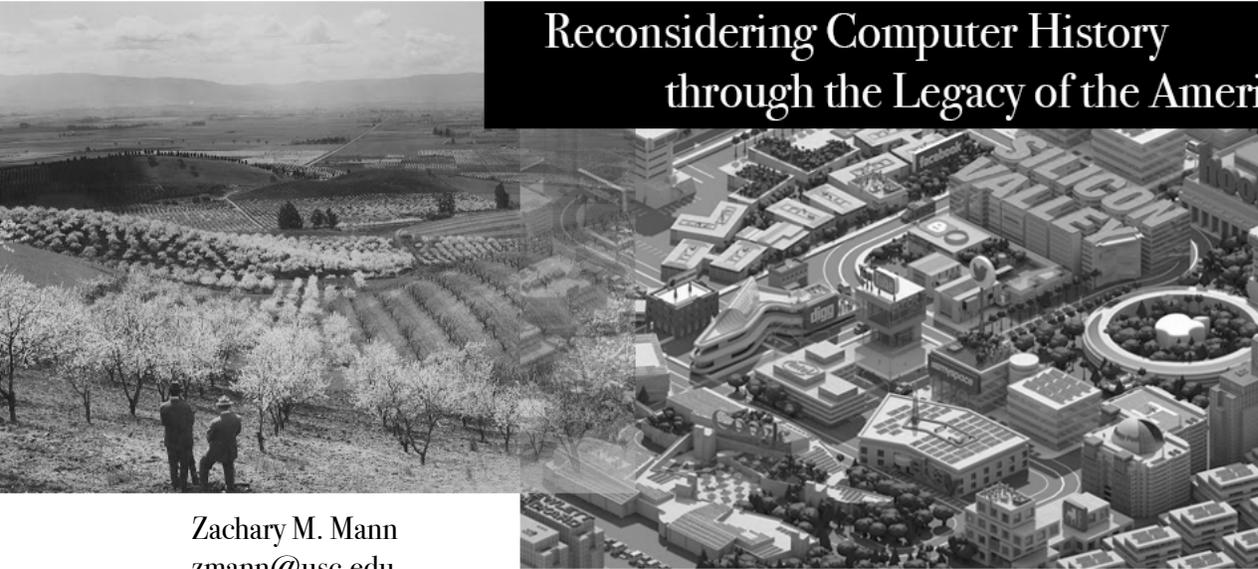# O' Pioneers!

Reconsidering Computer History through the Legacy of the American West

Zachary M. Mann
zmann@usc.edu

- USC undergraduate students will receive a $1,500 stipend for course completion
- Non-credit course taught by a USC Mellon Digital Humanities Ph.D. Fellow
- Tutorials will meet twice a week from 2–4pm, Tuesdays and Thursdays, June 16 – July 9
- Enrollment is limited to 8 students. See application process below.

Computer history is not a timeline of factual events; it is a folktale that we tell ourselves and each other. This course will interrogate that folktale by examining it alongside another: the story of the United States' expansion westward. We will uncover what our techno-culture has inherited from these familiar tales of rugged fortune-making, virtuous homesteading, and heroic individualism, the stuff of western films and adventure novels. Central to that culture is the myth of a promised (and uninhabited) land of opportunity. The images of ingenious nineteenth-century men embarking into, defining, and taming unknown territory persist in our stories of computing "pioneers" in the 1960s and beyond. It is a model which continues to shape not only how the American character is imagined, but also our lifetime's electronic frontier and its tech entrepreneurs, code cowboys, and unicorn start-ups.

The course does not assume prior knowledge of either nineteenth-century U.S. or twentieth-century computer history. Over the course of four weeks, we will encounter these histories through theoretical readings on the figure of the "frontier," as well as in objects, curated collectively by us, that demonstrate the kinds of stories that the tech industry tells itself: advertisements from print ads to TV spots, press releases and congressional statements, "About Us" sections of websites, and manifestos by hackers and developers. Additionally, we will incorporate creative works as forms of social commentary; this will include memoirs from inside the industry–from Tracy Kidder's groundbreaking *The Soul of a New Machine* (1981) to Anna Wiener's just-published *Uncanny Valley*–and popular culture texts like *The Social Network* (2010, dir. David Fincher), AMC's *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014-2017), and FX's *Devs* (2020). Through these narratives, and with special consideration to gender and race, we will strip away the rhetoric of Silicon Valley and ask: what are the repercussions of U.S. expansionist myths persisting in tech today? For whom is this expansionist imagination (and thus our future) designed?

To apply, please send a CV/resume and letter expressing your interest in the course to hidw@dornsife.usc.edu by Friday, April 17, 2020.