



UTOPIAN NIGHTMARES:

*Speculative Design and Feminist
Futuring with Design Students*

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Introduction

Written by Alison Place

The role of design in our lives has exploded in recent decades to become nearly ubiquitous and almost entirely unavoidable. It mediates our relationships, our work, our communication, our health, our communities, and our sense of self. Few if any aspects of our existence are untouched by the design of artifacts, spaces, systems, and technologies. Today, designers are increasingly called upon not only to create artifacts, but also to reckon with the systems, communities, and futures they shape. As their role expands, emerging and future designers face a world that is increasingly complex: rising global fascism; climate collapse; increasing wealth inequality; multiple genocides and wars; the rapid advancement of AI; the domination of technology corporations; anti-feminist backlash against women's rights and reproductive justice; and the ongoing persecution of marginalized people, including those who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, immigrants, disabled, trans, and non-binary. We are entering a period of uncertainty that we have not experienced in our lifetimes. The world that we previously knew has ended, and a new reality is emerging.

The feminist economist Denise Ferreira da Silva called the end of the world a point of

departure for a new kind of imagining, one that supplements the traditional work of critique with that of the imagination. "This new world will have to be rebuilt and recuperated from the destruction caused by the extractive tools and mechanisms of global capital," she said (Leeb and Stakemeier, 2019). In other words, the world we have known is a world that is bound up with the movement toward greater destruction. But what about a world we are yet to know? How do we begin to give shape to a new vision? How do we move away from destruction, and toward healing and renewal? As gender scholar Judith Butler argues, this question is at work when we ask about the future and try to fathom its possible forms. "Imagining the future beyond the end of this world is part of what it means to live life now," they wrote (Butler, 2025).

If a new world is to be built, designers will be central to its imagining, inception, and production. However, as colleges and universities move away from the humanities and toward a focus on career preparation, design education has shifted to prioritize job readiness skills, such as software literacy and portfolio-building, over critical theory and systems thinking—skills that are essential in the practice of futuring. If design students attain only measurable job-ready skills, their expertise will be narrow, their visions of the future will be short-sighted, and their imaginations will be unremarkable, if not dangerous. They will be prepared only to perpetuate the status quo. To meet the challenges they will face and to solve the problems they will encounter in the long term, designers need the complex problem-solving and critical thinking skills that the humanities foster. In the design classroom, feminist theory is a productive site for engaging creativity with radical speculation, and futurism with radical empathy.

In the spring semester of 2024, I had the privilege of developing and teaching a special topics course in the graphic design program at the University of Arkansas called Design and Feminism. The course was a hybrid studio-seminar format, and a total of 18 students enrolled, including both undergraduate and graduate students. The course examined the intersection of design and feminist theory, with an emphasis on critical thinking; questioning norms; and imagining design tools, methods, and artifacts in alternative ways. The content of the curriculum spanned three modules:

theory, hacking, and speculation. This case study describes the context of the course, and elaborates on the speculation module and the final project. Threaded into this case study are the perspectives of three students, two undergraduates and one graduate, who share their experiences of the course and the outcomes of their final projects. Their incisive work illustrates how feminist approaches to design and futuring can nurture the kind of reflective and critical thinking that is needed now more than ever.

Feminist Utopian Nightmares

Written by Alison Place

Futuring is an exercise in picturing possible outcomes in the future in order to plan for it. In design, it is an endeavor that involves much more than simply using creativity to imagine the world a different way. It is a deeply fraught process shaped by who is in the room, the tools used, and the belief systems that are reinforced. Futuring has traditionally been dominated by white, mostly European men, primarily with the objective of reifying their power within the status quo, and with little concern for what the future holds for marginalized people. In addition to its exclusionary tactics, feminist cultural studies scholar Sarah Kember argues that futurism is inherently problematic due to its adherence to technology-driven visions that play out a limited dualism of utopias and dystopias (Kember, 2012). For people who are oppressed or harmed by the perpetuation of the status quo, much more than technology is at stake when thinking about the future.

How, then, can we enlist our collective abilities to both imagine *and* build the worlds people want? An instructive site for exploring this question is feminist utopianism. The feminist human-computer interaction researcher Shaowen Bardzell asserts that utopianism with a feminist lens is particularly well positioned to engage practices of futuring at scale. Utopian thinking in general is roundly critiqued as well-intentioned but naive attempts to solve complex social problems with simplistic technological solutions. Bardzell observes that “in both design and utopia, there is a historical failure to deliver results that meet real human needs” (Bardzell, 2018). Feminist utopian thinking, however, reconstructs

the idea of a radically better future without attempting to define it, viewing utopianism as an activity rather than a completed image by holding “multiple possible futures-in-process” (Bardzell, 2018). It is emergent and contingent rather than comprehensive, and it embraces conflict as a driver of the process rather than eliminating it. Unattached to a particular medium or outcome, it demands the “continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet the also unrepresentable” (Bardzell, 2018). Futuring through the lens of feminist utopianism emphasizes plurality over individualism, and relationships over solutionism. For designers, then, the path to enacting a more just and equitable society lies not in the endless creation of speculative artifacts, but in how we build relationships and respond to issues collectively over time.

As feminists, we are always imagining what could be. Feminist theorist Vikki Bell calls feminism an “alternative vision” that entails a display of imaginative faculty. She asserts that feminist organizing is not a path that always leads forward, but rather a strategy that leads to the “otherwise” (Bell, 1999). Following the thread of the “otherwise,” students in the Design and Feminism course addressed the imaginative component of feminist design through a speculative design project entitled *Utopian Nightmares*. We started by asking: who gets to imagine the future? Whose voice and vision are included in the worlds we want to build? We read Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and collectively explored feminist futuring, feminist utopianism, and the unequal power relations embedded in the fields of speculative and critical design. Students then generated an imagined scenario 30 years into the future, and wrote about it in the form of a day-in-the-life narrative written in the first person. Their imagined future could be plausible, possible, preferable, or none of the above. Using their written narrative as a guide, they developed a speculative design intervention that responded to a need or a situation in their imagined future, taking into consideration how it grapples with feminist concepts of power, knowledge, care and liberation. With the understanding that one person’s utopia might be someone else’s nightmare, students were encouraged to engage with Donna Haraway’s definition of irony: “the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary or true”

(Haraway, 1991). Rather than designing from their own perspective as the “right” perspective, they held their subjective view of the future in tandem with multiple possible other views. They applied an ironic approach to the solutionism of design, with a satirical nod to the propensity of many designers to enshrine a single solution in response to a massive problem, disregarding its complexity, and homogenizing audiences.

The final projects were presented as ironic research posters that positioned their imagined future as if it were current reality, and featured their design interventions as tongue-in-cheek solutions to a problem. Students’ design interventions ranged from the practical (bioengineered architectural housing systems, mutual aid systems for growing food during climate collapse); to the improbable (community settlements on Mars, a digital galactic archive for celestial bodies); to the undesirable (A.I. brain implants that control emotions, forced cyborgian transmutation in lieu of death). Their proposals represented multiple possible futures-in-process that enact critical making as a means to reconsider the role of design in addressing our collective liberation. What follows are the perspectives of three students from the course who describe their proposed projects in response to the prompt.

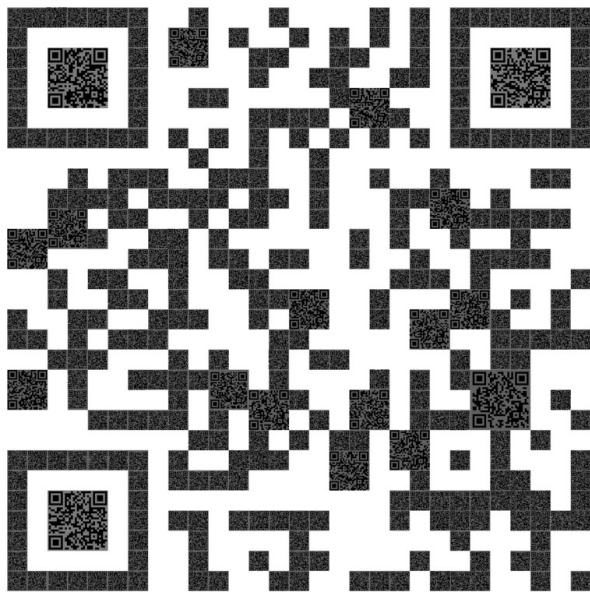


Fig. 4.1 — *Speculative design poster*. Student work by Caroline Leigh & Anna Kate Minichiello.

An Undergraduate Student Perspective

Written by Caroline Leigh & Anna Kate Minichiello

When initially reading the project brief for *Utopian Nightmares*, we were unsure how to respond. Imagining a feminist future raised more questions than answers, especially considering today’s reality. We wanted our response to reflect on personal moments that have shaped how we understand feminism. These moments often aren’t loud or outwardly political, but they reveal how deeply care is connected to larger systems. This insight prompted the question: What if the ideal feminist utopia wasn’t about achieving goals, but rather celebrating care-based realizations and transformations?

That’s where our concept of “J(QR)dan” began. After the two of us met in college and collaborated on different projects surrounding our past experiences, we discovered we had the same childhood therapist. Our experiences with him were remarkably similar—he was dismissive, made us uncomfortable, and was ultimately unhelpful to us. We both remember feeling unheard in those sessions, which ultimately shaped our early perceptions of our value as young women. In naming our project after him we weren’t honoring his work but rather reclaiming something that once made us feel overlooked. The project turned into counter-therapy for us, less centered around being “fixed” and more about being understood.

This act of reclaiming connected with Donna Haraway’s notion of irony as a feminist tactic. Holding contradictions in tension creates space for resistance. By naming the project J(QR)dan, we envisioned a liberatory reframing of a past that was once limiting to us. Haraway writes that irony “is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes,” and in our case, irony became a method of transformation by turning a source of discomfort into a space for self-care (1991).

We began our process by exchanging stories and piecing together our shared experiences that shaped our ideas of care, growth, and autonomy. These conversations became the foundation for the speculative journaling stage of our project. We wrote journal entries that envisioned a feminist future built on support that was mutual, and self-care that was non-institutionalized.

Visually, our piece took the form of a large QR code made up of many smaller QR codes, each

one linking to a personal experience relating to care. The large QR code directs viewers to our initial speculative journal entries, while the smaller codes led to digital artifacts—music, writing, images, and resources—that explore mental health and identity. This format encourages a user-driven experience where viewers construct their own journey through the material and decide which stories to access. This felt inherently feminist to us, emphasizing agency and reflection.

One of the biggest challenges was navigating visibility and vulnerability. We didn't want to make a spectacle out of our lived experiences. The QR code format allowed us to embed layers of intimacy and access, offering both lighthearted content and deeply personal reflections. The act of scanning, listening, and sharing became its own form of care and connection.

J(QR)dan embodied an idea of a feminist future that doesn't offer one perfect solution but instead invites self-reflection and care. By layering personal narratives through scannable artifacts, we created a participatory experience grounded in emotional honesty. Our project didn't aim to fix what currently exists but instead raised a question: what would happen if care were central to imagining feminist futures? *Utopian Nightmares* pushed us to see care not as an afterthought, but as a radical foundation for reimagining the world.

A Graduate Student Perspective

Written by Piper Schuerman

Leading up to the *Utopian Nightmares* project, our class had numerous discussions about the systems of oppression that feminism addresses. These systems are so ingrained in our culture that it can be hard to imagine a realistic path towards a feminist alternative. Someone in the class was always asking whether feminism could occur within the current systems that are in place, or if it must break those systems in order to exist. Inspired by that point of discussion, my "utopia" imagines a future state of the United States government where the Feminist Party has risen to power.

Initially, a future society that includes not just a Feminist Party, but a successfully elected Feminist president, sounds like a win for feminism, *right*? Not everybody thinks so. Leading up to the president's re-election for a second term, a movement of opposition is growing, critiquing the Feminist Party for not upholding truly feminist values. Based on this speculative scenario, I created a poster featuring a visual identity for the Feminist Party alongside protest material for a Feminist Rebel Group demonstration.

The idea of 'branding' feminism had an inherent irony to it. All semester long, our class explored the diversity of perspectives that exist within the movement of feminism, and even read an essay by Aggie Toppins entitled "On the contradictions of feminist branding (Toppins, 2023). By proposing a visual identity for the Feminist Party, I set the stage for a critique of how they used branding to universalize feminism when it needed to be more nuanced. In contrast, the designs on the demonstrator's posters were not meant to be cohesive; rather, their plurality is a statement in opposition to a universal feminist identity. Messages on the signs position the United States under the Feminist Party as an illusion of a feminist society. One poster quotes Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," arguing that the electoral system is inherently flawed and at odds with feminist principles.

The demonstrations described above were first imagined in a narrative written as part of a futuring exercise. I wrote the narrative from a first-person perspective of a top advisor to



Fig. 4.2 — Speculative design poster. Student work by Piper Schuerman.

the president. Her account of how this scenario was unfolding was riddled with doubt and self-negotiation, as a reality she once thought of as utopian became much more complicated. Describing the future from this perspective enabled me to articulate my own complex feelings about how progress can be made towards a more feminist society. Embedded into the narrator's account are questions I asked myself in earlier class discussions: *Is dismantling established systems of power on such a large scale realistic? Can a feminist ethically operate within those systems? How can a movement with so many diverse identities and agendas unify to create positive change?*

None of these questions were resolved by the time I completed this project. The scenario leaves the audience hanging, feeling just as conflicted as I did. This realization surprised me. As a designer, communicating my ideas requires a clear point of view. I'm accustomed to building an argument that convinces someone of my creative direction. Designing through the lens of a feminist utopia reframed how I thought of my role. My work went from being an answer to being a provocation, a shift that was both exciting and unsettling.

Looking forward, as I enter my first academic position, I believe that provocation and contradiction can be addressed more regularly in the design classroom. What if, instead of a typical project brief, which anticipates a solution presented and pitched confidently, students were asked to intentionally design something that would prompt a lively debate? My experience with *Utopian Nightmares* reinforced the idea that design enables discourse, and I plan to continue that exploration.

Conclusion

Written by Alison Place

The practice of critical making is simultaneously a reflexive and recursive practice. It calls on designers to continually reflect on their role within oppressive structures through responsive acts of making. The process aims to generate discourse and provoke moments of reflection, which operates in direct resistance to the typical ways in which designers' creativity is exploited for market-based value. When enacted in a feminist design practice, critical making reimagines creative skills as tools for liberation.

Students in the Design and Feminism course were challenged to not only shift their perspective of themselves as designers, but to shift their perspective of design itself. By exploring the practice of feminist futuring, they revealed multiple ways in which speculative design can resist, rather than enable, the techno-solutionism that design suffers from. As Caroline, Anna Kate, and Piper's projects demonstrate, visions of feminist futures reject a singular solution and the typical designer-as-heroic-problem-solver ethos. They embraced questions, discomforts, and relationships. They sought to stir up trouble, rather than cement a resolution.

As an educator teaching this course for the first time, I was initially surprised by the discomfort students felt when thinking about the unknown of the future—and equally surprised by the ease with which they took ownership of their ability to intervene in it. They showed up as their whole selves and saw each other as whole beings, capable of shaping and imagining the world otherwise. Arguably, by completing the course, students did not gain any job-ready skills, software expertise, or polished portfolio pieces—but many of them eagerly announced on our final day of class that their understanding of design had completely changed, and they would never see the world the same way again. As their teacher, cultivating the next generation of designers, that's more than I could ever ask for.

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