

# Feminist Pedagogy

---

Volume 2  
Issue 4 *Volume 2, Issue 4: Back to School*

Article 12

---

August 2022

## Documentary Review: Coded Bias

Sydney Elaine Brammer  
Texas Tech University, [sydney.brammer@ttu.edu](mailto:sydney.brammer@ttu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>



Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), and the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brammer, Sydney Elaine (2022) "Documentary Review: Coded Bias," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol2/iss4/12>

This Media Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@calpoly.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@calpoly.edu).

## Documentary Review: *Coded Bias*

In a time when we find ourselves constantly connected, we must question what is being done with the data produced by our activities, who it serves, and whether we get to choose what parts of our lives—and ourselves—are included in that data. In Shalini Kantayya’s (2020) brilliant documentary, *Coded Bias*, these questions are explored through the eyes of some of the most notable women leading the fight against algorithmic bias in artificially intelligent technologies. The film is an excellent, accessible teaching tool for students with little to no previous training about AI, and is still an interesting and powerful watch for those who are already somewhat familiar with it. Below, I argue that *Coded Bias* has three major applications which align with most feminist pedagogy approaches and unpack each of the following, respectively: investigating the roots of a source of oppressive power, analyzing the impact of that power on the oppressed, and identifying actionable steps to challenge that power and support those who are working to combat it.

On May 22, 2019, the inimitable Joy Buolamwini—a central figure of *Coded Bias*—sat on a panel before the House Oversight and Reform Committee and described the present and potential dangers of biased artificial intelligence. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) asked, “So, what demographic [are algorithms] mostly effective on?” Joy answered, “White men.” AOC followed up, asking “Who are the primary engineers of the algorithms?”, to which Joy responded, “Definitely white men” (Kantayya, 2020, 01:15:57). When a clip of this exchange appeared in the film, I was immediately struck by (a) the amount of work that had to be done by anti-bias activists before Joy reached this moment; and (b) how much of that work Kantayya was able to showcase in the documentary. Early in the film, Meredith Broussard discusses media portrayals of robots, from *The Terminator* (1984) to *I, Robot* (2004), and how these images are some of the most salient images that the average person may have of artificial intelligence, yet they do not actually represent the presentation or scope of most real AI. Throughout the remainder of *Coded Bias*, the cast breaks down how AI technologies and the ways they are integrated into our society are rooted in white, hegemonic patriarchy. When AI technologies are designed by white men and operate most efficiently to identify and serve those men, they are biased against, and a disservice to, women, especially women of color. Feminist data scientists like Cathy O’Neil and Virginia Eubanks (both featured in the film) have been shouting this point from the rooftops for years: we must view data bias as a result of structural oppression, an oppression under which “marjoritized bodies are granted undeserved advantages and minoritized bodies must survive undeserved hardships” (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 63).

Though there are many potential impacts of oppressive algorithmic biases on women, including life-threatening gaps in medical data or vehicle safety test data, for example (Criado-Perez, 2019), many widespread biases appear, at the surface, to be innocuous. One example of this deceptively low-stakes oppression highlighted in *Coded Bias* is the use of facial recognition technology for building entry at an apartment complex in a predominantly Black neighborhood. One of the tenants interviewed in the film reflects on this additional “security measure,” saying, “I feel that I, as a human being, should not be tracked. I’m not a robot” (Kantayya, 2020, 00:24:17). The potential for denial of entry to one’s home, constant surveillance lacking a justification, and so many more potential outcomes of using AI for such purposes are not innocuous. In fact, the persistent inaccuracy of many facial recognition technologies can lead to serious consequences, including misrecognition and a subsequent wrongful conviction for a crime committed by someone else. Thus, by pointing to several instances of oppression rooted in AI, *Coded Bias* demonstrates the possibility and importance of investigating algorithmic biases.

Feminist pedagogy, or the practice of integrating feminist thoughts and behaviors into spaces where people learn and/or advance knowledge, is “driven by emancipatory intentions” (Herman & Kirkup, 2017, p. 784). Some of the most impactful ways to combat biases in data and technology are to make sure that pools of data used for machine learning are diverse, and to avoid the use of AI technologies for decision-making when results indicate that they are not consistently accurate or inclusive (i.e., the algorithmic hiring and firing systems faced by public school teachers like cast-member Daniel Santos). But, because such actions depend largely on industry performing behaviors, scholars, professionals, and anyone who wants to practice feminist pedagogy can work towards more overtly emancipatory behaviors as consumers and citizens. Refusing to be subject to facial recognition technologies like cast-member Silkie Carlo and her Big Brother Watch team, spreading awareness of AI bias through art (i.e., Joy Buolamwini’s spoken word excerpts), accessible authorship (i.e., cast-member Zeynep Tufekci’s journalistic works), and/or encouraging the next generation to speak out (i.e., Joy Buolamwini’s mentorship of cast-member Deborah Raji) are all ways that progress can be made at every level. From undergraduate survey courses on racial justice movements to graduate courses on the place of data mining and management in our rapidly changing digital society, *Coded Bias* is an excellent point of focus and conversation starter for college students in a wide variety of disciplines. Introducing others to *Coded Bias* may equip and inspire them to join the movement toward more just and equitable algorithms and AI technologies.

### References

- Cameron, J. (1984). *The terminator* [Film]. Cinema '84; Euro Film Funding; Hemdale.
- Kantayya, S. (2020). *Coded bias* [Film]. 7<sup>th</sup> Empire Media; Chicken and Egg Pictures; Ford Foundation; Just Films.
- Criado-Perez, C. (2019). *Invisible women: Data bias in a world designed for men*. Abrams.
- D'Ignazio, C. & Klein, L. (2020). *Data feminism*. The MIT Press.
- Herman, C. & Kirkup, G. (2017). Combining feminist pedagogy and transactional distance to create gender-sensitive technology-enhanced learning. *Gender and Education*, 29(6), 781-795. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1187263>
- Proyas, A. (2004). *I, robot* [Film]. Twentieth Century Fox; Mediastream Vierte Film GmbH & Go. Vermarktungs KG; Davis Entertainment.