(A)I CAN'T SEE HER.

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The Rupture of Historical Interpretation

Historical storytelling has long relied on mediated reproductions of past figures in theatre, literature, film, and museums. These representations reflect the limits of their medium and carry structural biases shaped by editorial choices, archival hierarchies, and power relations that determine whose lives become visible and whose remain obscured (Carter 2006; Robb 2024).

Conversational agents, driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI), that simulate historical figures for edutainment, which I term histobots (Harder 2024b), introduce a new rupture in this tradition. Museums now use AI avatars (Bonjour Vincent, Musée d'Orsay, 2023) or voice clones (Ask Dalí, Salvador Dalí Museum, 2024) of modernist painters, and educational platforms like *Khanmigo* (Khan Academy 2023) and *Hello History* (FACING IT International AB 2023) present histobots as learning tools. Their appeal lies in the promise of direct access to the past. However, the large language models (LLMs) they run on often do not evaluate sources or account for contested narratives. They generate responses from probabilistic patterns in their training data, influenced by human reinforcement and alignment rules (OpenAI 2022; 2023), informed by WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) values (Smart et al. 2024). Histobots then produce an apparently coherent voice assembled from partial records and platform governance.

My research uses practice-based, reflexive, and autoethnographic methods to study this shift. I examine histobots through the development of a Hedy Lamarr chatbot (Harder 2024a), based on the Austrian-American actress and inventor who pioneered the technology underlying today's wireless technologies. My bot ran on *OpenAI*'s GPT-4o-mini model (2024) and was exhibited in the *More than Meets AI* exhibition (O'Kane et al. 2024). What I hoped would bring Lamarr into sharper focus highlighted the difficulty of holding her in sight at all.

I draw on Donna Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledges, which rejects the "god trick" and stresses that all knowledge is partial and accountable, and on Shannon Vallor's (2024) metaphor of AI as a mirror that reflects traces of human expression rather than understanding them. These lenses, along with critical AI scholarship (Crawford 2021), help me trace how inequalities in data and infrastructure shape generated personas, including my own prototype.

The Question of Agency

Histobots promise to let users "chat with anyone from the past" (FACING IT International AB 2023). In practice, they create feedback loops. The various representations of Anne Frank illustrate this risk. Her father removed entries on sexuality, gender, and family conflict from early editions of her diary (Waaldijk 1993, 329–31). AI versions repeat this sanitization. *SchoolAI*'s Frank appears historically situated but responds in polite and upbeat generalities and avoids naming the Nazis as responsible for her death (Wilkins 2025). This is not an oversight but a structural limitation of LLMs and their creators' alignment strategies, which prioritise apolitical neutrality and politeness over an accurate historical narrative. The same occurs in *Khanmigo*'s rendering of Harriet Tubman, whose rhetorical force is subdued to avoid perceived caricature (Wallace and Peeler 2024).

My Lamarr prototype confirmed these tendencies. Despite extensive back-end prompts on content and linguistics, the bot adopted a generic, vague register. It misdated films, omitted context, and regurgitated GPTisms, lexical markers common to large language models (Gibbs 2023). The system echoed my assumptions of who Lamarr might have been and the limitations of *OpenAI*'s proprietary model. Across commercial platforms, similar uniformity appears. On *Hello History*, Harriet Tubman, Marsha P. Johnson, and Virginia Woolf all speak in the same generic voice. Such uniformity risks a form of historical negationism (Rousso et al. 1991), in which inclusion becomes tokenistic, and difference collapses into a single, platform-friendly persona.

Histobots as Algorithmic Reenactment

Histobots extend practices of reenactment, but with a key difference. In traditional reenactment, audiences usually recognise the presence of actors, curators, or directors. AI removes the visible mediator. It presents its responses as direct, objective, and authoritative. This shift has epistemic consequences.

Reenactment usually operates within artistic, curatorial, or scholarly traditions (Agnew 2004). Histobots instead rely on proprietary systems such as *OpenAI*'s GPT-4, a multimodal transformer trained on a mix of public and licensed data (OpenAI 2023). These systems operate as black boxes. Companies disclose little about model architecture, dataset composition, or behaviour guidelines (OpenAI 2022; OpenAI 2023). As a result, when an AI-generated figure presents false or biased claims, these cannot be easily traced or corrected, and responsibility is dispersed across platforms, datasets, and developers.

This issue is acute when representing marginalised figures. Women, queer people and people of colour have varying degrees of agency in their lifetimes and are already affected disproportionally by archival silences (Carter 2006). AI further flattens their complexity, constructing a version of history based on contemporary assumptions about what is useful or valuable. Benchmarks like *WinoQueer (*Felkner et al. 2024) demonstrate that language models embed anti-queer biases, reinforce stereotypes, and erase lived realities.

So who decides which aspects of a person's life should be foregrounded? Should AI historical figures be uplifting and engaging, or should they confront users with brutal truths? These questions expose the ethical dilemma of posthumous reproduction. While I at least refrained from cloning Lamarr's voice, my chatbot still felt intrusive. Was I honoring her legacy or exploiting it?

Reclaiming or Reinforcing the Master's Tools?

Haraway (1988) argues that all knowledge is situated and shaped by the perspective and positionality of those who create it. Histobots inherit the biases of their training data, the economic imperatives of their platforms (Nieborg and Poell 2018), and the assumptions embedded in model alignment. Audre Lorde (1979) argued that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." If histobots rely on proprietary models that extract, commodify, and erase historical complexity, can they ever be ethical tools for historical engagement?

Histobots reveal how history, like data, is always constructed, mediated, and contested (Crawford 2021). Many scholars advocate for more inclusive, intersectional, feminist, and responsible AI (Søraa 2023; Klumbyte, Phiel, and Draude 2023). Achieving such practices within commercial infrastructures may prove difficult. Building ethical histobots may require *open*-source, transparent, and collectively governed systems. Whether such models are feasible—or sufficient—remains an open question.

Conclusion

Histobots unsettle established forms of historical mediation by means of systems that reproduce the exclusions found in archives and datasets. Although marketed as tools that make the past more accessible, they often simplify events and hide responsibility.

How do we intervene if history is always constructed, mediated, and contested? A more useful histobot must show what it is drawing on. It must point to its sources, identify missing records, and state when it cannot answer. It should guide users to letters, images, and documents rather than speak as if it were the person.

This shift turns the histobot from an ersatz historical figure into a companion for exploring the archive. In doing so, it becomes less a mirror of the past and more a guide to the limits of what can be known. In Hedy Lamarr's case, the lesson was clear. AI could not let me see her. It showed instead how the traces we inherit, and the systems that shape them, decide how far our sight can reach.

Acknowledgements

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