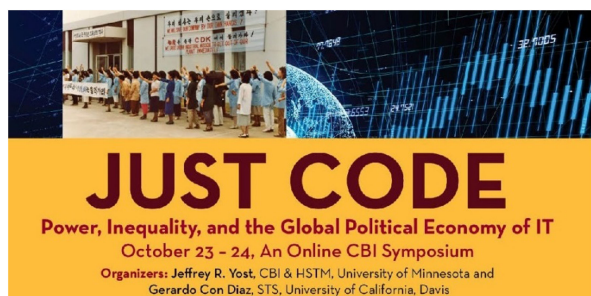


## DEPARTMENT: EVENTS AND SIGHTINGS

### Charles Babbage Institute for Computing, Information, and Culture—A Major Interdisciplinary Turn

What is in a name (change)? A great deal if it reflects an institutional transformation, and a revised and extended set of goals, values, and commitments. In early 2020, the Charles Babbage Institute for the History of IT became the Charles Babbage Institute for Computing, Information, and Culture. This new full name reflects a greater interdisciplinary commitment in our core mission. Through our research, facilitating the research of other people (CBI archives users, fellows, travel grant recipients), and disseminating research (in publications, editing, workshops, symposia), CBI is leading and partnering to lead the study and understanding of computing globally. The change is not backing away from history, but reflects our embrace of the many valuable ways that content, method, and theory in sociology, STS, anthropology, social informatics, communication, geography, and policy and media studies informs and enriches our comprehension of the recent and more distant past (and what historical perspective adds to these fields.



CBI held an online symposium “Just Code: Power, Inequality, and the Political Economy of IT,” on October 23 and 24, 2020. I organized the event with

Prof. Gerardo Con Diaz of the University of California, Davis and the *Annals* EIC.

The symposium focused on how code—construed broadly, from software routines to bodies of law and policy—structures and reinforces power relations. It explored the ways that individuals and institutions use software, algorithms, computerized systems, and associated law, policy, and practice to establish, legitimize, and reinforce widespread social, material, commercial, and cultural inequalities and power imbalances. The response to the call for papers was tremendous and the resulting highly competitive program had a notable and diverse group of top interdisciplinary scholars from many standout universities worldwide. Most of the talks focused on race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and intersectionality and the ways computing/software/networking fosters and/or extends inequalities. Among the topics and themes explored were databases, AI and predictive policing; platforms, power, and resistance in China; postcolonial computing in India; surveillance capitalism; political economy and IT in Brazil; coding in Mexico; coding education; gender and labor; computing and psychopathology; character cultures in Japan; and landscape, water, algorithms, AI, and environmental racism.

Just Code was a great success by all measures. In our postevent survey (65 responses) the intellectual content averaged 4.7 of 5.0, with more than 75% rating it excellent. We were above 4.5 in all categories. The event was attended by 345 people (from more than two dozen countries) with the median attendance time of 5 to 7 hours of the 12-hour total, and more than a quarter attending all or nearly all 12 hours, all during a devastating and worsening global pandemic. As a one-time thematic scholarly symposium, it had the largest attendance of a multiday event that I am aware of in the 100-year history of science or 70-year history of technology. Con and I will edit a Just Code volume of revised papers from the event to be published by a leading university press.

CBI is also advancing the interdisciplinary study of computing through editing. In June 2020, Curator of Manuscripts/Archivist Amanda Wick and I launched a new electronic journal, *Interfaces: Essays and Reviews in Computing and Culture*. It

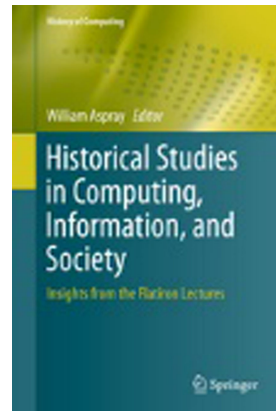
follows a continuous publication model (editorial review and publishing individual articles as soon as they pass review with push alerts to the subscribers of the free journal with each new article). The comments from the history of technology and broader communities have been tremendously positive, both for the idea and its execution with our early published articles and strong download/view numbers. Our goal with this publication is publishing short essays (2000 to 3500 words) to connect recent and more distant history to contemporary issues, developments, and culture. We welcome essays from historians, sociologists, anthropologists, curators, archivists, geographers, political scientists, and many other fields. To provide a rough model, I published a short essay at launch “Where Dinosaurs Roam and Programmers Play” on COBOL programmer shortages and impact on state unemployment systems with the pandemic. A diverse group of talented scholars followed, publishing on AT&T’s 1970 Picture Phone as context to our current videoconference world, IBM and mobile work over 110 years, Y2K, and other topics and themes. Please consider submitting an essay (to Amanda or me).

### ***Interfaces: Essays and Reviews in Computing and Culture***



*Courtesy of the Charles Babbage Institute*

CBI historians also contribute editorially with other publications and series. I continue to colead/coedit the Springer History of Computing series with University of Amsterdam’s Gerard Alberts. We have a number of recent and upcoming exciting titles on the social, cultural, business, and scientific history of computing. Gerard and I are both on the Annals Board. I also serve on the Information & Culture editorial Board. Former Director Tom Misa, and Sr. Research Fellow Bill Aspray edit the MIT Press History of Computing series.



*William Aspray’s 2019 edited volume with chapters from past CBI Director Tom Misa, CBI Sr. Res. Fellow MIT’s Jennifer Light, and other top scholars.*

Our senior research fellows add so much, and MIT’s Jennifer Light, Colorado’s Bill Aspray, IBM’s (retired) Jim Cortada, and S. Denmark’s David Nye continue to publish path-breaking new books and articles. Affiliated CBI Historian Honghong Tinn is completing her book for MIT Press. I continue to make progress on my book for MIT Press on the history of cybersecurity. Our Tomash Fellow, Columbia University History Department’s Aaron Plasek is doing critically important research on the social history of machine learning, as is our Interdisciplinary Fellow (IDF) University of Minnesota Sociology’s Devika Narayan on AI, cloud, and labor transformation in India.

Our interdisciplinary commitment is also evident in our collecting. We continually extend our Social Issues in Computing Collection. Many of our long-existing collections are also rich for the study of gender, race, class, and environment in IT. Amanda recently secured a donation of a vast new collection extending our manuscripts, publications, and gray (printed, narrowly circulated, and over time, often lost or at risk) literature on the Internet, security, and machine learning—The Christopher Reuter Collection of Computing and AI Literature.

CBI is in substantial part a service organization in helping people advance their research. In these pandemic times, we continue to offer scanning/remote use of archives services, advisory services, consulting oral history services, and we are always delighted to do all we can to help students, scholars, and others’ research.

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