

CTC-2033/ DM-2033
FEMBOTS AND CYBORGS: COMPUTATIONAL FEMINIST CREATION
AUDITORIUM, ROOM 522
MON 1:10-6:10PM EST
FALL 2021

INSTRUCTOR:

Theo Ellin Ballew (they/she)
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Office hours by appointment





COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores how the joining of technology and art may liberate or fortify women and gender-nonconforming people—especially by forging and/or imagining new feminist human forms. We will consider a range of material: web artworks, AI collaborations, Afrofuturism/scifi, feminist theory, pop songs, computational installations, scientific articles, and more. Beginning at the feminist roots of code, we will ask how femme cyborgs and fembots live both as feminist icons of potential power, and as sexualized and/or servile male fantasies (in films and Silicon Valley’s femme AIs). We’ll think about how technology could birth new forms of sex, alleviate gender dysphoria, and amplify femme voices—and how/why/where it has failed to do so. Finally, we’ll look at imagined and real digital feminist Creations, and ask how far away we are from their actualization.



The themes of this class will be fodder for students’ own computational feminist creations: several mini-projects and a final artwork, all of which may take any form. Students will be encouraged but not required to learn and/or use computation for these projects.

Students need only a standard laptop, and will not be expected to purchase any software or text (cost of materials: \$0). There are no prerequisites. Syllabus is subject to change.

METHOD OF INSTRUCTION (5 HOURS/WEEK)

-  Weekly check-in exercise (30 min)
-  Flash-presentations of mini-projects (30 min)
-  Discussion of readings and creative exercises (120 min)
-  Mini-project or final prep critique in small groups (120 min) Each week, you will have a new group and be scheduled for a different time slot. In the first section, I will be present and we will discuss your work for the week. I will then leave, and you will continue to discuss your works, the readings, or anything else for another 15-30 minutes.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

-  Produce several small computational feminist creations;
-  Produce one larger computational feminist creation;

- 🔗 Develop an understanding of the tension between the fembot/cyborg that's been historically sexualized/objectified and the fembot/cyborg as a potential for feminist liberation;
- 🔗 Think about the connections between code/computation and feminism; and
- 🔗 Develop a greater understanding of the way advances in computation inflect and reflect our search for intersectional liberation.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

Mini-projects (x6): You will complete a mini-project each week during the first half of the class. Mini-projects can occupy ANY medium; you might make: a shirt, a poem, a website, a web intervention, a computational drawing, a watercolor, a song, a sculpture, a cake, a video, etc. The only requirement is that there is evidence of sincere effort, and that you respond (loosely) to the week's (loose) prompt. Documentation of the mini-projects should be uploaded to Canvas.	40%
Participation: Missing class, tardiness, and obvious engagement in other activities will affect this grade, unless there are extenuating circumstances.	30%
Final project: Your final will be a considerable work of digital feminist creation that takes 10-15 minutes to view in full. It can be an expansion of one or more of your mini-projects, or an entirely new project.	30%

GRADING POLICY/EVALUATION CRITERIA

Grades will reflect evidence of a) effort and b) progress/change in a student's practice/thinking. Such evidence may take the form of: attention to detail, development of new technical skills, breaking/glitching/failing within given systems or structures, self-contradiction, and more. Please see RISD's [grading scale](#), and graduation requirements for [undergraduates](#) and [graduates](#). Undergraduates in the CTC concentration should review [CTC grade policies](#).

NOTE: This is a course for both graduates and undergraduates. Course expectations will be the same for everyone, with one exception: while graduate students will be free to use the mini-projects to build upon previous projects, undergraduates will be encouraged to use each mini-project to start a new project.

COURSE POLICIES

Please communicate with me ahead of time if you will be absent, tardy, or be late on an assignment. Tardiness is especially discouraged. RISD's Absence Policy can be found [here](#). RISD's Academic Code of Conduct can be found [here](#).

COURSE SCHEDULE

9/13

[Introductions]

9/20

Prompt: Make something part-organism, part-machine.

Reading: [Feminist roots of computation] Excerpt from Sadie Plant's *Zeros and Ones* + watch the trailer for *Hidden Figures*

9/27

Prompt: Make something in collaboration with AI.

Reading: [Fembots/cyborgs in male gaze] Watch one film about cyborgs/fembots of your choice + read excerpt from Wendy Chun's "Orienting Orientalism" + watch Safiya Noble video on *Algorithms of Oppression*

10/4

Prompt: Make a something that makes you less cyborgian.

Reading: [Fembots/cyborgs in feminist fantasy] Listen to "Electric Lady" by Janelle Monae and "Fembot" by Robyn + read excerpt from Donna Harroway's *Cyborg Manifesto* + read excerpt from Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

10/11

Prompt: Make something for a cyborgian society.

Reading: [Fembots today] Google Miquela and Sophia + watch video on Stephanie Dinkins' "Conversations with Bina48" + read Brookings' "How AI bots and voice assistants reinforce gender bias" + listen to Holly Herndon's *Proto*

10/18

Prompt: Make yourself more cyborgian.

Reading: [Cyborgs today] Google Moon Ribas and Neil Harbisson + watch video about Micha Cardenas' "Autonets" + read articles by Jillian Weise + read excerpt from Lilian Yvonne-Bertram's *Travesty Generator* + read/explore "Reconstructions" by Allison Parrish

10/25

Final prep: Come up with three distinct possibilities for your final.

Reading: [Glitching] Read introduction to Legacy Russel's *Glitch Manifesto* and Rosa Menkman's "Glitch Studies Manifesto"

11/1

Prompt: Make something with a glitch or a hack.

Reading: [Hacking] Look through Rian Hammond's "Molecular Female" (you can skip "Mapping a Hormone Object"); read/watch the contents of this page (feel free to stop at the "Methods" heading) regarding Mary Maggic's "Open Source Estrogen"; read about GynePunk; and read "Introduction," "Testogel" (optional), and "Gender and Sex Hackers" from Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie*.

11/8

Final prep: Work in progress

Reading: [Feminist Birthing and Creation; Avatars and Personas] Shelly Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (Wiki + [YouTube](#)) and Moreshin Allahyari's *She Who Sees the Unknown...* *Mouchette.org* by Martine Neddam + interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson and Juliana Huxtable

11/15

Final prep: Work in progress

Reading A: Upload (an) article(s) and/or (a) work(s) of art that you wish we had discussed (at least one item, but there is no limit on how many you can upload). You will pitch these as your flash presentation!

Reading B: [Robots' rights] Excerpt of "White Christmas" from *Black Mirror*, Asimov's laws, and "Making Kin" + read about Lauren McCarthy's LAUREN

11/22 [Final critique part I]

11/29 [Final critique part II + celebration]

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather (or on which our institution is built and has amassed power) is the rightful territory of the Narragansett and Wampanoag people. [If you are not in Providence, please use <https://native-land.ca/> to find out which Indigenous land/territories you are occupying.] If we are not indigenous, we are settlers and accountable to the Narragansett and Wampanoag people, as beneficiaries of the violence that makes it possible for us to be here.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

In this class, we agree to presume good intent, and name/own our mistakes. If something in class makes you at all uncomfortable, please contact me; I will work with you on the issue as a top priority. I am responsible for your comfort and safety while participating in this class, so please do not worry about imposing and/or making me uncomfortable. If you are a student with a disability and may require accommodations, please discuss this with me during the first week of class so I can make the course as seamless as possible for you. Please also feel free to be in touch with any of the following offices:

- Disability Support Services. 401 709-8465 or disabilitysupportservices@risd.edu
- The Center for Arts & Language (A&L), which offers academic support and advocacy for effective and expressive communication at the many intersections of arts and language. They provide tutoring for all RISD students in writing, public speaking, and visual communication, English language support for multilingual students, and advising and infrastructure for student publications. 401-454-6486 artsandlanguage@risd.edu
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), which provides a range of mental health services to help students improve emotional, interpersonal, and academic functioning. 401-454-6637 or counserv@risd.edu

- RISD's Title IX office, which addresses concerns regarding sexual and gender-based discrimination, harassment, and/or violence. Title IX is available 24/7 by calling Public Safety 401-454-6666 and asking to speak to the Title IX Coordinator.

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