

Alex Ahmed: I'm starting to think about the prompt "what is feminism doing for/to design." Here could be something to start with: this prompt is really vague, I guess intentionally, but my gut feeling is that "feminism" as a set of values has encouraged some good work in HCI/design over the past few years (Bardzell's watershed "Feminist HCI" came out 10 years ago). If that's our barometer, then there is at least an "awareness" of feminist issues, though that seems to stop short of a deep engagement (according to this paper <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3334480.3382936>). They found that HCI researchers are citing Bardzell by the hundreds but not really reading or engaging with feminist/queer theory in those same numbers.

Lilly Irani: But there's a some literature that engages with feminist theory directly but does not route it through the 2010 Bardzell paper. Yolonda Rankin and Jakita Thomas have an article in *Interactions* where they engage Black feminist histories of intersectionality *deeply* in critical dialogue with HCI take up of intersectionality, but it doesn't route through Bardzell's feminist design framework. Lucy Suchman, Leigh Star, and Jean Lave made whole branches of CSCW through rigorously feminist questioning of received knowledge categories and feminist interventions into computerization of labor. Suchman's revision of Plans and Situated Actions also questioned the category of the human that underpins "human"-computer interaction, laying groundwork for designers like Lucian Leahu and Marisa Cohn to imagine new ways to evaluate the worth of automated agents. I think feminism in HCI has provoked a lot of researchers to imagine otherwise -- look for ways that design and knowledge can prototype different kinds of social relationships.

Alex: That's interesting and is really getting at what I think is the larger issue: what do we (feminists?) want, how is design going to get us there? Can it? Will a bunch of academics starting to read feminist scholarship get us there? I worry that this kind of thinking really obscures how institutions hold power. Undoing the unconscious individual biases of individual researchers and designers is definitely good, but there is so much more to the fight. If our reading and engagement with feminist texts can embolden us to challenge those institutions, then great, but has that happened? I don't think so. In my own experience, I have been emboldened by joining with my colleagues and fighting for a better university. Feminist theory and practice can help to make our campaigns less male-dominated and more

encompassing/inclusive. But now I'm talking about collective action and not "design." I dunno. What do you think?

Lilly: You brought up whether HCI asks us to challenge our institutions and I think this is precisely an excellent example Mary Gray and Katherine Zyskowski find ghost work of similar issues faced by South Asian Amazon Mechanical Turk workers in South Asia. Is HCI drawing on feminism or even a wider range of theories to imagine otherwise in a way that's simply producing innovation -- in the field, new thoughts for academic credit? Or, as you put it, are we using it as a diagnostic to find places where making computation better for people actually inspires them to organize changing the computation in its institutions rather than being limited to design and imagination.

Alex: Yes, I think that's totally right. And I think that the pursuit of recognition and credit has led to problematic trends in what's getting cited, funded, and published. In this case I think it's a very narrow definition of liberal feminism limited to 1) reducing bias against women in the design process, 2) designing new systems specifically with cisgender women in mind, and 3) getting more women involved in computing research. During the first CHI I ever went to, in 2017, I decided to attend the workshop "Hacking Women's Health" (<https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3027063.3027085>), and I wrote a position paper called "Trans Women's Health" because I felt that the subject wasn't being given nearly as much attention as it should. The "women's health" and "feminist" design space seemed at that time to be dominated by researchers exploring menstruation and other topics focused not so much on the gender of the user, but their organs. I met a lot of good people at that workshop, but I still felt pretty uncomfortable. I've been seeing a lot of critical work contesting this trend since, and I've been seeing the number of trans HCI researchers rise and their research gain traction in the field, which is great but still very new.

Going back to our original point though, I don't think that having more trans HCI researchers is going to necessarily bring about the change that I want to see in the world -- just like having more women HCI researchers, more women police, more women CEOs, or a woman president of the United States won't. I wanna highlight this part of a talk Angela Davis gave back in 2013

titled "Feminism and Abolition"

(<https://beyondcapitalismnow.wordpress.com/2013/08/08/angela-y-davis-feminism-and-abolition-theories-and-practices-for-the-21st-century/>): *"Feminism involves so much more than gender equality. And it involves so much more than gender. Feminism must involve a consciousness of capitalism (I mean, the feminism that I relate to. And there are multiple Feminisms, right). It has to involve a consciousness of capitalism and racism and colonialism and post colonialities and ability and more genders than we can even imagine, and more sexualities than we ever thought we could name. Feminism has helped us not only to recognize a range of connections among discourses and institutions and identities and ideologies that we often tend to consider separately. But it has also helped us to develop epistemological and organizing strategies that take us beyond the categories "Women" and "Gender". And, Feminist methodologies impel us to explore Connections that are not always apparent. And they drives us to inhabit contradictions and discover what is productive in those contradictions. Feminism insists on methods of thought and action that urge us to think things together that appear to be separate, and to de-segregate things that appear to naturally belong together."* I love that she talks about feminism as a methodology and I aspire to using it that way in my work.

Lilly: That quote creates such a rich set of pathways for searching for those ways of making knowledge and organizing change that, in some ways, interaction designers have long been about. When I think of the history of this field, I don't think of the killer demos and light pens. I think of feminist anthropologists and sociologists like Lucy Suchman, Jean Lave, and Susan Leigh Star challenging what counts as intelligent action and who gets to design work for whom. These interventions changed how we make knowledge about people, computers, and design. But as governments and companies suffuse homes, cities, and institutions with computing, I want us to highlight the question of Davis raises of "organizing strategies" -- especially ones that "take us beyond the categories 'women' and 'gender'."

In San Diego, the Mayor's staff championed an installation of 4000 smart streetlights that gathered video of us moving through where we live and converted it into data for civic tech hacking and the police. They did this without a strong understanding of the technology and contracts -- it turns out that the streetlight company owns a copy of all data about us. And they

did this without consulting people already surveillanced and even harassed because of their race or country of origin.

I learned about this technology years ago because the Design Lab at UCSD would get recruited to participate in hackathons related to the technology. I saw the problems but I didn't have the community relationships to alert and work with communities that ought to have known. Lucky for me, in 2019 organizers with black and muslim community groups found out about the technology and asked me and Tech Workers Coalition members to help them interpret what the tech can and might do. They organized a 30 group coalition led by those who had the most at stake and we're working towards a new city ordinance that mandates community input into surveillance technology. That input includes those most affected by surveillance as well as law, technology, and data experts. I could look at the APIs and sensor technologies, but a mother and activist knew that the SDPD was approaching young men and gathering their DNA without warrant as part of their surveillance practice. The coalition assembled people with diverse expertise are necessary to understand what this San Diego smart city proposal really was and could become -- the good and the harms. Is the coalition doing HCI? They are analyzing technologies and community needs and creating a policy framework that demands the space for meaningful, democratically governed systems design. Anti-blackness helps understand how discriminatory police attention is systemic, carceral capitalism helped us understand the private investments in systems of jailing, surveillance, and punishment, gendered hypervisibility helped us consider the intersectional discriminations faced by hijab-wearing, black East African San Diegans targeted by a government that often sees both Blacks and Muslims as dangerous but targets them in different ways shaped by gender, race, and class. Ramla Sahid of San Diego's Partnership for New Americans had her eye on all of this already when I met her at a community forum. She was, in some sense, an unrecognized HCI expert. I added perspectives on how entrepreneurship dominated the narrative of these technologies and how the coalition might convert tech business people from opponents into allies. All of this analysis was necessary to forge and maintain a coalition and argue for smart technology governance that addressed complex but historically evident community needs. I hope this work begins to approach the kinds of complex intersectionality called for by Rankin and Thomas here in interactions (<https://interactions.acm.org/archive/view/november-december-2019/straighten-up-and-fly-right>),

an intersectionality rooted in histories of how black women have theorized power to organize differences into collective action for liberation.

I'd like to see feminist in HCI take very seriously the calls by black scholars in our community to assess what we call scholarship and what we call service, what we call research and what we call activism. A rigorous technical practice that engages with computation in the wild can't make a difference by restricting itself to social science, lab, or design methods that place all their bets individuals and teams rather than coalitions and collectives that can match the scale of the systems we are confronting and working to shape.

Alex: Okay first of all, I love this work and definitely reminds me why I admire and look up to you so much! It's the kind of "doing work in the world" that I want to do: plugging into movements and organizations that already exist, not to mine them for data, but to actually uplift, support and drive resources toward those groups while creating new knowledge that furthers our collective interests and fights back. **This methodology has teeth in that it's actually interested in fighting rather than just documenting, analyzing, producing and publishing results.**

Lilly: And your work does plug in to existing movements. Your dissertation on trans voice engaged existing communities of trans friendship and support. Those lasting relationships are not always visible in the CHI paper, nor do we want to put them on display them for credit. But I know you have them.

Alex: Thank you, I try :) I'm thinking about the original prompt, what is feminism doing for design. I think in order to actually answer this question we have to look at the history and various strains of feminism, right? If we are going to say that any feminism worth its salt is a feminism that fights for something, we also have to ask, what is being fought for and why? There were prominent and powerful suffragists back in the day that were only interested in gaining voting rights for white women in America. There are prominent and powerful "feminists" today that see trans women as monsters and sexual predators. It's clear that the kind of feminism that "won" in the academy and in the corporate world (which are the same monster anyway) is this kind of milquetoast middle-ground "liberal" feminism that isn't outright hostile to minorities, but is still firmly entrenched in the status quo. The type of feminism that's like, we're

going to put glossy photos of our "diverse" students and faculty all over campus and on our website, but we're still going to charge a massive tuition, hire mostly white male faculty, bust unions, and fuel gentrification by expanding into the neighborhoods around campus. It's the same as this milquetoast "anti-racism" that leads universities to sponsor Robin diAngelo to lead a "White Fragility" session but refuses or ignores student-led demands to defund and disarm the campus police. My worry is that if we fixate on "feminism" as something worth pursuing we are kind of stuck because powerful institutions have already co-opted it.

Lilly: My parents came from Iran, a country whose politics have been structured through imperial geopolitics of oil grabs, CIA coups, and US sanctions. My family and friends end up on no fly lists because, while the census categorizes us as white, it is plain to see that we are not seen as such publicly or even in policies. We pose a racialized threat. I don't need a feminism that wants to liberate women and queers in the middle east and South Asia as a cover for imperial geopolitics. I need a feminism that undoes racism and imperialism. That's why my feminism can't stop with diversity. I *just* saw the announcement of a new batch of CI Fellows proudly advertised as 52% women. And the CRA podcast advertised right next to it was on the computing challenges of the intelligence community. Intelligence practices are woven into criminalizing communities of color as Brendan McQuade documents, and targeting places for drone strikes that kill thousands. That's why my feminism includes tech workers saying no to making killer robots, cloud for ICE, or AI for drones. My feminism has to fight the many ways capitalism perpetuates harm and hierarchies of difference. And I know I'm not alone in tech or in the HCI community. Some might call this "activism" and use the term dismissively, but to me it is a rigorous accounting of what computing for human flourishing needs to deal with.

Alex: I really like your framing, of not abandoning "feminism" but insisting that in fact, these are feminist issues *and* these are issues relevant to computer science. Unfortunately I feel that the vast majority of CS departments and graduate programs wouldn't agree. But all of this makes sense because universities are not collectively-run and geared toward the common good, they're run by hedge-fund billionaires in bed with the military-industrial complex.