COLONIAL MAPPING OF ADVANCE AUTOMATION: EAST INDIA COMPANY AS AI

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This paper argues that AI systems must be understood as extensions of centuries-old platform infrastructures rooted in empire. The prevailing narrative in AI studies treats machine learning models as novel instruments of automation and cognition. This narrative obscures the deeper historical continuity between modern computational platforms and earlier imperial systems of data extraction, classification, and labor governance. This paper situates AI within a longer genealogy of colonial knowledge infrastructures from the British East India Company to nineteenth-century statistical sciences to reframe AI not as a political-economic formation shaped by racial capitalism, imperial epistemologies, and extractive logics.

A telling anecdote comes from a senior Microsoft scientist who asked a generative model to depict "an Indian girl under a tree reading a book." Instead of producing her desired childhood reflection, the system defaulted to white, Western images—revealing how foundation models encode colonial value systems. Like Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the circulation of meaning is pre-structured by Western archives that dominate training data.

This dynamic is not new. Like modern digital platforms, the EIC embedded governance into its technical and administrative architectures. Terms of trade were encoded into contracts, racial hierarchies were formalized into labor regimes, and territorial sovereignty was operationalized through documentation systems that standardized taxation, land ownership, and commodity circulation (Lim, 2025). The Company's infamous Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793, for example, transformed complex

agrarian relations into fixed property titles and revenue obligations, creating massive dispossession while stabilizing revenue streams for British investors (Guha 1982). The EIC perfected the instruments that are central to contemporary platform governance – it set the rules of participation, controlled the interfaces of exchange, and externalized social costs onto colonized populations.

Today, national initiatives such as India's foundational AI model demonstrate both possibility and peril. While framed as sovereign alternatives to Western dominance, such projects risk reproducing exclusion by privileging some languages and identities over others. In contrast, Indigenous data sovereignty movements—such as Te Mana Raraunga in Aotearoa—foreground communal ownership and resistance to state or market capture.

Contemporary platform studies gesture towards inclusion and diversity by citing innovation and labour practices in the Majority World (Poell, Duffy and Neiborg 2025). This brackets off a longer history, framing digital platforms as neoliberal novelties that emerged in the late twentieth century (Srnicek 2017; Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). Instead we insist that modern platforms capitalize and rearticulate colonial techniques of privatization, extraction, and labor precarity. APIs replace charters; data pipelines replace shipping routes; and algorithmic management replaces overseers.

From this perspective, decolonizing AI is not a matter of diversifying methodologies or case studies but a structural rethinking of who owns, governs, and benefits from computational infrastructures. The problem is not merely that Western images dominate generative models, but that the entire architecture of foundation models is built on colonial logics of abstraction, enclosure, and value extraction. As Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias (2019) argue, data colonialism represents a new phase of imperial accumulation in which human life itself becomes a resource frontier for capital.

This paper therefore situates AI within a longue durée history of platform empires that stretches from the East India Company through to contemporary machine learning infrastructures. By tracing these genealogies, it becomes possible to see that the political stakes of AI are not confined to questions of bias or transparency but extend to the fundamental organization of global power. This paper situates "Global Southing" not as a guarantee of decolonization but as a contested terrain where platform power may either reinforce or unsettle colonial continuities.

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