Kris Cohen and Scott C. Richmond

New Histories of Computational Personhood: An Introduction

In the 1960s, a chatbot simulates paranoia. Some twenty years later, a group of women computer scientists document the misogyny that saturates their professional lives, using bureaucracy's own tools to try to force institutional change. In the 1950s, a programmer teaches a computer to write little queer love letters. In Silicon Valley—long before it earned that name—a wealthy eccentric who earned her fortune selling rifles holds séances while inventing the speculative, neo-colonial real estate tactics that would eventually become the Valley's distinctive milieu. And, in the middle of one of the most famous demos in the history of computers, an engineer and his screen are both ready for their close-up.

The histories we have convened in this dossier all find ways of narrating the history of computing that displace the familiar story of computing as one of white male audacity. The litany of "pioneers" is familiar: Charles Babbage, Alan Turing, Vannevar Bush, J. C. R. Licklider, Douglas Engelbart, Alan Kay, Steve Jobs—and, of course, the familiar billionaire trio now committed to leaving the Earth behind: Elon Musk (space!), Jeff Bezos (space!!), and Mark Zuckerberg (the metaverse?!). In part, this story is familiar because it is ongoing; those people have and do wield world-shaping power. Also ongoing are attempts to temper that power through the work of counterexample about how, for instance, black and brown and queer and trans people have long been involved in computing.[1] All of these important counternarratives teach

1 Two of the authors in this dossier have written important historiographies in this

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(and re-teach) us that computing has never just been an arena for white men to act authoritatively. But in ways that are worrying and themselves familiar, these two ongoing histories need each other: white male audacity turns out to need its counterexamples in order to game the politics of diversity and inclusion. The representational politics of the counterexample needs white male audacity until the moment that audacity has been definitively displaced or destroyed. And none of us are holding our breath.

In order to move outside the gravity created when example and counterexample, narrative and counternarrative orbit each other, the essays in this dossier experiment with historiographical method. Refusing to presume what computing is, might be, or might have been, each essay lets its historical objects both loosen and proliferate in order to tell different stories of how we got to where we are. All are in search of new kinds of relevance, beyond biography, devices invented, and units sold.

One way to hold these experiments together is to say that they all address not media or computers, but *computational personhood*. If personhood itself has a history, what role have computers and computation played in this history? In what ways has computation itself tried to mimic prior historical modes of personhood, and to what extent has it sought to intervene in those histories? We've invited the authors in this dossier to help us develop and elaborate our sense of what computational personhood is and what questions it can generate for media studies and the history of computing.

Computational personhood gives a provisional name to the ways in which computation—not only our computational technologies but also the economic, ordinary, practical, and aesthetic impacts of computing—elaborates forms of life, modes of experience, and structures of subjectivity. It also names how, in a tweak to the temporality of representational politics, all persons are made, eventually, to be intimately compatible with computing. Computational personhood is not, therefore, a fixed structure so much as a labile infrastructure, a crucible of experimentation. Far from an elite club, it is an open invitation. This is why Christine Goding-Doty refers to race and racialization as an event more than an identity.[2] Structures of domination, of course, endure, and often they wield the power of exclusion and inclusion. But to the extent that lives are now lived in relation to always-on networked computation, computational personhood has developed a complex repertoire of power and subjectivization around the dynamic of inclusion. In the face of an industry that has invented unthinkably ambitious forms of dom-

mode. See Jacob Gaboury, "A Queer History of Computing," *Rhizome*, February 19, 2013, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/feb/19/queer-computing-1/; and Joy Lisi Rankin, *A People's History of Computing in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). See also (among many others) Jennifer S. Light, "When Computers Were Women," *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 3 (July 1999): 455–483; Nathan L. Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over: Computers, Programmers, and the Politics of Technical Expertise* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Mar Hicks, *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); and Charlton McIlwain, *Black Software: The Internet and Racial Justice, from the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

2 Tung-Hui Hu and Christine Goding-Doty, "Race after Representation: Christine Goding-Doty and Tung-Hui Hu in Conversation," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 21, 2021.

ination, many of which feel like nothing more threatening than an open invitation to be whomever or whatever one wants, the essays gathered here seek out histories and historiographies committed to the negation of such domination as well as to the less glamorous business of improvising forms of survival, endurance, and thriving inside computational personhood.

The question that adheres to computational personhood, in particular, is not—or not just—*Do we have the right objects and participants in our histories of computing?* It is rather, *Where and when have particular people, events, and technologies in that history exceeded familiar historical frames for objecthood and personhood?* The authors gathered here rarely pose this question in a utopian mood. Kris Cohen, Homay King, Avery Slater, and Joy Lisi Rankin, for instance, give readers new genealogies of the enemy: the graphic user interface as an environment for the extension of whiteness as a post-racial site of self-invention; Sarah Winchester's neo-colonial architectures in a very young Silicon Valley; the psychologized personhood of early chatbots; and a report from the 1980s about misogyny as a trans-personal structuring force of and in early tech cultures. But Jacob Gaboury and Rankin also present readers with new, immanent theorists of the cultures of computing and computation: respectively, Christopher Strachey and Turing exchanging their queer computational love letters and the authors of the *Barriers to Equality in Academia* report, who address misogyny as the very structure of computing's work environments (if not computing itself).

A few interlinked commitments motivate our desire to assemble these new histories of computation. First, we refuse to take as given that the present state of computational machines and digital media should occupy the center of our histories of computing. We thus take Tom Gunning's formulation of "cinema's forgotten futures" in film history as an explicit model for this dossier.[3] For Gunning, as for many historians of early cinema, the reason to study the first two decades of cinema is to explore the paths not taken: What did filmmakers do with cinema before the norm of feature-length narrative film was sedimented *as* a norm? As King's essay in this dossier shows, when we expand the histories of computing and begin to loosen our sense of computing history's fixity, we will have to tell new kinds of histories, often with oblique relevance to the computational present we think we know or share. For Gunning, part of the force of this project is the way it emphasizes an underground resonance between early film and avant-garde aesthetic practices. Perhaps more to the point, we, collectively, refuse to allow the corporate interests of monopoly capitalists—Silicon Valley as a synecdoche for the tech industry or, in the film analogy, Hollywood—to circumscribe our imagination of what computing is, how it matters, and what it does. We require broader, weirder, less predictable histories of the present of computing.

Second, inquiry into computational personhood should investigate not only minoritized subjects but also the ways in which whiteness and mascu-

3 Tom Gunning, "'Animated Pictures,' Tales of Cinema's Forgotten Future," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 34, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 465–485.

linity have continually reshaped themselves to maintain their dominance as the paradigm case. What we call computational personhood is the structure of subjectivity that had to be invented alongside computing technology, encompassing forms of life made compatible through living intimately with the machinery of computing: at first in the living room, via personal computers; then enmeshed in placeless networks via smartphones; and, ultimately, surrounded by computing as the massive, impersonal, and utterly ordinary backdrop of our lives. The concept of computational personhood acknowledges that lives are at once destabilized and made possible by computing.[4] To the extent that we are computational persons, we must tell histories of how that came to be, how it might have been otherwise, and how people excluded from intelligible forms of being computer subjects have improvised lives and made worlds out of (but not always inside of) the strictures of computation. In their contributions to this dossier, Gaboury and Rankin both follow how some historical actors have lived lives in proximity to computing, lives that can not only teach us to expand who counts as a "computer person," but also offer lessons in how to get on as a subject of computation in scenes of structural violence.

Third, computing is the contemporary technology for making up people, as Ian Hacking has said in a different context.[5] Paraphrasing Friedrich Kittler, computational media, like all media, determine our situation.[6] But computing's address must also be broad enough to encompass shifting horizons of experience. One of the most important lessons of film and media theory is that such determination is rarely straightforward, and it is often surprising in its impacts, causalities, and modes of exemplification. Media theory has taught us how to pay close and sustained attention to the ways various media impinge upon experience. Cohen's and Slater's contributions are different versions of this sort of history; they each offer histories of the ways technology patterns computational personhood.

Fourth, and in a way summing up the previous, we approach archives with an attunement to their abundance. Anjali Arondekar has described such historical "abundance" as a paralogic of the archive that does not seek out facts and counter-facts but rather releases possibility from the places where the dominant logics of an archive (e.g., lost and found, marginalized and centered, erased or recorded) have trapped it.[7] If one of the trade secrets of early-twenty-first-century tech industries has been a power over temporality itself—what Brian Massumi calls *ontopower*, or the power to pre-shape reality and the future—then what the authors in this dossier are after is what Lau-

4 Computing is, like all technē, a pharmakon. Bernard Stiegler, "Relational Ecology and the Digital *Pharmakon*," *Culture Machine* 13 (2012), https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/464-1026-1-PB.pdf.

5 Ian Hacking, "Making up People," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986).

6 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), xxxix.

7 Anjali Arondekar, "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia," *differences* 25, no. 3 (2014): 98–122.

ren Berlant, extending Freud, called *supervalence*.[8] As Eli Rose Thorkelson describes it, "A supervalent thought is too multiplicitous, too heavily charged, too overflowing and too resonant to pin itself down in any single dialectical drama."[9] Rather than embellish the histories of computing we have—expanding them, diversifying them—the authors assembled here seek out the proliferative force in their objects.

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8 Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); and Lauren Berlant, "Supervalent Thought," *Supervalent Thought* (blog), December 23, 2007, https://supervalentthought.com/2007/12/23/hello-world/.

9 Eli Thorkelson, "Lauren Berlant and the Nonbinary," *decasia* (blog), August 31, 2021, https://decasia.org/academic_culture/2021/08/31/lauren-berlant-and-the-nonbinary/.