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# On the Religious and Cultural Origins of Artificial Intelligence

As we continue to live through the emergence of generative AI, what some would call one of the most important and disruptive technological advancements of our lifetime, the way we talk about these technologies is increasingly important. Technology is the product of narrative, ideology, and myth. It is discursively produced. The language we use to talk about technology determines how society uses, understands, and imagines technology and how it impacts society. Having experienced the meteoric rise of so many technologies, and riding the wave of hype around ChatGPT, I became curious: how does the language we use to talk about AI shape how we think about AI?

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Los Angeles
Metro Area, CA

San Francisco
Metro Area, CA
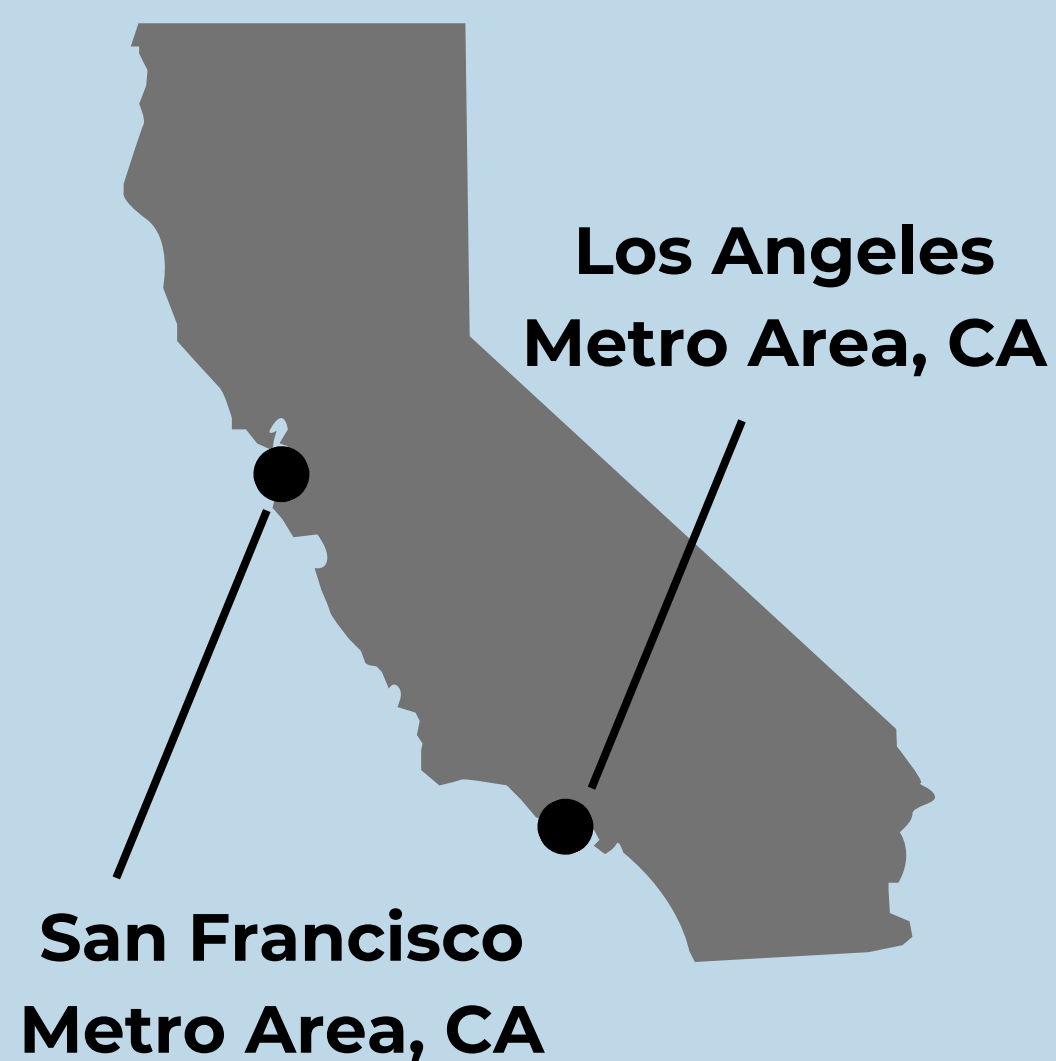
My Burch Fellowship experience took me across California. I began my journey in Southern California, bouncing between Santa Barbara, San Diego, and Los Angeles. At UC Santa Barbara, I worked with my faculty advisor to identify and compile a compendium of transhumanism in science fiction and literature. In San Diego, I connected with artist and professor Ricardo Dominguez to explore the mythopoetic origins of technology and artificial intelligence. With *Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952–1982*, an exhibit presented by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), I gained a clearer idea of the impact of computers in popular consciousness and the artistic visions of utopia and dystopia that followed their emergence.

I eventually landed in San Francisco, where several immersive weeks solidified my final thesis topic. Thanks to several connections, I was able to meet several founders of AI-based startups and companies. I began to realize how different their values and priorities were from the rest of the world, how oddly they seemed to talk about technology and people, particularly artificial intelligence.
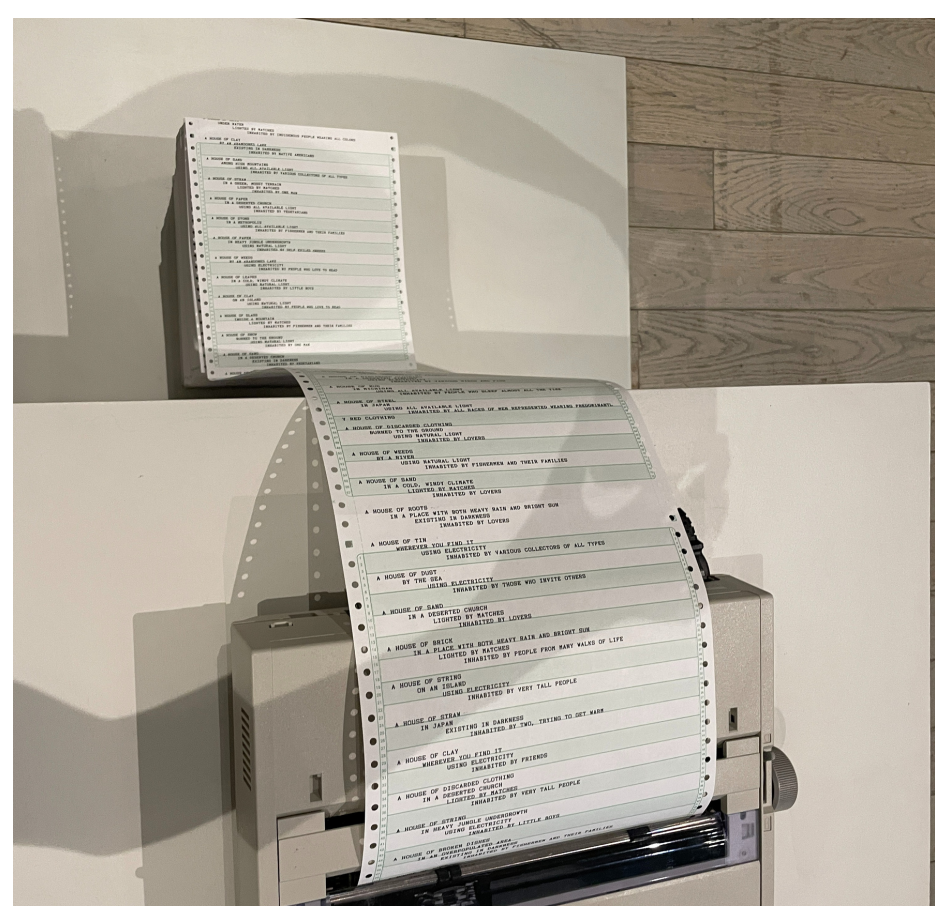
It was like witnessing a foreign language: their utopic vision of artificial intelligence, the seemingly imminent arrival of artificial general intelligence, the ubiquity of concepts like the singularity, effective accelerationism, longtermism, existential risk, transhumanism, cosmism, pronatalism, and the Dark Enlightenment, to name a few.

Why was the language invoked by these AI founders and employed to describe these language models so existential, so infused with notions of ritual and magic despite the field's well-documented disavowal of organized religion?

What was so necessary about physically living in San Francisco, rather than staying in Chapel Hill reading articles, was experiencing the ideas and assumptions that suffused the city. The logic of technology-as-solution seemed to permeate every aspect of my time there, particularly because my host was involved in the cryptocurrency scene. Drawing on my comparative literature background, I became curious about the kinds of media these people were consuming and the kinds of stories they contained. I began asking my interviewees for book and article suggestions, and they happily acquiesced, recommending everything from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* to Peter Thiel's *Zero to One* to Ray Kurzweil's *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. At the same time, my host and I began going to different AI- and technology-related parties, mixers, and openings, where I continued my ethnographic work. I ended up leaving San Francisco with a completely new thesis topic: the history of the relationship between religion and technology.

I continued to build on my experience in Palo Alto, where I spent days trawling through the archives of the Computer History Museum. One of the most diverse and comprehensive computing archives in the country, it contained a wealth of relics from the early days of computing and Silicon Valley, informal communications, throwaway notes, and casual write-ups that sketched a less formal history of AI. I found, for example, a complete collection of the Whole Earth Catalog, a magazine started by early technologist and noted futurist Stewart Brand which had been a canon work in the early days of Silicon Valley.

During my time in California, I learned from academics, organizers, and AI founders how to study, think, and write about artificial intelligence. I have a much better understanding of what ethnographic, archival, and historical research look like, as well as the existing methods and approaches for historicizing technology. Most importantly, my Burch Fellowship summer left me feeling like a different person. My time alone in California made me more resilient. Whether it was navigating public transportation in highway-dominated Southern California, losing my wallet before my flight to San Francisco, or frantically calling friends of friends to find last-minute housing, I learned how to navigate stressful situations and find solutions.

Coded:
Art Enters the
Computer Age,
1952–1982

Looking back, I'm able to better reflect on what I've gained from this fellowship: research experience and a thesis topic, yes, but also: a larger network, a wealth of connections, a better idea of what constitutes independent research, more experience interfacing with institutions and academics, more confidence in myself as a person and my ability to navigate tough situations, and a better idea of who I am and the ways I want to be when I am older. For that, I am endlessly grateful.