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Reem Hilu, **The Intimate Life of Computers: Digitizing Domesticity in the 1980s,** Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 240 pp., $27.00 (paperback).

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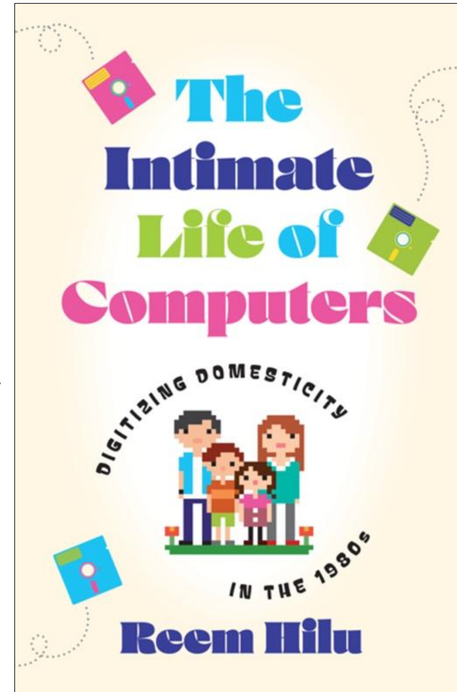

Reem Hilu's ***The Intimate Life of Computers***: ***Digitizing Domesticity in the 1980s***, offers a strikingly original feminist media history of domestic computing in the 1980s. At a moment when dominant histories of digital technology continue to center Silicon Valley, productivity, and sovereign users, Hilu insists on an overlooked archive: when computers were imagined not merely as tools but as intimate companions woven into the affective and infrastructural life of the home. Her key analytic term—*companionate computing*—names an alternative historical formation in which caregiving, emotional legibility, and household coordination were reimagined alongside emerging digital technologies.

Hilu's intervention builds on, yet significantly complicates, foundational feminist media histories like Lynn Spigel's (1992) *Make Room for TV*, which relocates media history into domestic and gendered spaces. Where Spigel (1992) charted how television reshaped postwar fantasies of family and control, Hilu turns to the less stabilized media ecology of the 1980s, treating the computer not as a Cold War portal but as a prospective partner—intimate, provisional, and affectively coded. This reframing also recalls Lisa Gitelman's (2006) *Always Already New*, which demonstrates how media infrastructures and formats actively produce cultural norms and shape the kinds of subjects that technologies hail. Like Gitelman (2006), Hilu resists both technological determinism and triumphalism, situating computation within the mundane architectures of domestic life.

At the same time, Hilu's project gestures toward questions that might be deepened through more explicit engagements: How do technologies solicit and organize feeling beyond their immediate functions? What repetitions, orientations, and spatial arrangements give intimacy its charge, and for whom is such intimacy provisioned or withheld? These questions open potential dialogues with affect theory—particularly Sara Ahmed's (2006) concept of "orientation," which tracks how bodies and objects come to matter through repeated encounters, and Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism," which frames affect as an infrastructure of attachment that can sustain or trouble our relations to the world. Hilu's concept of companionate computing could be read as staging precisely these affective mappings and investments, even though the book does not explicitly theorize affect as such. Likewise, Lisa Nakamura's (2008) work reveals how race and labor become infrastructural to digital experience even when they remain largely invisible, offering further avenues to complicate Hilu's scenes of household computing.

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Methodologically, Hilu's blend of archival research, feminist oral history, and critical product analysis offers a reparative historiography that recalls the rigor of both Spigel (1992) and Gitelman (2006), while modeling a practice attentive to ephemeral or commercially failed technologies—talking dolls, romantic software, domestic robots—as staging grounds for collective imagination. In this sense, Hilu does not merely recover a "lost" history; she models how digital history itself might be written as a capacious and emotionally attuned feminist practice, even without naming it through affect theory directly. The result is a book that expands how we historicize computation, intimacy, and infrastructure and that invites readers to reconsider the very conditions under which technological intimacy is provisioned.

Each chapter focuses on a distinct device, platform, or genre that embodied the companionate computing imaginary. In chapter 1, Hilu explores romantic software applications like *Interlude* (pp. 31, 37–49, 52–53, 57–58, 60), *Lovers or Strangers* (pp. 29–31, 37–38, 41, 47, 49–53, 58–60), and *IntraCourse* (pp. 31, 37–38, 40–41, 52–61). These programs, aimed at couples, sought to mediate romantic and sexual intimacy through text-based interfaces, often borrowing narrative conventions from women's magazines and pulp romance. Hilu deftly reads these programs not only as artifacts of gendered media history but also as aesthetic experiments in scripting affect. The chapter's standout moment is her feminist recovery of Brigitta Olsen's co-authorship of *Lovers or Strangers*, a software package long misattributed to Stanley Crane alone. In conducting a retrospective interview with Olsen, Hilu models a feminist historiographic practice that expands the domain of digital labor and highlights how gendered contributions are often erased in computing history.

Chapter 2 turns to home robots like Hero Jr. and Omnibot, marketed as both educational toys and emotional companions. Hilu situates these devices within the history of fatherhood and the changing gender norms of the 1980s. Rather than serving as household servants, these robots were imagined as bonding tools for fathers and sons—reconfiguring masculinity around participatory domesticity and STEM-oriented play. Hilu draws on marketing materials, user guides, and trade press to show how home robotics sought to naturalize techno-paternal presence in the home, often reifying heteronormative household roles under the guise of innovation. Yet Hilu resists simple cynicism, revealing moments where robot–human intimacy opened up unpredictable affective dynamics and partial refusals of normative masculinity.

Chapter 3 examines talking dolls like Julie, Jill, and BabyTalk*,* designed for young girls in dual-income households. Hilu argues these devices extended traditional play while also addressing the privatized childcare anxieties of the Reagan era. With references to *Pinocchio*, AI (Artificial Intelligence) ethics, and child psychology, she reads these toys as ambivalent figures—at once tools of neoliberal hothousing and sites of imaginative agency. Especially resonant is her account of how these dolls were positioned as emotional educators for latchkey girls: providing moral guidance, developmental stimulation, and companionship in the absence of adult supervision. The chapter invites questions about the racial and economic assumptions underpinning these markets, opening a potential avenue for future comparative research.

Chapter 4 explores erotic and dating-themed computer games, such as *Romantic Encounters at the Dome* (pp. 131, 158–166, 168) and the cult classic *Leisure Suit Larry* (pp. 133–134, 139, 141–158,

160, 162, 164–165, 168). These games, often dismissed as juvenile or retrograde, are treated here with nuance. Hilu shows how they both reflected and parodied masculinist fantasies in an era shaped by second-wave feminism. While designed for solitary male play, these games often staged male awkwardness and anxiety, ironically undercutting their own premises. Hilu reads this not as subversion per se but as an index of cultural disorientation—a form of "reflexive masculinity" where desire is performatively refracted through the machine. These readings are among the book's most surprising and theoretically generative.

The strength of *The Intimate Life of Computers* lies in its interdisciplinary synthesis. Hilu draws on feminist media studies, critical design history, and affect theory to reveal how technologies shape and are shaped by structures of feeling. Her term *companionate computing* does not merely name a set of devices but a historical configuration: an imaginative and infrastructural investment in computing as intimate. In doing so, she intervenes in larger debates about technological mediation, not by rejecting intimacy as illusion—as in some critical theory traditions—but by tracking the conditions under which it is differentially provisioned.

One of the most generative contributions Hilu offers is her refusal to treat the failure of companionate computing as a narrative of obsolescence. Hilu's archive resonates strongly with early cinema—another field marked by aesthetic and functional experimentation before formal conventions stabilized. That analogy, developed by this reviewer rather than by Hilu herself, suggests a broader historiographic approach: the 1980s domestic tech landscape as a prehistory of today's "smart home" rather than as a cul-de-sac. Technologies like Alexa, Ring doorbells, and companion bots continue to rehearse the ambivalent scripts Hilu uncovers—scripts that fuse care and control, presence and privatization, intimacy and individuation.

In sum, *The Intimate Life of Computers* is a rare and necessary work: methodologically innovative, theoretically generative, and historically grounded. Scholars working in Science and Technology Studies, feminist theory, and media history will find much to learn here. So too will those seeking to move beyond critiques of surveillance toward more reparative accounts of mediation. Hilu's work will endure not only for the archive it recovers but for the feminist hermeneutic it models: even discarded or failed media are staging grounds for collective imagination.

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