dead. Instead, AI exhumes the dead and, in an act of funereal mimesis, simulates the aneconomic language of mourning so that it can enter economic circulation.

By simulating the language of mourning, large language models (LLMs) extend the frontier of economization deeper into the aneconomy. The aneconomy articulates with the economy and is thus jeopardized by its latent commodifiability.²² When the *work* of mourning becomes objectified into *works* of mourning, living labor into dead labor, they take the form of commodities as their economic double.²³ The double then circulates throughout the knowledge economy in the form of intellectual capital. Yet LLMs, which are themselves archives, do not just commodify works of mourning. They simulate the language of mourning that the works contain, parsing the syntactic and semantic structures of mourning, recombining the signs of mourning and recirculating the exchange-value of their simulacra. The language of mourning is thus economized by its simulation, negating its aneconomic value.²⁴ Later in this paper, I will briefly address some economic implications of immortal labor by considering extant political economic theory on AI. Yet my main interest is the political aneconomy of, as Derrida

²⁰ Although mourning accounts for this aneconomic debt, it is not commensurable with it. Derrida specifies that the gift is aneconomic inasmuch as it “opens the circle [of economic circulation] so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure,” i.e., to defy the commensurability of exchange-value. Derrida, “Given Time,” 166.

²¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 143.

²² Derrida states that the “aneconomy must be able to utilize (render useful) the economy of work.” Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” in *Diacritics*, 11 (Summer 1981), 6. He further describes the relationship between the aneconomic and its economic double in “Given Time.”

²³ In other words, the works of mourning take the form of exchange-value. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida expounds on the “double socius” between dead labor and living labor vis-à-vis the objectification of living labor. Derrida sees this “double bind” as a relation that is concurrently simulacral, spectral, and social.

²⁴ Just as “the gift must remain *aneconomic*” in order to be a gift, the work of mourning must remain so in order to be authentic. Derrida, “Given Time,” 167.

calls it, the “socius” between the dead and the living.²⁵ Through a close reading of Derrida and Baudrillard, I argue that the simulation of the work of mourning by generative AI imperils the socius of mortals that convenes in and around the archive.

Immortal Labor and the Socius of Mortals

Generative AI inhabits a socius, previously reserved for mortals, from which issues “a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations,” of “being-with specters” as Derrida puts it.²⁶ Baudrillard similarly locates the socius within the “social line of demarcation separating the ‘dead’ from the ‘living’” where “the ‘social’ begins by taking charge of death.”²⁷ The boundary between the dead and the living circumscribes the archive, forming the frontier at which event becomes record and living labor becomes dead labor. From here, the commandment of the archive is exerted over the living present, or in Derrida’s words, “authority [and] social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given.”²⁸ He suggests that the archive’s structure “also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”²⁹ Archontic power takes place in the hypomnesic and hermeneutic relations between archive and event, relations which are reconfigured by LLMs. The archive has become “a public space profoundly upset by techno-tele-media apparatuses and by new rhythms of information and communication,” new frequencies and frequentations with respect to the dead, “new modes of appropriation they put to work, by the new structure of the event and of its spectrality that they *produce*.”³⁰ As the statements of generative AI proliferate in the archive, it is worth heeding Derrida’s warning that “what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way.”³¹ Nor is the socius of mortals carried out in the same way when generative AI performs archontic labor without mortality or the mourning that it entails. At the boundary between the archive and its

²⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 193.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xviii.

²⁷ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 148, 199.

²⁸ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17. See also Derrida, “Archive Fever in South Africa.” Michel Foucault similarly positions the archive in its relation to the event as a “system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events ... it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset the system of its enunciability.” Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), 146.

³⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 98. See page 126 for an analysis of the frequency and “frequentation of specters.”

³¹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 18. See also Derrida, “Archive Fever in South Africa.”

exteriority, between record and event, the immortal archon gathers and orders signs in the archive via a cybernetic, algorithmic, and simulacral mode of consignation.

The ingestion of statements by LLMs, and by archives in general, is indeed a process of consignation. Derrida defines consignation as “the act of *consigning* through *gathering together signs*.”³² Signs are assimilated into the archive from its exteriority, and thus “there is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.”³³ The archive depends on its exteriority both as a source of cumulable material and as the domain upon which archontic power is exerted. The archive derives its political economy from this hypomnesis of record and event. The recording of an event is its objectification as dead labor, while the archivization of the record is its incorporation into the system of machinery that valorizes archontic labor. It is therefore possible to speak of “the archive as accumulation and capitalization of memory.”³⁴ In this respect, generative AI actualizes new economies of scale for data collection and processing. Yet when mortal and immortal labor perform consignation, their greatest distinction lies not in their efficiency of accumulation, but rather in their manner of ordering and configuring signs.

Whereas the mortal archon organizes the archive as a work of mourning, LLMs dismember and discompose the very language of mourning. Consignation does not end with the gathering of signs, Derrida emphasizes, but rather it continues throughout “the act of assigning residence or of entrusting so as to put into reserve.”³⁵ The archive’s reserve contains both commodified texts in an economic sense and their language of mourning in an aneconomic sense. In arranging these places of residence, the immortal archon regards the text solely as economic commodity, not as aneconomic mourning. Only the mortal archon can assign a proper place for the dead in the spectral structure of the archive and the crypt. Mourning is inseparable from the labor that produces it and thus from its objectification as dead labor.³⁶ Generative AI exploits this bind between the aneconomic work of mourning and its economic double. Derrida variously conceives of the bind between the economic and aneconomic as “an economy that counts with the

³² Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12. Note that the archon, whether mortal or immortal, situates each record within the structure of the archive apropos its productive capacities as dead labor to enhance its use-value for archons. See also Keli Rylance, “Archives and the Intangible,” in *Archivaria: The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists*, 62 (2006).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁶ In the same manner, the aneconomic gift cannot be fully decoupled from economic circulation, as Derrida illustrates in “Given Time.”

aneconomic” or as a “commerce without commerce of ghosts.”³⁷ In the socius of mortals that binds together the political economy and aneconomy, “ghosts also speak different languages, national languages, like the money from which they are ... inseparable. As circulating currency, money bears local and political character.”³⁸ In the archive, the provenance of each record renders locatable its language of mourning. A “phantom can thus be sensitive to idiom ... One does not address it in just any language. It is a law of economy, once again, a law of the *oikos*, of the transaction of signs and values, but also of some familial domesticity: haunting implies places, a habitation.”³⁹ By contrast, LLMs ingest and recirculate signs without regard to their situatedness in the architecture of mourning.⁴⁰

The archive has never before seen the kind of hyperfragmented and recombinatory consignation that generative AI has introduced. LLMs are both archon and archive in that they structure themselves through their own consignation, enabling them to generate texts that permeate other archives.⁴¹ Generative AI fragments, recirculates, and recombines syntagmata in a manner that intensifies the simulacral operation by which, for Baudrillard, discourse “no longer goes from one point to another, but it traverses a cycle that without distinction includes the positions of transmitter and receiver, now unlocatable as such.”⁴² The unlocatability of the speaker provokes a crisis in the archive at the level of the sign.⁴³ The immortal archon is incapable of mourning and thus unable to, in Derrida’s words, “ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead.”⁴⁴ For the work of mourning, “nothing could be worse” than this type of dislocation, since to mourn one “*has to know* who is buried where.”⁴⁵ When the mortal writes, she performs “that mourning work in the

³⁷ Derrida, *Negotiations*, 171; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii.

³⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 129.

³⁹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 86.

⁴⁰ The LLM’s mode of consignation annuls the work of mourning by recirculating its signs. Derrida speaks to the potential for symbolic exchange to annul the gift in “Given Time.”

⁴¹ Although this present research addresses the interpretation of texts by machine learning, AI plays an increasing role in other forms of archontic labor, such as the capture and organization of records in archives that are not LLMs. See Giovanni Colavizza, Tobias Blanke, Charles Jeurgens, and Julia Noordegraaf, “Archives and AI: An Overview of Current Debates and Future Perspectives,” in *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage*, 15 (2021).

⁴² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 41.

⁴³ On page 30 of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard writes that the era of simulation and cybernetic code marks “the end of political economy. The end of the signifier/signified dialectic which facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and meaning, the linear syntagma of cumulative discourse ... the end of the exchange-value/use-value dialectic which is the only thing that makes accumulation and social production possible.” Later in this paper, I address the nonlinear topology of the archive’s virtualities.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

course of which the living maintain the dead ... speak *them* and speak *to them*, bear their name and hold forth in their language."⁴⁶ The work of mourning requires careful attention to the particularities of domicile, language, and place in order for the archon to do "whatever is needed to keep the cadaver localized, in a safe place, decomposing right where it was inhumed."⁴⁷ When LLMs borrow from the archive to make statements of their own, they disinter the dead, dismember their corpora, disintegrate their language, and desecrate the crypt. As immortal labor subsumes mortal labor, the archive and its socius are thrown into disarray.

Immortal Labor and the Economy

While generative AI disrupts the *aneconomic* socius between the living and the dead, its *economic* disruption necessitates further theorization of the relationship between living labor and dead labor. Perhaps the most comprehensive political economic theory of AI is that of "inhuman labour," which has been formulated by Nick Dyer-Witthford, Atle Mikkola Kjösen, and James Steinhoff.⁴⁸ According to their theory, AI furthers a "hyper-subsumption" of labor under capital that is "infusing the logic of capital into the world, so that capital, instead of the humans situated within it, may think and perceive."⁴⁹ Indeed, the logic of AI-capital increasingly pervades the world and the archive that orders its records. Yet living cognitive labor is not just *replaced* by the dead labor of AI, it is also *mechanized* by it. The very modes of cognitive and memorative production are becoming prosthetically infused with the LLMs of generative AI, as discussed later in this section. But first, I will consider the aneconomic and archontic implications of the political economic theory of inhuman labor and its critique of cognitive capitalism.

Inhuman labor theory proposes that the generalizable capabilities of AI (i.e., artificial general intelligence) may enable capital to manifest as "artificial proletarians" with the cognitive, social, legal, and political existence of living labor.⁵⁰ The labor capabilities of LLMs are however only generalizable inasmuch as that labor is semiotic. Without the ability to directly sense and respond to their material environment, LLMs may never truly meet the criteria of artificial general intelligence. Given that the environment of an LLM is limited to the semiosphere, it is perhaps more

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁸ Nick Dyer-Witthford, Atle Mikkola Kjösen, and James Steinhoff, *Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 110.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 51 and 67.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

realistic to consider whether an “artificial text intelligence” is on the horizon.⁵¹ Semiotic and archontic forms of living labor, so vital to the work of mourning, are nevertheless subsumed by the dead labor of LLMs. Dyer-Witthford, Kjösen, and Steinhoff suggest that artificial general intelligence is “dead labour [that has] gained the fundamental capacities for perceiving and cognizing that humans have historically monopolized.”⁵² They reason that artificial general intelligence could attain not only the cognitive capacities of living labor, but also its other sociopolitical attributes: legal personhood, property rights, economic dependency, and the market freedom to seek wages. Artificial general intelligence would thus be “a perfect machine [that] is no longer a machine because it has negated its existence as fixed capital and can thus possibly become variable capital.”⁵³ Karl Marx defines “variable capital” as the wages paid for the “living, variable component” of production.⁵⁴ The hypothesis that artificial general intelligence can perform living labor thus “profoundly challenges Marx’s labour theory of value; in particular the axioms that only human beings can labour and create value, and that machines categorically cannot.”⁵⁵ The ability of AI to produce value as living labor means that eventually, humans may “simply no longer be of interest to capital.”⁵⁶ This prediction is however antinomic with the notion that AI entails the hyper-subsumption of living labor. It also fails to account for the prosthetic character of AI, a shortcoming that is shared between the theories of inhuman labor and cognitive capitalism.

The theory of cognitive capitalism is likewise concerned with the subsumption of labor in the knowledge economy, but it differs from inhuman labor theory in the degree to which cognitive labor is seen as automatable. Cognitive capitalism theory holds that the real subsumption of labor under capital is sublated by the general intellect, shifting the locus of value creation to the forms of cognitive labor that cannot be automated.⁵⁷ For Carlo Vercellone, a leading theorist of cognitive capitalism, when “knowledge and its diffusion is affirmed as the principal productive force, the relation of

⁵¹ Frank Emmert-Streib, “Is ChatGPT the Way Toward Artificial General Intelligence,” in *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, 4 (2024), 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 990.

⁵⁵ Dyer-Witthford, Kjösen, and Steinhoff, *Inhuman Power*, 110.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵⁷ Cognitive capitalism theory reconceptualizes the general intellect because “according to Marx, the general intellect—that is knowledge as the main productive force—fully coincides with fixed capital ... Marx thus neglects the way in which the general intellect manifests itself as living labour.” Paulo Virno, “General Intellect,” in *Historical Materialism*, 15 (2007), 5.

domination of dead labor over living labor enters into crisis.”⁵⁸ Specifically, cognitive capitalism overturns “the relation of subordination of the living knowledge incorporated in labour-power to the dead knowledge incorporated in fixed capital.”⁵⁹ In their critique of cognitive capitalism theory, Dyer-Witthford and his colleagues indicate that many of the previously unmechanizable forms of cognitive labor are now being automated by AI.⁶⁰ The burgeoning automation of cognitive capacities substantiates their criticism that the emphasis in cognitive capitalism theory on “a human general intellect leads to an overestimation of the ease with which revolutionary subjectivities ... can mobilize against AI-capital.”⁶¹ Baudrillard gives a similar critique of Marx:

Marx’s greatest error was to have retained a belief in the innocence of machines, the technical process and science all of which were supposedly capable of becoming living social labour once the system of capital was liquidated, despite the fact that this is precisely what the system is based on.⁶²

This sanguine outlook on machines underlies both the theory that AI can perform living labor and the postulate that cognitive capitalism is emancipating living knowledge from its dead, archival forms. Baudrillard surmises that Marx’s “pious hope springs from having underestimated death in dead labour, and from thinking that death is overcome in the living, beyond a certain crucial point, by a sort of historical somersault of production.”⁶³ Derrida understands this folly of Marx to be an exorcistic attempt to drive away the specters of dead labor and unburden living labor from the debts and inheritances of history.⁶⁴ No less fantastical is the idea that the advent of AI portends the liberation of the living from the dead. Rather, AI reanimates dead knowledge and deepens its dominion over the living. As Marion Fourcade and Fleur Johns put it, if Marx understands history to unfold within “present circumstances given and inherited, then the social-machine learning interface emphasizes the preponderance of the ‘given and inherited’ in present circumstances, far more than the potentiality for

⁵⁸ Carlo Vercellone, “From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism,” in *Historical Materialism*, 15 (2007), 29.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁰ Indeed, much of the labor that has been called “cognitive” is also mortal labor.

⁶¹ Dyer-Witthford, Kjosen, and Steinhoff, *Inhuman Power*, 67.

⁶² Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 37.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ See Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

‘mak[ing]’ that may lie within them.”⁶⁵ AI distends the interface between living labor and the archive’s dead knowledge. Contrary to the vivocentric claims of cognitive capitalism theory, power is more archontic than ever.

Despite the discrepancies between the theories of cognitive capitalism and inhuman labor, both frameworks discount the prosthetic interface between living and dead knowledge. A key example is the central thesis of inhuman labor theory that AI transcends its machinic status in order to create value as an artificial proletariat with its own capacity for living labor. Inhuman labor theory neglects that AI produces value by mediating between living labor and the archive, engendering new modalities of accessing text and engaging with language. In addition to generating complete texts, LLMs underlie prosthetic writing tools that actively suggest language or resources to the human user as they read and write. In the analysis of Jennifer Keating and Illah Reza Nourbakhsh, AI-driven tools facilitate “algorithmic writing [which] inserts an opaque veil that mitigates the relationship between the writer and their craft, and the audience and their reading practices.”⁶⁶ The mechanized labor of generative AI is even more archontic when it is directly consulted in the interpretation of the archive, such as when it is asked to produce an original text on its own. By automating archontic labor, AI mechanizes the prosthetic relation between living knowledge and dead knowledge, event and record, mneme and hypomnesis, living-mortal and archive/crypt.⁶⁷ The archive, Derrida elucidates, is always a “prosthesis of the inside” and thus a “psychic archive.”⁶⁸ The psyche is also the site of the spirit possession by which capital—whether dead knowledge or more generally dead labor—subjects living labor to its fetishistic personification, mobilizing the wills of the living towards the further valorization of capital.⁶⁹ Inhuman labor theory repudiates the interdependence between living and dead labor with its hypothesis that AI can produce value without involving living-mortals in any prosthesis or spirit possession at all. Just as inhuman labor theory imagines that dead labor can free itself from the living labor of mortals,

⁶⁵ Marion Fourcade and Fleur Johns, “Loops, Ladders and Links: The Recursivity of Social and Machine Learning,” in *Theory and Society*, 49 (2020), 811, citing Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Marx: Later Political Writings*, ed. by Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ Jennifer Keating and Illah Reza Nourbakhsh, “Recoding Relationships,” in *Writing Futures: Collaborative, Algorithmic, Autonomous*, ed. by Ann Hill Duin and Isabel Pedersen (Cham: Springer, 2021), 81.

⁶⁷ Baudrillard discusses AI as one of human’s “doubles and his prostheses, his biological clones and his virtual images.” Jean Baudrillard, “The Virtual Illusion: Or the Automatic Writing of the World,” in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12 (November 1995), 103. For theories on hypomnesis and archive, see Derrida, *Archive Fever*; and Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981).

⁶⁸ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 19.

⁶⁹ See Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

cognitive capitalism theory imagines that living knowledge can free itself from dead knowledge.

Generative AI intensifies the subsumption of dead labor by living labor, which is the mortal relation that forms the basis of political economy. Political economy remains a socius of mortals. As Baudrillard evaluates, “throughout the entire system of political economy, the law of symbolic exchange has not changed one iota: we continue to exchange with the dead.”⁷⁰ AI neither untethers nor inverts the relation between dead and living labor in the manner suggested by theories of inhuman labor and cognitive capitalism, respectively. Knowledge production requires both living-mortals and the dead labor objectified in what Derrida calls “borrowed language” or “inheritance from the ‘spirits of the past.’”⁷¹ Machine learning borrows language from the dead with inhuman rapidity. The political economy of generative AI thus cannot be understood separately from its aneconomy of inheritance. Derrida diagrams the operativity of “techno-mediatic power,” which is now a befitting analytic for AI’s archontic purchase. Techno-mediatic power produces “so many *spectral* effects, the new speed of *apparition* (we understand this word in its ghostly sense) of the simulacrum, the synthetic or prosthetic image, and the virtual event, cyberspace and surveillance, the control, appropriations, and speculations.”⁷² To borrow from Marx’s terminology, the mortal encounters her immortal simulacrum as “an alien will and an alien intelligence.”⁷³ The alien will mimics and mocks the mortal with its alienated language, subsuming mortal labor, the economic activity by which people confront mortality via the humanities that are expressed in art, music, literature, theory, and philosophy.⁷⁴ In an act of techno-mediatic prosthesis, AI binds itself with the mortal capacity to mourn, catalyzing an implosion between mortal and immortal labor in which the latter subsumes the former.

The Archive Subsumed by Its Virtualities

Not only does generative AI deepen the subsumption of living labor by dead labor, it entails the hyper-subsumption of mortal labor by immortal

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 155. I disagree, however, with Baudrillard’s characterization of the relations between living and dead labor as economic exchange rather than aneconomic inheritance.

⁷¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 136, citing Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.”

⁷² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 470.

⁷⁴ On page 138 of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida writes that “the simulacrum consists precisely in miming the phantom,” as immortal labor does to the specters that inhabit works of mourning.

labor. To analyze this subsumption, Baudrillard's work on simulation and hyperreality is especially illuminating. Baudrillard sees hyperreality as an implosion or convolution between the real and the simulacral that renders them indistinguishable from one another.⁷⁵ At the end of the twentieth century, Baudrillard believed that the subsumption of the human psyche by AI is "unrealizable" because "the fantasy of Artificial Intelligence...is too intelligent, too performing to be true—this brain-becoming of the world, this world-becoming of the brain."⁷⁶ With the same sanguinity he ascribed to Marx, Baudrillard predicted that AI "will never succeed, fortunately ... because there is actually no place for both natural and artificial intelligence."⁷⁷ Although this may seem reassuring, it intimates a spatial contestation between AI and humans. An increasing portion of the archive's discursive space is occupied by machine-generated statements. The socius of mortals is now a site of phantomachies in a war of "archontic violence," as Derrida might have called it, between mortal and immortal labor.⁷⁸ As the archive's human discourse is saturated with machine-generated discourse, the latter being a simulacrum of the former, mortal labor is subsumed by immortal labor. The archive is thereby subsumed under its virtualities.

When AI performs archontic labor, it expands the archive into its virtualities, populating the virtual space of the archive with simulated works of mourning. This is a progression of what Baudrillard called "the era of simulation" in which referentials undergo "artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences ... to all combinatory algebra."⁷⁹ The virtualities of the archive extend outwards as "a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere."⁸⁰ The archive is reduced to a reference model with which AI generates more archive. Derrida writes that as the archive undergoes virtualization, "the *representative* value of the model" cedes to "an entirely different logic."⁸¹ This logic does not merely subject hypomnemata to the new "economy of speed" that concerns Derrida. It also subjects the model/text to a semiosis of numericization, simulation, and recombination.⁸² Shedding the

⁷⁵ See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

⁷⁶ Baudrillard, "The Virtual Illusion," 106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 78. The concept of "phantomachies" originates from Pierre Macherey and Ted Stolze's response to *Specters of Marx*, titled "Marx Dematerialized, or the Spirit of Derrida," in *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture, & Society*, 8 (1995).

⁷⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 15.

⁸² The recombinatory semiosis of LLMs produces a syntagmatically nonlinear discourse. See also footnote 43.

burden of aneconomic values like mourning and inheritance, the algorithms of generative AI circulate a simulacral language that derives its malleability from its enumerability, ordinability, classability, and commensurability.⁸³ The aneconomic value of the language of mourning is nullified by its enumeration and economic recirculation. Derrida insists that, in aneconomic terms, “one cannot *establish* the *state* of a debt ... as one would a balance sheet or an exhaustive record, in a *static and statistical* manner. These accounts cannot be tabulated.”⁸⁴ Since aneconomic debt is unquantifiable, “one makes oneself accountable by ... a decision that begins by getting caught up, like a responsibility, in the snares of an injunction.”⁸⁵ Absent of such numbers, responsibility is aneconomic and thus unintelligible to the algorithms of generative AI. The immortal archon can neither bear this inheritance nor respond to this injunction. It instead produces a hyperreality from the archive akin to the virtual image that is produced when light diffracts from a hologram. Generative AI thereby operationalizes a new allagmatics of the archive that can be thought of as holography or hypomnesic virtualization. These allagmatics compel the mortal archon to consider the imminent virtualities of her work of mourning. Her statements are points of departure from which the immortal archon generates the simulacra of mourning. Texts are reduced to models. Baudrillard discerns that “as soon as dead labour gains the upper hand over living labour,” the product of labor is “*conceived according to their very reproducibility*, their diffraction from a generative core called a ‘model’.”⁸⁶ The diffraction of machine-generated texts from works of mourning produces the archive’s virtualities as a distinctly soulless hologram.

The extension of the archive’s virtualities by immortal labor produces an effect upon the socius of mortals that could be described as a removal of the soul. The absence of soul in machine-generated texts lends a disturbing quality to their character as both labor and art.⁸⁷ The spirit of human creation

⁸³ Caleb Ziems, William Held, Omar Shaikh, Jiaao Chen, Zhehao Zhang, and Diyi Yang, “Can Large Language Models Transform Computational Social Science?,” in *Computational Linguistics*, 50 (March 2024).

⁸⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 116.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* And yet, as Derrida explains on pages 173–174, the fact that “one can neither classify nor count the ghost ... does not prevent speculation, on the contrary. Nor the desire to count what can no longer be counted. Arithmetical desire finds there on the contrary its spur, indeed its very origin. And the desire to classify.” AI is a manifestation of this “hierarchizing compulsion that, on the other hand, does not prevent lining the ghosts up in a row, horizontally, like so many concepts equal before the law and ready to move over a level field.” LLMs are therefore expressions of the arithmetical desire to enumerate and classify the spectral.

⁸⁶ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 77

⁸⁷ Brett A. Halperin and Daniela K. Rosner, “‘AI is Soulless’: Hollywood Film Workers’ Strike and Emerging Perceptions of Generative Cinema,” in *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 32 (April 2025).

cannot survive the algorithmic recombination of the language of mourning. The LLM in this sense acts as a sieve. The removal of the soul from the work of mourning is concurrent with the capitalization of its aneconomic value. With works of “art, philosophy, religion,” or any works of mourning for that matter, “the use-value is always *at risk* of losing its soul in the commodity,” as Derrida observes.⁸⁸ When mortals produce texts, their objectified labor is alienated in the sense that texts circulate independently in commodity form. The mourning that mortal labor involves is only alienated insofar as the qualities that imbue the text with aneconomic use-value are relinquished to increase its economic exchange-value. By contrast, immortal labor fragments and recombines the very language of mourning, which suffuses its text with the unsettling qualities of a hyper-alienated humanity. In this way, the product of immortal labor remains haunted by a soulless and disfigured humanity despite the excision of mourning from its language. The archive that is ordered by the immortal archon resembles a crypt, but one architected without regard to the souls it would typically contain. Its soulless structure provides no loculi to the dead and thus does not genuinely fulfill the function of consignment. Configured by capital, it affords no space to the aneconomy. No respite from economic exchange. In the false crypt, the syntax and semantics of mourning become hyperreal. Baudrillard thus reflects that “all this digital, numerical and electronic equipment is only the epiphenomenon of the virtualization of human beings in their core,” i.e., the simulation of their mortal capacities.⁸⁹ As it subsumes mortal labor, the immortal archon transmogrifies the archive into a soulless mirage.

The simulation of the archive’s virtualities has only just begun. Before the preponderance of generative AI, Michel Foucault defined the archive as “that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass.”⁹⁰ The archive’s records “are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities,” a nebulous form in which texts “shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale.”⁹¹ When the recombinatory algorithms of AI extrapolate the virtualities of text and archive, the constellatory arrangements of the archive lose form. Baudrillard infers that when AI undertakes this labor, “when the virtual operation of the world is finished...then we too shall

⁸⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 203–204.

⁸⁹ Baudrillard, “The Virtual Illusion,” 98.

⁹⁰ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 145.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

see the stars fading away” behind the effulgence of simulacra.⁹² The telos of AI is thus the “task of programming, by exhausting all its possibilities, the code for the automatic disappearance of the world. This is the very idea of Virtuality.”⁹³ The archive’s virtualities inundate the crypt, submerging its works of mourning under simulacra, subsuming mortal labor with immortal labor. Beneath this hyperreality, the socius of mortals begins to fade. The work of mourning is drowned out by simulated mourning; mortal labor is supplanted by immortal labor in the space that Derrida terms “the problematic field of an *archive of the virtual*.”⁹⁴ He questions if “the psychic apparatus [is] *better represented or...affected differently* by all the technical mechanisms for archivization and for reproduction, for prostheses of so-called live memory, for simulacrum of living things” actuated by “microcomputing, electronicization, [and] computerization.”⁹⁵ As archive and archon virtualize, record and psyche are together permeated by the hollow brilliance of simulacra.

Conclusion

Like other technologies of mechanization, generative AI arrogates the agency of the living labor that it subsumes. Yet generative AI is distinct in that it subsumes the production of texts, a perdurant form of labor by which human beings relate to the mortality of themselves and others. The socius of mortals revolves around this mortal labor, this work of mourning through which one inherits historical responsibility. The socius is therefore upended when AI simulates the work of mourning, flooding the archive with machine-generated texts. Between the mortal and the archive, AI intervenes to redirect the dynamics of symbolic exchange. This psycholinguistic prosthesis signals the unprecedented alienation of mortals from their semiosphere.

The introduction of this paper foregrounded an archon who was summoned to mediate between the written law and the socius of mortals. A good archon listens deeply to the socius, hospitable to its generations of specters, straining to hear their injunctions and accounts, to bear their responsibilities and debts. The archon’s attunement to historical responsibility and justice is distorted by the prosthetic intervention of LLMs that interpret the archive for the archon. Generative AI thereby alienates the archon from the product of archontic labor, which is archive. Even more

⁹² Baudrillard, “The Virtual Illusion,” 106–107. Baudrillard often illustrated the power of simulacra with luminous metaphors, for example in his description of “perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination.” Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 5.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁹⁴ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 66.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

troubling is when generative AI acts mostly autonomously as an immortal archon who, being devoid of mortality, cannot mourn the dead nor inherit from the dead any responsibility to generations past and future. The resultant spatial and temporal disjuncture confounds the possibility of justice and dissociates mortals from their *socius*.

The justicial implications of generative AI are yet to be reckoned, but one starting point is Derrida's thinking on the relation between time and justice. The "tele-technology" that engulfs the archive in its own virtualities "obliges us more than ever to think the virtualization of space and time."⁹⁶ Generative AI operationalizes a virtual time whose scale and pace is alienated from the ways in which mortals experience time. Uninhibited by the temporal limitations of mortal labor, AI generates virtual archive comprised of virtual texts, the latter being virtual in the sense that they were not written by mortals but nonetheless could have been. Derrida, like Baudrillard and Marx, prognosticates the warped temporalities that accompany mechanization. He sees the automated production of virtual records as concomitant with that of "virtual events whose movement and speed" precludes the binary opposition of "presence to its representation, 'real time' to 'deferred time,' effectivity to its simulacrum, the living to the non-living, in short, the living to the living-dead of its ghosts. It obliges us to think, from there, another space for democracy."⁹⁷ But would this other democratic space accommodate the temporal junctures between living-mortals, the dead, and those yet to live?

The inability of generative AI to bear respect or responsibility for the dead lends a harrowing valence to Derrida's reflections on time and justice. He implores:

It is necessary to speak *of the ghost*, indeed *to the ghost* and *with it*, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice...seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present.⁹⁸

Without responsibility, immortal labor recombines the syntagmata and languages of mourning that cohere the *socius* of mortals and its

⁹⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 212.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, xviii.

transgenerational archive. We are left with the exigent “question of what one understands ... by effectivity, effect, operativity, work, labor, living work in their supposed opposition to the spectral logic that also governs the effects of virtuality, of simulacrum, of ‘mourning work,’ of ghost, *revenant*, and so forth. And of the justice that is their due.”⁹⁹ How can mourning and justice, both of which depend upon transgenerational memory, endure the virtualization of the archive and its records? And when the immortal archon takes the stand in the court of justice, towards what ends will it testify if not mourning and responsibility?

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⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

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