

DIGITAL POSSIBILITIES AND THE REIMAGINING OF POLITICS, PLACE, AND THE SELF

An Introduction

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Much has changed since the original Interactive Frictions conference, both on the Internet and in the wider world around us. Less than a year after the conference, the castles in the air built by the mid-1990s Silicon Valley frenzy had collapsed and, soon after that, the twin towers of the World Trade Center fell. The spiraling deflation ignited by the dot-com crash was further fueled by the disastrous events of 9/11. Today, as a second round of economic turmoil continues to wreck havoc with the economy, the United States still feels the effects of a falsely justified war and faces new assaults on civil liberties. This conflict is at least partially virtual, deploying the digital along multiple registers from communication to drone attacks to surveillance and reminding us of the long-standing coupling of war and technology. Yet it is also all too grounded and bloody, marked by a high body count and by images of torture that seem to defy the virtual and to underscore the reality of specific places and of fleshed bodies.

While none of those gathered in the Davidson Conference Center in June 1999 might have predicted the events of September 11 or their aftermath, a few conference speakers did call us to remember other histories, particularly industrial histories that illustrate the degree to which all narrative forms are deeply influenced by their conditions of production. Pat Mellencamp recalled the early, heady days of guerilla video and eloquently underscored the capacity of capital to cut short the possibilities of experimental narrative. We could likewise have turned to the early days of radio, television, or even cable to find similar cautionary tales.

Still, in those heady days of “early” digital media theory, industrial history was not the only terrain eclipsed by the pursuit of specificity. In many ways, the field seemed caught up in a boom of its own, with pioneer spirits eager to brand the scholarly outposts of the digital in their own images, intent on staking their claims in this new academic growth industry. Some of this mindset was on display at the conference, as we hotly pursued medium specificity, limning the multiple contours of the things that were there before us and tracking the many precursors to the forms taking shape in interactive narratives, digital art, and, to a lesser degree, popular practices.

At the conference and in the broader field of “new media theory,” this “cyberstructuralism” (as Marsha Kinder refers to it in her introduction to Part I) often proceeded as if critiques of structuralism in film and literary fields had never surfaced at all, erasing decades of challenges to formalist theory by feminists, cultural studies scholars, and theorists of race, and distancing a direct engagement with the politics of media.¹

Certainly, much of the first half of this anthology complicates a blind cyberstructuralism through a careful attention to the precursors of new media. As such, it performs important work by historicizing the “new” in new media, locating productive antecedents even while parsing what really is different or unique about the digital. In this second half, the volume moves pointedly beyond medium specificity to a broader engagement with social and cultural contexts. If essays in Part I provide important formal and historical lenses through which to examine the specificity and predecessors of digital media, Part II delves even more directly into the cultural, the social, and the political in a post-World War II landscape. In doing so, it is possible to broaden our conceptions of several key terms, including the “political.”

I think the ease with which some sense of the “political” was excavated from much work in early new media theory had less to do with the overt intentions of the cyberstructuralists and much to do with the paucity of many conceptions of the political as they related to cyberspace circa 1999. For a variety of complex reasons well delineated in other places, much of the explicitly “political” conversation about cyberspace in the late 1990s was tied to notions of the “digital divide,” a concept that quickly became a flash point for academics as well as policy makers and politicians. Essentially, the idea of the digital divide fixated on the notion of access, insisting that many were being left with no entry ramp onto the “information superhighway,” a term popularized by then Vice President Al Gore and others. Such claims tied notions of citizenship (or, perhaps more accurately, notions of “empowered” consumers) to digital access but seldom broached more complex issues like multimedia literacy or even diverse content, implying a kind of blind faith in access as panacea. In keeping with the libertarian spirit driving the denizens of Silicon Valley and readers of *Wired* everywhere, the idea of the digital divide implied that providing computers would somehow ensure the flowering of democracy, an attitude we continue to see replayed with successive waves of technology, particularly vis-à-vis education.

Of course, this shorthand sketch of the issue is itself reductive. At its best, the concept did (and can continue to) highlight some very key aspects of digital inequality. For

instance, according to Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm), less than thirty-five percent of the world population uses the Internet. Still, Faye Ginsburg has argued that the “neo-developmental language” underpinning much digital-divide rhetoric has led to an “unexamined First-Worldism that has underwritten assumptions about the digital age and its inequalities.” She insists that conceptions of the digital divide often devolve into a consumerist discourse that “smuggles in a set of assumptions that paper over cultural and economic differences in the way things digital may be taken up, if at all, in radically different contexts, and thus serve to further insulate thinking against recognition of alterity that different kinds of media worlds present.”

This market-driven idea of the digital divide overdetermined the overtly “political” discussions about digital media in the late 1990s and perhaps made it easier for the cyberstructuralists to disengage. Such considerations seemed to smack too much of policy or of communication studies, fields long devalued by film and literary studies, and did not seem to have much to do with the more rarefied and philosophical pursuits of “specifying” the medium. The concerns of those debating the digital divide didn’t much impinge upon new media theory, and the two fields seemed engaged in different realms of inquiry. Interestingly, and in ways I will return to, the very forms of the digital may also have underwritten this kind of academic partitioning.

In small pockets of the conference and certainly in the years since, several scholars, including Anna Everett, Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Chun, Jessie Daniels, and Herman Gray (who was not at the conference but is included in this volume), have turned to race as one test bed for rethinking the myriad ways we might broaden our conceptions of the political in this digital age, defusing the hyperformalism of much digital media theory. A productive strand of this work has explored the creative use of new technologies by marginalized communities, particularly communities of color, examining early adopters of the digital in communities like hip hop and DJ culture.² This work challenges the rhetoric of the digital divide by locating technological competency and originality in precisely those communities that digital-divide rhetoric tends to pathologize as technophobic. At its best, this work also begins to push beyond questions of identity and representation as the primary modes by which we understand the terrain of the political. Questions of representation, in particular, while important, always risk remaining on the surface of our screens and make it harder to see the vast systematic changes unfolding around and enveloping us since at least the Cold War era. They make it difficult to understand our embeddedness in cybernetic systems and networked subjectivities that point toward political terrain not firmly rooted in identity, in representation, in access, or even in traditional conceptions of the left and the right.

I don’t think it is accidental or surprising that one important challenge to formalist analysis emerges from scholars also engaged in understanding the work of race in the digital era. Scholars of color have been at the forefront of critiquing the depoliticized nature (and universalizing whiteness) of digital theory for at least twenty years, often drawing on and extending related critiques of 1970s film and literary theory.³ Many who

had worked quite hard to instill race as a central mode of critical inquiry throughout the late twentieth century were both disheartened and enraged (if not surprised) to find new media theory so easily returning to formalist modes at the dawn of the twenty-first century. One might argue that the “newness” of digital forms necessitated a kind of “formalist period,” a sustained time of reflection on the specificity of what was before us in a particular moment. While there may be some value to such an observation, we can also pursue another vector of thought and ask if there is not something *particular to the very forms* of electronic culture that seems to encourage just such a supposition—a supposition that partitions race from the specificity of media forms.

“First-wave” writers on digital technology such as Sherry Turkle and George Landow commented on the parallels between the ways of knowing modeled in computer culture and theories of structuralism and post-structuralism, a tendency much in evidence at the Interactive Frictions conference and in subsequent work by theorists like Alex Galloway. Critical race theorists and postcolonial scholars like Chela Sandoval and Gayatri Spivak have noted the structuring role that race plays in the work of post-structuralists like Barthes and Foucault. We might bring these two arguments together, triangulating race, electronic culture, and post-structuralism, and also argue that race, particularly in the United States, is central to this undertaking, fundamentally shaping how we see and know as well as the technologies that underwrite or cement both vision and knowledge. Specific modes of racial visibility and knowing dovetail with specific technologies of vision: if the digital underwrites today’s key modes of vision and is the central technology of post-World War II America, these technologized modalities took shape in a world also struggling with changing knowledges about, and representations of, race.

Scholars have tracked the emergence of a “color-blind” rhetoric after World War II, a discourse that moves from explicit to more implicit modes of racism and racial representation. Referencing those 3-D postcards that bring two images together even while suppressing their connections, I have earlier termed the racial paradigms of the postwar era “lenticular logics.” A lenticular logic is a covert racial logic, a logic for the post-Civil Rights era. We might contrast the lenticular postcard to that very popular artifact of the industrial era, the stereoscope card. The stereoscope melds two different images into an imagined whole; the lenticular image partitions and divides, privileging fragmentation.

A lenticular logic is a logic of the fragment or the chunk, a way of seeing the world as discrete elements or nodes, a mode which can also suppress relation. The popularity of lenticular lenses, particularly in the form of postcards, coincides historically not just with the rise of an articulated movement for civil rights but also with the growth of electronic culture and the birth of cybernetics (with both—cybernetics and the Civil Rights movement—born in quite real ways out of World War II). I am not so much arguing that one mode is causally related to the other, but, rather, that they both represent a move toward fragmentary knowledges, knowledges increasingly prevalent in the later half of the twentieth century. They are congruent modes of knowledge production which coincide with (and reinforce) (post)structuralist approaches to the world.

UNIX, a computer operating system, and C++, the programming language that underwrites many of our encounters with the digital, both function, at some levels, as forms of fragmentary knowledge production, making cause and effect and interrelation hard to conceptualize. As early as 1988, Bill Nichols detailed the tendency of cybernetic systems to substitute part for whole. This fragmentation also haunts other digital experiences. Both the computer and the lenticular lens mediate images and objects, changing their relationship but frequently suppressing that process of relation. The fragmentary knowledges encouraged by some forms and experiences of the digital neatly parallel the lenticular logics which underwrite the covert racism endemic to our times, operating in potential feedback loops, supporting each other.⁴

If scholars of race have highlighted how certain tendencies within post-structuralist theory simultaneously respond to and marginalize race, this maneuver is at least partially possible because of a parallel and increasing dispersion of electronic forms across culture, forms which simultaneously enact and shape these new modes of thinking. This is not call for a return to master narratives, but rather a plea for a heightened sensitivity to the sleights of hand that certain formulations of the digital underwrite. We must foreground that race is not something that can be parsed independently of theories of new media and instead insist that race is constitutive of those very media forms, particularly in an American context after World War II. Such a position also recognizes that there might be some potential power in the fragment or the part that can expand our notions of the self or of politics were we to engage it on our own, already politicized terms, terms that also value the potential of linkage or affiliation. The politics of the fragment are not predetermined, but powerful forces push back against certain maneuvers that might spin the fragment elsewhere.

Despite this sustained attention to reconnecting the circuits between race and digital theory, I am not arguing that race is the *only* way to parse the politics of the digital, but it is a central and crucial one. To insist on its centrality is one way of suggesting that we cannot simply “add” race (or other elements of difference) on later once we’ve specified the forms and theories of new media, as this additive strategy precisely falls prey to a limited and limiting logic of the fragment or the part, suppressing connection and relationality. Further, it does not allow us to see the ways in which race may be embedded in the very root structures of American technology, functioning as a constant ghost in the machine. Thus, many of the essays in this half of the volume engage directly with race, illustrating the relevance of race to technology in registers that exceed (while also including) issues of identity and representation and expanding our conceptions of the political.

A subset of essays in this half tackles the politics of the digital through a rethinking of place, pursuing the contact zones between physical and virtual terrains. These essays resist binary thinking and insist on mapping fascinating feedback loops between the simulated spaces of virtual realms and the physical world, illustrating a certain bleed between screen and street, code and country. They also teach us important lessons about transiting across scales and remind us that places matter in our efforts to ground digital theory in emerging modes of the political.

If reconfigurations of place and of the very terrain of politics cut across and categorize the essays in this second half, the body and identity represent final organizational rubrics. Across the essays, a new possibility for theorizing the relationship of technology to identity or to the body begins to take shape, one that far outstrips the binary logics of difference and sameness. When the self is at least partially constituted within and through the network, a political and politicized engagement with technology must extend beyond questions of representation, identity politics, and access. While body and technology have been intertwined at least since the industrial revolution, if not before, the specific processes, architectures, and systems of the “information age” enact a significant shift in this relationship, a shift that is mutually constitutive of body and of technology. To understand the “political” in relation only to questions of access, of representation, even of interface and identity, is to profoundly misunderstand the age we now inhabit.

Careful considerations of race thread throughout Part II, sometimes receding from an immediate line of sight but resurfacing pages later, forming the context and ground upon which our understanding of the politics of the digital era take shape. I would argue that such a structure also characterizes life in these United States, despite our “color-blind” delusions and desire to see it otherwise.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: RETHINKING THE CONTOURS OF THE POLITICAL

The first trio of essays in Part II boldly remap our very conception of politics, engaging directly with notions of the political and imagining new vocabularies that burst out of tired old binaries. Firmly grounding their vibrant technopolitical imaginaries in the social, the cultural, the economic, these authors also move beyond the all-too-familiar dance of technophobia versus cyber celebration, tracking both possibilities and pitfalls in this new digital terrain. In so doing, they engage with various theories of cultural politics, occasionally producing some unexpected pairings and strange bedfellows.

“Transnational/National Digital Imaginaries,” by John Hess and Patricia Zimmermann, powerfully envisions the possibility for “alternatives to amnesia” in an era of global capital, a moment of accelerated morphing of the contours of the nation-state as well as new cycles of genocide and violence attendant on those shifts. While fully recognizing the often deadly consequences to this latest global turn, the authors do more than just bemoan this state. Rather, they “want to sketch out an alternative vision of, and response to, the transnational” that remains cognizant of history and that arrests the collapse of space and time so much a consequence of our current post-Fordist moment. The essay turns to early forms of digital documentary in order to reimagine the world we now inhabit and to suggest new politicized aesthetic strategies that might more fully mine the possibilities of the digital.

Their essay pays careful attention to the forms of the documentaries they consider, providing a lively examination of the double movements of history and the future that

the digital can underwrite. They attend to the differences *and* similarities between cinematic and digital forms, noting the ways in which early digital documentary “questions the ontological assumptions of the forms, practice, and argumentative mode of older, more analog, forms of documentary,” even as the digital and analog remain in dialectical relationship with each other. Drawing on Timothy Murray and Philip Mallory Jones, they deploy the concept of the fold and the sphere as ways to think this dialectic and, like authors in Part I, extend Dziga Vertov into the digital era. In this, they clearly form a bridge to the essays of the first half of this anthology. However, if the essays of Part I begin with the specificity of forms and often circle out to examine historical context, Zimmermann and Hess enact the opposite strategy, rejecting “some mathematical reorganization of cinematic elements that displaces locations within racialized, sexualized, and engendered subjectivities.” They recognize that the ripple effects of the transnational are hardwired into our technological forms from the very outset (many, after all, locate the origins of today’s global, post-Fordist economy in the very era that spawned cybernetics) and cannot conceive of a political engagement with the digital that does not begin from this located and embodied knowledge.

Thus, when this essay first appeared online in 1999—about the time our conference was unfolding and at the height of the first wave of formalist analyses of new media—it was voiced in the spirit of fierce polemic. Zimmermann and Hess insist that the very economic structures that were remapping the transnational landscape were, and are, deeply implicated in all digital practices—practices that might at once allow the disabled to communicate and simultaneously create oppressive working conditions for the “men and women, often boys and girls, of the [global] South.” Thus, creativity and coercion, BANFF and NAFTA, aesthetic innovation and global capital, are all at once caught up in the movement of the fold. To focus on one without the other is to not understand the digital at all. They refuse to separate political and aesthetic economies even as they pursue just what *is* new in the digital documentary. Throughout this manifesto for a new digital politics, Hess and Zimmermann analyze emergent examples of digital documentaries, works ever cognizant of the bleed between the global and the local, the virtual and the material, the performance and the archive, and the past and the future. They strategically foreground projects that begin from an engagement with memories and bodies, particularly raced ones. They challenge the dream of perfect “phantom realism” so embedded in commercial cinema FX and in computer games and prefer the visible compositing, strategic breakdowns, and disruptive interfaces of many of the works they examine. Nonetheless, they are not naive about these aesthetic practices and recognize the degree to which digital art can function as a “masturbatory, peep-show construction” reinforcing an elitism severed from questions of access and economics.

If their essay moves to a close with the observation “that the analog forms of the racialized body are always embedded within the digital, just not always visualized,” this argument also riffs through Herman Gray’s “Is (Cyber) Space the Place?” Like Hess and Zimmermann’s recombinant pairings of the unlikely figures of Vertov and Reginald

Woolery or Jacques Derrida and Coco Fusco, bringing Herman Gray in dialogue (if only in the covers of this volume) with Lev Manovich enacts a new versioning of “what counts” as digital theory. Although Herman Gray was not at our 1999 conference, his book *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* clearly illustrates why he should have been. Including him in this volume suggests that the most useful insights about the digital are not only to be found among the now canonical digital theorists familiar from many “new media theory” anthologies.

In *Cultural Moves*, Gray relocates blackness from the margin to the center of any investigation of the technological imaginary, highlighting the diverse ways in which blackness scaffolds all manner of contemporary popular culture. Extending Gray’s earlier work, the book convincingly argues for the central role of culture in meaningful conceptions of the political. If many theorists of the digital have specified the forms of new media while mindful of the pitfalls of technological determinism outlined by Raymond Williams, Gray turns as well to another key figure of the Birmingham School, Stuart Hall, as well as to Cornel West, to think through the implications of the digital for what they, over two decades ago, called the “new cultural politics of difference.” In doing so, he asks whether the digital revolution has “disrupted something so fundamental as our collective structure of feeling.”

Like many of our contributors, Gray has little use for the “grim tales and happy narratives” of much writing on digital technology. He recognizes that the conditions of production under global capitalism are at once “specific and global as well as abstract and local.” As such, they harbor contradictory possibilities for political practice, possibilities most often crystallized through the “experiential and representational . . . apparatus” of culture. He is particularly interested in how the formulations of Hall and West might be rewired for today’s technological landscape, querying whether difference can ever “do more than simply serve as the raw materials for flexible forms of capitalist production,” another lifestyle choice emptied of political meaning. In short, Gray urges us beyond a binary of sameness and difference and beyond “an attempt to secure a place for ‘identity.’” If he is critical of the formalism of early new media theory, he is equally critical of calls for access that do not extend to issues of critical engagement and production. The very same technologies (by which Gray means the computer and the Internet but also the video camera and the mixing board) that seem to serve neoliberal market forces are also intertwined in complex and specific cultural relations, “places of potential (and unwieldy) articulations that interrupt, destabilize, and rearticulate (even if only momentarily)” these same forces of globalization.

If Gray, Hess, and Zimmermann are all interested in a political strategy that can operate from the spaces of contradiction inherent in the logics of late capitalism, pursuing doubled movements and enfoldings across multiple binaries in the pursuit of new possibility, David Crane’s essay, “Linkages: Political Topography and Networked Topology,” also examines the strange articulations, affiliations, and connections so often produced within digital domains. All three essays in this subsection investigate how modernist

systems (of economics, thought, or politics) will be reconfigured by the digital. Crane's piece takes the notion of the "political" in some ways more literally than the first two essays. He asks how the changes wrought in global politics since the end of the Cold War have reconfigured the political topography, lending an instability to terms like the "right" and the "left" and creating the possibility for new and often unexpected affiliations and transversals. That this reconfiguration coincides with the rise of computer-mediated communication [CMC] suggests interesting feedback loops between digital technologies and political processes that have become fundamentally interlaced. Thus, as his title suggests, he offers theoretical considerations for linking the shifts in political topography to aspects of web typology.

He argues that new, more flexible modes of political affiliation are developing, modes that might facilitate ideological transversals where the margins can play a role in new forms of symbolic political recenterings and hierarchizations. Crane recognizes both the potential and the contradictions of such processes and thus also critiques the claims of early digital enthusiasts like Mark Poster who tended to see these linkages as necessarily transformative or as exceeding the terrain of democracy itself. Crane explores how we might see political topography as partially analogous to Web topology through two extended examples, looking at both early digital libertarian and anarchist discourse.

In examining libertarianism, a political modality that holds particular sway on the Internet and in Silicon Valley, Crane moves through figures of the early "virtual class" as diverse as John Perry Barlow, Timothy May, and Virginia Postrel, detailing their varied attempts to replot aspects of the left/right axis. In different ways, each creates strange hybrid philosophies that combine "traditionally" left or right elements in new political and discursive formations. Taken together, such examples highlight the role of libertarianism (for better or worse) in producing new symbolic topographies, especially in relation to high tech and CMC. Such topographies were crucial in libertarian efforts to gain discursive hegemony over cyberculture, helping to cement certain market assumptions that so drive technological development in the United States and beyond.

Crane also takes up the refractions of anarchism across political topography and web typology and offers an in-depth look at examples that illustrate a kind of DIY approach to building political positions. Many of the sites he examines defy conventional political description, including the "British nationalist, separatist, and anticapitalist organization, Third Way." The group claims inspirations as diverse as the fascism of Julius Evola, the racial separatism of the Nation of Islam, and the critique of mass culture of the Frankfurt School. That such contradictory nodes can be held together in articulating the group's political philosophy stands as a succinct example of the fragmented and lenticular logics increasingly underwriting the discursive and technological networks of the post-World War II era. At any given moment, such a nodal logic can privilege a given analysis while suppressing the contradictory relationality between distinct nodes.

Such sites create their own strange bedfellows, as does Crane himself as he brings together thinkers normally at odds with one another (including Anthony Giddens,

Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe) in an effort to make sense of emergent political formations at a moment when many citizens express extreme disillusionment with conventional politics in general.

If Gray insists on the relevance of theorists of difference to new media theory, Crane also builds important bridges to political theory and to scholarship in communication, sociology, and public policy, areas seldom in productive dialogue with registers of new media theory more inflected by film and literary studies. Such bridges are increasingly relevant and important if theorists of digital media's forms are committed to producing analyses that might also engage policy makers and politicians. Digital media theorists can do much more than specify the forms that are before us; we can engage in broader dialogues that might help to shift the conditions of possibility for creating those very forms. In different ways, each of the essays in this subsection introduces rich conceptual models that can invigorate a politically grounded engagement with the digital.

AUGMENTING REALITY: THE PLACES OF THE VIRTUAL

If the earliest days of “cybertheory”—fueled by both the fanciful futurism of cyberpunk and ever-present images of the data glove and the headset—imagined disembodied souls floating free in the heady realms of virtual reality (VR), today's engineers and technologists are much more likely to speak of augmented reality (AR) and locative media. If VR implied a complete immersion in the system, AR layers the virtual over the physical and is currently in development or use for a number of applications, ranging from medical diagnosis (where doctors might, for instance, see a virtual interior layered over an actual patient's body) to advertising (where pedestrians could view embedded commercials in a variety of everyday cityscapes by donning Google glasses.) While engineers tend to parse the differences between VR and AR in precise terms, cultural theorists have argued that even the most advanced VR systems are, of course, always already augmented to the degree that they incorporate viewers situated in precise social and historical contexts. The essays in this subsection might all be seen as helping us to understand different (if not always literal) versions of AR, for each illustrates the bleed between physical and virtual spaces in varying degrees. All three also transverse different scales, helping us to track the ripple effects of globalization across multiple levels: global, national, and local(e).

In “The Database City: The Digital Possessive and Hollywood Boulevard,” Eric Gordon investigates the \$615 million entertainment monolith “Hollywood and Highland” in order to plot a precise example of the ways in which the virtual and the physical were deeply intertwined at the start of the twenty-first century. If Crane argues for linkages between web typology and political topography, you might say that Gordon maps the transversals between digital spaces and city places, recognizing certain circuits of exchange between new urban-renewal strategies in the 1990s and the spatial metaphors of the web as a growing city portended in William Mitchell's *City of Bits*. The essay specifies the forms of this new mode of urban development, one that, in the case of

Hollywood and Highland, sought to mobilize particular Tinseltown histories of glamour, style and stardom (but not its more noir underbelly) via the new navigational sensibility being experienced on the web at the time. Thus, the complex was designed as a legible interface to the city, providing a searchable, interactive environment via which the user could explore the city. Here, AR takes the form of the database city, a space that is more about structuring access than about pure simulation (as some have described an earlier Los Angeles urban project, Jon Jerde's Universal CityWalk).

By exploring the parameters of the database city (and, in turn, this augmented city's use of the database image), Gordon draws upon and extends the very different theorizations of the database by theorists Lev Manovich and Marsha Kinder. While he finds value in Manovich's reconfiguring of film theory's delineation of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, he is also drawn to Kinder's figuration of the database narrative as a potentially subversive form. Gordon spends a good deal of the essay detailing the architecture and hot spots of Hollywood and Highland, noting the degree to which the development structures interactivity and narrative, providing a kind of formalist analysis of the new media forms of the city. But he also pushes beyond this structural analysis to imply a politics, one that moves beyond Frederic Jameson's nostalgic critique of pastiche to hint at the possibility of the individual user's transgressive mobility within the spaces of crass commercialism.

These transgressions largely remain latent in Hollywood and Highland but are more fully exploited in a screen-based project, the DVD-ROM *Bleeding Through: Layer of Los Angeles, 1920–1986*, that also provides a kind of interface to Hollywood. Here, a multiplexed interplay of database and narrative works to destabilize master narratives and reclaim alternative, often racialized, histories of the city, illustrating the subversive potentials of the database narrative that Kinder theorizes. Yet, if *Bleeding Through* creates its possibilities through a certain incompleteness that allows the user freedom in "filling in" the gaps, Gordon argues that Hollywood and Highland is specifically designed to disenable aporia, foreclosing some registers of possible transgression. Still, Gordon hopes that, by holding these two modes of database together, we can begin to imagine new modes of selection and combination that might spin the politics of culture elsewhere. I would add that such a politics might also unearth the varied struggles over specific places that are partially concealed in the mega-developments of the urban renewal projects—stories of displacement, immigration, and community that are not fully evident in either tales of "old" Hollywood glamour or the gritty fantasies of noir.

If Hollywood and Highland tries to recapture a romanticized slice of Los Angeles history in a precise physical locale, Cristina Venegas investigates a reverse process in her essay "Cuba, Cyberculture, and the Exile Discourse." She articulates Cuba's status as an "infinite island," a kind of "portable homeland," that is constantly reclaimed and refigured by Cuban-American exiles. Since the rise of the web, this process increasingly unfolds on the Internet, augmenting both physical reality and memory in an elaborate staging of a lost and finally irretrievable home. This exilic discourse also responds to

official Cuban websites, sites that seek to present a utopian view of the nation for global consumption. Exploring the tension between these interlocked but very different modes of virtualizing Cuba, Venegas observes that the Internet, at the very least, extends the sphere in which differing views of democracy in Cuba are discussed. She simultaneously recognizes that such a sphere may also expand the space for xenophobic and extremist discourses.

In a close examination of the Cuban and exilic digital responses to the Elián González episode of 1999, Venegas illustrates the degree to which the boy functioned as a kind of node or hot link to polarized positions. In Miami, this augmented reality revitalized the most vehement of anti-Castro rhetoric and gave a renewed legitimacy to extremist points of view. While these two modes of representing Elián and Cuba seem polarized, she goes on to illustrate that official and exilic imaginings of Cuba are always intertwined and mutually constitutive. Further, “narratives about the past define . . . the contours of what is said about Cuba” and emphasize the liminality that characterizes life in exile. The syncretic in-betweenness of the exile dovetails with the emergent enfolding so characteristic of the digital, scaffolding the ambivalence wrought of displacement across the nodal slippages of the web.

Many of the personal websites of Cuban-Americans that Venegas surveys create digital “mirror cities” of the hometowns that the web pages’ authors left behind. Such database cities stage elaborate and poignant reenactments of memory and desire, illustrating the limits of the many claims (dating back to Joshua Meyrowitz) that electronic forms untether us from the physical and undermine a sense of place. Rather, the digital becomes another realm in which places, memories, and identities are symbolically constructed. Both proponents and critics of online community have noted the Internet’s ability to free us from physical spaces, propelling us into, on the one hand, the disembodied play of the virtual, or, on the other, bottomless dimensions of placelessness. Venegas’s exploration of Cuba on the web highlights the complexity of the many ways in which space is augmented by and through the digital, creating powerful virtual geographies that serve as engines of memory and desire. She also illustrates the ease with which augmented realities can replicate “the worst excesses of xenophobia and nationalism” as well as occasionally map paths that “go beyond the confines of unitary notions of community.”

If Venegas and Gordon offer largely reserved and cautionary tales regarding the digital’s capacity to outstrip the excesses of global capital’s desires, John Caldwell provides a case study of how even low tech can empower those most marginalized by the forces of neoliberalism and networked globalization. Caldwell’s “Think Digitally/Acting Locally: Interactive Narrative, Neighborhood Soil, and La Cosecha Nuestra Community” examines a more voluntary and nomadic form of exile than that of the Cuban-American in Miami and maps a very different trajectory of technologically mediated Latino existence. Still, both Caldwell and Venegas understand that digitally augmented reality is often about being here and there at the same time, especially for those displaced by the border

flows and stoppages of the post-World War II era. Caldwell begins his essay, originally written for the 1999 conference but substantially revised, by revisiting the histories of media theory in the 1990s.

He draws out telling and insightful parallels between the vaporware and inventive accounting models of late-1990s dot-com venture capitalists and the disembodied speculations of Baudrillard, Virilio, and Levy. As he wittily observes, “both of these different worlds-of-practice gave producers and scholars alike institutional cause to traverse and violate industrial, economic, and cultural boundaries.” Caldwell then moves to provide his own quick (and very useful) breakdown of three “successive periods of digi-space theorizing”—the “virtual-spatial, material-tactical, and pod-mobile.” If Caldwell is quick to point out the easy bleed between corporate speak and new media theory in the 1990s, he is equally suspicious of the emancipatory fantasies now surrounding all things mobile. Rather than stake his digital future on the mobilized privatization that i-devices now repackage and brand, Caldwell tests out these happy, liberatory claims through several years of alternative-media fieldwork among migrant workers in Southern California. This experience suggests to him that the border theories born of critical geography may have as much to tell us about technologically mediated existence as do many theories of digital media.

The fieldwork, a project called *La Cosecha Nuestra*, was undertaken in northern San Diego County and was intended to address nutrition-related health problems specific to Latinos in California. Aware of the paternalistic realities of many early forms of good-intentioned “portapak activism,” Caldwell sought to sidestep the “give-the-camcorders-to-the-indigenes conceit,” so the project used participatory media to increase the sense of ownership of participants in a community garden project. All involved soon came to realize the complexity entailed in creating meaningful dialogue among previously segregated groups. The irony of persistent diet-related health problems among the very workers who pick California’s bountiful produce is not lost on Caldwell, but he also realizes the likelihood of failure of video art deployed “in the service of the four food groups.” The outcome of the project expanded Caldwell’s conception of the digital, radically repurposing his understandings of tactical failure, interactivity, narrative databases, and multiple-user platforms. It also maps useful political registers of these familiar digital tropes when they are firmly situated in a racialized, and often racist, physical geography.

This leads Caldwell to privilege “two wrenches”: the analog and the soil, tools that reject the glitz of shiny, new commercial products. There’s brilliance in Caldwell’s reclamation of dirt and of “old” tech *as tools*, a polemical move that pushes back against the thinly veiled technological fetishism of so much digital theory (and so many consumer purchases). But Caldwell is no Luddite; rather, he aims “to liberate the notion of interactive media away from an explicit linkage to specific and always immediately obsolete digital tools” in order to reground our theories of interactivity and distributed cognition in the fleshy, dirty, hopeful realms of cultural politics and contested landscapes. If the dreams of engineers and technologists are of a seamless mapping of the digital over the

physical, perfectly integrating the two, the experiences of *La Cosecha Nuestra* suggest the ideological stakes of such a dream of flawless union. From Hess and Zimmermann's transnational imaginaries to Caldwell's two wrenches, new strategies for the digi-political take shape. Augmented realities that account for the messy flows between the physical and virtual, the material and the immaterial, the global and the local, will form the ground for engaged, multilateral, and politicized theories of the digital.

POSTIDENTITY: THE FRAGMENT, COLLECTIVITY, AND VIRTUAL EMBODIMENT

Caldwell's essay also hints at new possibilities for agency in the digital era, briefly sketching a notion of agency that moves beyond identity politics toward a shifting, contingent network of willed affiliations. Such a framework rejects the rigid essentialisms of the Cuban-American exiles busy policing the border of virtual Havana but still values commonality as a ground for strategic struggle. Nonetheless, these processes, while routing around a fixed binary of sameness versus difference, are very much tied to fleshy bodies, bodies that die if they do not eat well. This last subsection of essays also engages themes of identity and of the body, although there is little consensus among them as to what the interface of body and technology might produce.

If *La Cosecha Nuestra* deployed video to enable a participatory, hybrid agency, Mark Hansen pursues the relationship of video as a specific artistic practice in a very different setting: the rarefied spaces of the museum and the gallery. If Zimmermann and Hess worry about the elitism of art practices that are not widely accessible, Hansen instead argues that, because video installation art "affords a heightened experience of the presencing of worldly sensation" in a dimension both presubjective and prerepresentational, it is ineffable by its very nature. In its attempt to understand the precise experiential modalities underwritten by such art, his "Video Installation Art as Uncanny Shock, or How Bruce Nauman's Corridors Expand Sensory Life" parallels many of the essays in Part I of this anthology. However, in specifying the particularities of this evanescent art form, Hansen is less concerned with form per se and more interested in how the experience facilitated by video installation art actually takes place in the experiencing body of the viewer.

In a journey through the theories of Walter Benjamin, Steven Shaviro, Brian Massumi, and Gilles Deleuze as well as the video art of Bruce Nauman, Hansen carefully parses the differences between the materiality of film and video. Importantly, because the "shock" of video does not occur at the perceptual level, "the video image injects perception directly into matter, entirely bypassing the mediation of memory." In fact, the video image, "unlike its cinematic counterpart, does not of necessity generate any shock whatsoever." Thus, in video, shock "has become a contingent and extrinsic correlate of the actualization of a nonhuman, virtual form of perception," a function of how human interaction with the work at hand is staged. For Hansen, this is a crucial shift because it

underwrites video art's capacity to deform our clichéd body images and embodied points of view. This adaptation is an affective one without cognitive or representational correlates, produced as video installation art opens "the lived body to the intensity of sensation."

As such, the body emerges as the key circuit of digital exchange, and Hansen's work challenges a neoformalist privileging of the medium in and of itself. It simultaneously pushes ideas of media "reception" into bold new arenas even as it seems little concerned with the many ways in which reception theory historically served to nuance the universal spectator of film theory. While Hansen suggests that the shocks and passion of video art exist at a level that precedes representation and ideology, he is perhaps more convincing on the former than on the latter. Even if the bodily and affective adaptations produced via an engagement with video installation are precognitive and before representation, these bodies are still marked by history, culture, race, and ideology before they enter the space of the installation. As such, the encounters that unfold there are never entirely free from the marks the body already bears, even if they remain at the level of sensation. While Hansen has reinserted the body into digital theory, this is a body curiously without a history or a past, a body in some ways as unmarked by its transit through the rest of the world as the body of 1970s film theory.

Even as he theorizes embodiment, he joins the neoformalists in a distancing of culture, perhaps missing an opportunity to tease apart the mutually constitutive feedback loops between culture and technology. For instance, if the filmic image displays complete images that the viewer perceives to move, while the video image is always partial and in the process of becoming, such a technological development (the switch from film to video) occurred precisely at the moment U.S. society was coming to terms with a forcefully articulated claim for civil rights by several subjugated groups. That racial representation and racism shift from overt to covert at the same time our technologies also mutate is, I'm suggesting, more than just coincidence. The fragmentary, always partial becoming of the electronic image serves to reinforce broader epistemological and cultural patterns, much as did the partitioning and black-boxing of code. Hansen is positing a collision of body and technology that exists beyond identity in the realm of the cannot-be-known, and he also imagines some new, even utopian, form of posthuman collectivity, a collectivity that escapes the dirtier, messier collisions of culture and technology where theorists like Caldwell and Gray dwell. It is an interesting conceit that might usefully point toward different conceptions of the political, as does much emerging theory in vitalism, posthumanism, and phenomenology. There is potential in the fragment, the fold, and in becoming even if we do not yet inhabit a world where technobodies float free from the burdens of history and of race in the streets or in corridors of video.

Holly Willis also turns to video art as a kind of transit zone between the flickering cinematic image and digital ephemerality. And, like Hansen, her interests lie in the making and unmaking of bodies as they encounter the video image. Nonetheless, the bodies she limns painfully bear the marks of situated history, even as elements of affective

becoming remain crucial aspects of the artistic practices she surveys. While there are compelling points of connection between the essays by Hansen and Willis, the latter enacts a crucial shift of focus, locating the force of its analysis in history and culture. Throughout the piece, Willis attentively and carefully situates the pieces and artists she considers within a broader sociopolitical frame that helps us align the affective registers (presubjective and prerepresentational as they may be) of emergent forms with the particularities of specific bodies, particularly grotesque ones. In turning to the precise histories and motivations of feminist artists in the 1960s and in the early digital era post-1990, Willis also insists that the body exists in a complex nexus of affect, precognition, becoming, and experience. She refuses to privilege one strand of this complex tangle and suggests that, for a politicized feminist praxis, such a parsing would be unimaginable.

In her brief survey of feminist video art, she challenges typologies that have consistently overlooked the contributions of these artists to a project of theorizing what Amelia Jones has called the “technophenomenological subject.” The works that Willis investigates foreground, as does Hansen, that analyzing representation alone is an insufficient mode of inquiry when confronted with the video (or the digital) image. Thus, pieces by artists as diverse as Joan Jonas, Linda Dement, and Marina Zurkow engage with the “diverse incarnations of the body/machine conjunction” by positioning the body (of the viewer) in space in specific ways. Yet Willis also recognizes the necessity of grappling with the slippages between a kind of prerepresentational movement of bodies through space and a cognitive engagement with the digital image. The impact and import of video installation art reside at once in its ability to open the body up to “the intensity of sensation” (in Hansen’s terms) and in its capacity to mobilize this relationship along other phenomenological, and sometimes conscious, registers.

To be clear, Willis does not lament an imagined past era of a “whole” or privileged body or take recourse in simplistic notions of identity. Her analysis moves far past an earlier expectation in identity politics that political presence might be guaranteed through “indexical facticity” and the representation or visibility of “real” bodies on our screens. Rather, she is interested in how bodies—both in representation and in the space of installation—can be pressured to reveal fractured, complex, and situated experiences and to formulate a “language for discerning insights gleaned through the body.” She insists that feminist theory and feminist practice offer the best starting point from which to understand shifting networks of corporeality; after all, this has been the active terrain of engagement for feminists for decades.

In the essay that draws this subsection to a close, the contours of the machine-body assemblage and their ties to postidentity politics achieve a new level of clarity (and fun) in the “tech-illa” theoretical stylings of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Since the mid-1990s, both artists have actively battled against the fantasy of a universal, placeless, or color-blind “cyberspace” and against a formalist turn in new media theory. Separately and together, in performances, installations, web projects, and critical writings, they have investigated the possibilities and dangers of networked living

for the hybrid, global subject. A site like Gómez-Peña's Pocha Nostra (www.pochanostra.com/) mobilizes theory in an exploration of the forms of new media that route back into the messy terrains of dirty, fleshy worlds, refusing the disembodied, shiny dreams of so many early cyber-utopians, and calling to mind the two wrenches of John Caldwell. Here is a brave new world laced at once with possibility and with danger. The all-too-easy binary logic of sameness versus difference is jettisoned in favor of a jacked-up, low-rider-meets-cyber aesthetic that simultaneously underscores that we do not yet inhabit a world where technobodies float free from the burdens of history, of culture, and of race. But that does not mean that our machines (and our theories) might not take us elsewhere if we'd let them.

The flexible (post)identities that these two artists create throughout their various productions stage a series of shifting, mutable avatars, modeling a digitally enabled trickster who draws from networks of many flavors. This cyber-vato inhabits and reroutes multiple traditions and cultures, high and low. His body gets made and remade, plugged into global networks of machines and meanings. Here, borders—of the self, of the machine, of the nation—shift and morph, hinting at both danger and desire. Identity is neither authentic nor originary but grounded in history and materiality even as it parses the ephemeral and mutates into the network and the fold. "Tech-illa Sunrise" speaks back to any notion of a universal spectator/viewer, a hermetically sealed body, or a raceless network. Instead, these artists insist that, given the complex histories of empire and immigration in the United States and around the globe, we cannot understand or think code without also thinking race and culture. They vibrantly illustrate that the task at hand is not simply "to add" race into our analyses or art but, rather, to come to terms with the fact that race has infected the systems. It is part and parcel of the coded environment we unequally inhabit, creating the very grounds from which our networked economies and ecologies spring. We end with this speculative fiction not to marginalize it as the wacky coda at the end of a "scholarly" volume but to illustrate a productive blur between art and theory. Its vibrant technological imaginary points to new configurations of the self, of the global, and of the political. If Hansen imagines (but doesn't name) a postethnic world where bodies are opened up to sensation through a spatialized body-technology hybrid, this sample of ethno-techno-poetics suggests that race is always already embedded in our codes and systems.

FRAGMENTS OF POSSIBILITY

Obviously, some key areas of the "politics" of media are not fully developed in this introductory essay or in the essays that follow it. While I began this introduction mapping the move beyond questions of the digital divide, the issues of access always at the heart of that formulation remain a key terrain of struggle, particularly as the uptake of social media increasingly reveals various forms of (in Henry Jenkins's term) participation gaps. Equally important are a number of policy issues, including debates over fair use, net neutrality,

and immaterial labor. Legal and philosophical investigations around these issues represent crucial aspects of the politics of the digital today. Finally, while essays like Eric Gordon's map the wily ways of capitalism vis-à-vis our digital imaginaries, and Hess and Zimmermann remind us of the pitfalls of aesthetic elitism, very important issues of privacy, surveillance, and digital human rights are given less than their full due here. These and other issues mark essential terrain for ongoing work and struggle.

One consistent through-line of the essays in this section is a cautious optimism that ripples just below the surface of the very different styles collected here. It is a modulated optimism, to be sure, but there nonetheless, foregoing the kind of knee-jerk pessimism so familiar on the left while also sidestepping a greedy libertarian euphoria. Perhaps this is the engaged optimism partially born of the bleed between theory and practice, an optimism that often also characterizes those working in the digital humanities. In myriad ways, many of the authors in this volume theorize about new media while also creating it, from the soft cinema of Manovich to Kinder's Labyrinth Project to Patricia Zimmermann's and Steve Anderson's activist curating to Caldwell's vibrant community practices, modes of extending academic production that are sampled on the companion website to this book. That theory and practice are perhaps even more closely wedded now than in 1999 suggests a sustained faith in the possibilities laced through the transformative powers of the digital. In the folds, fragments, nodes, and networks of the electronic era, there resides a kind of bottom-up possibility that can speak back to power, an aspect of the very decentralized systems cybernetics has privileged. There are multiple points of entry into and pathways through these networks, points mined by immigrant communities, exilic diasporas, activist organizations, experimental artists, Tea Party participants, military optics, and corporate rhetoric alike. If the histories of race and racism and of Cartesian mind/body dualisms are embedded in the very partitioned logics of code and the tendrils of the network, there too lie the possibilities for their remaking and undoing, but only if we remain mindful that the forms of the digital are never neutral or innocent.

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NOTES

1. Here it might be useful to distinguish between “new media theory” and other terrains of scholarly inquiry into the digital. Work on computer-mediated communication, often based in fields like communication or sociology, was generally more engaged in questions of the social and the cultural than was work in “new media theory” in the late 1990s, with the latter often taking place in film studies or literature departments and often utilizing textual and formal analysis. This divide, of course, is not absolute and reflects different trajectories that have driven different disciplines; the two tend to come together in some ways in a field like cultural studies, particularly in its Birmingham incarnation, and also in television studies, itself greatly influenced by cultural studies. Nonetheless, it is a fair characterization to say that the Interactive Frictions conference skewed toward “new media theory,” particularly in the plenary sessions.

2. See, especially, work by Anna Everett and Herman Gray.

3. See edited volumes by Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman; Chow-White and Nakamura; and Nelson, Tu, and Hines; as well as Nakamura’s *Cybertypes* and *Digitizing Race* and the work of Wendy Chun.

4. I develop this argument about the intertwining of race and UNIX in “Why Are the Digital Humanities So White? Or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation.”