

ladymouth: Anti-Social-Media Art As Research

Sarah Ciston

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Figure 1. The ladymouth bot responds to a post featuring the keyword 'SMV' ("sexual market value") on the Red Pill (reddit.com/r/theredpill), and then another Red Pill user responds to ladymouth's interjection.

'THE ENTIRE SYSTEM OF HUMAN RELATIONS IS COLLAPSING' (Introduction)

ladymouth is a chatbot that tries to explain feminism to misogynists on Reddit. I wrote this code so that I could address self-identified 'men's rights activists' without engaging them personally. The chatbot responds with quotations from feminist theorists and then logs its conversations, which I incorporate into writing, performance, and video art.

The project aims to demonstrate the emotional labor and risks of interacting online for anyone perceived as female, queer, non-binary or trans, not white, or otherwise 'other.' I began with artistic research questions from three perspectives. First, as an academic: By placing feminist theorists before unreceptive misogynists, and MRA speech in front of unaccustomed audiences, what conversations could emerge in the friction between viewpoints? Second, as a media maker: What tools could technology offer to address the distress of engaging with technology? Could it make emotional labor visible to audiences who had dismissed it? Could it speak for me in spaces where I felt afraid? Third, as an experimental writer and programmer, how was digital language influencing my writing? What would a text made from online misogyny look and sound like? How might I repurpose or perform it? How would 'processing' it-through code, through writing, through my body-change these texts and my relationship to them? I continue exploring these questions in ongoing iterations of the work.

ladymouth makes its technological intervention interdisciplinary, combining creative-critical programming, cross-genre writing, and feminist scholarship. After describing the methods used to develop the chatbot, and how its outputs are incorporated into my artistic practice, I will contextualize the project with research that details the scope of online misogyny. Then I will discuss how it intersects writing and coding in relation to activism and academic research, enacting a queer feminist media praxis.



Figure 2. A Reddit user reacts to ladymouth's participation in the Men's Rights subreddit ([reddit.com/r/mensrights](https://www.reddit.com/r/mensrights)).

'IT'S PROBABLY A BOT. AND VERY LIKELY CODED BY A MAN, BECAUSE YOU KNOW...CODING. (Methods)

In the initial prototype, the ladymouth chatbot selects a random keyword from a SQLite database I compiled of common misogynist terms. It logs into Reddit and searches a predetermined forum for a post containing this keyword, then submits a reply using a quotation I linked to that keyword, selected from my readings in feminist theory. The bot also stores the original post and checks for any responses to its previous comments. It waits, then runs again.

During development, rather than the bot replacing me in these communities as I hoped, I became all-too-acquainted with their vocabulary and customs. I reviewed posts daily and added keywords from TheRedPill Glossary: 'SVM' is 'sexual market value'; a 'plate' is a 'woman with whom you are in a non-exclusive sexual relationship,' i.e. 'spinning plates'; 'LMR' refers to 'last-minute resistance'; and 'AWALT' stands for 'all women are like that' (R/TheRedPill). I gained uncomfortable familiarity with the language of misogyny while loitering in these spaces, and this necessary caretaking of the chatbot points to some of the fleshy, embodied impacts of technology (even when designing technology explicitly to avoid those impacts).

During beta tests in early 2016, the bot posted 60 comments and received 44 responses. The most popular keyword match was 'cunt.' The bot operated for 12 hours and 3 days respectively before it was banned from each forum. Their moderators are able to ban new users as they see fit, usually according to guidelines posted in the forum. While TheRedPill gave no reason for banning the bot, MensRights noted that the bot was

posting only quotations (as several of its users also noted), which it considered spam. MensRights subreddit also offers detailed rules for user behavior, but these rules did not explicitly exclude the bot's behavior (ModPolicy). Decisions to ban users are at the discretion of moderators, thus subjective and somewhat opaque. Like all such forums on Reddit, these communities are self-regulating. The chatbot makes a technological intervention by inserting itself where it is unwelcome—because of this provocation, it operates as spectacle, designed to fail.

I am often asked whether ladymouth contributes to hate and divisiveness, whether by echoing the tactics of online misogynists (“trolling the trolls”) it adds fuel to their outrage. However, good or bad, the impact of ladymouth on MRAs is a drop in the bucket. It interacts with a tiny sample of these enormous forums: MensRights has 200,000 members. TheRedPill had more than 150,000 members during my beta tests and at last count in October 2018 had 286,000. (As of January 2019 the subreddit has been ‘quarantined’ on Reddit for being “dedicated to shocking or highly offensive content”; while still operating, its current user count is hidden by Reddit administrators.) Meanwhile, a vast minefield of similar subreddits continues to grow.

Examples of networked misogyny have long been public on Reddit and elsewhere online, pervasive and yet easy to ignore. One initial goal in developing the chatbot is to renew attention to the impacts of hate-driven digital language toward embodied subjects. Perhaps the absurdity of trolls yelling at machines can make trolls yelling at women seem absurd again too. Rather than minimize such language, I argue this means highlighting its vitriol and its excess. I agree with Emma A. Jane (2017) that ‘it is necessary not only to cite a multitude of examples, but to cite a multitude of unexpurgated examples. Indeed, [...] the metaphorical unspeakability of gendered cyberhate may be one of the reasons it has become as prevalent as it has’ (14).

Given the contentious political climate in which various types of bots participate and interfere in ideological discourse today, I want to emphasize that it is not the human or non-human nature of an ideological intervention that makes it ethical or unethical. Instead a bot's ethics necessarily lie in the ideologies it is programmed to disseminate and the tactics it employs to do so—whether those are to sow chaos and spread misinformation, as in the 2016 US election, or to disrupt the flow of caustic digital discourse and shift the risks of engagement online, as in the case of ladymouth.

I designed the bot to intervene in and document the language of MRAs, and I make additional creative-critical interventions by recontextualizing that text—placing e-bile, elegy, and ideology in parataxis through my work. After the bot collects the comments of every user who responds to it, I sift through its archives to curate a representative

sample, then compose additional text in response. One creative-writing strategy I employed was to imagine the chatbot as a character and to address “her” as a feminine presence in those forums. Since I had sent ladymouth to act on my behalf, I found I worried about her while she was there. Writing to address her experience became a means of addressing the embodied experience of online harassment through a new lens. This recontextualization also meant bringing the language of the forums to different physical spaces-performing it live at poetry readings in order to push the language through my body, presenting it as a looping video in order to experiment with large-scale gallery installation, and interjecting it into academic guest lectures on the bot itself in order to test the limits of how its language pervades my embodied experience and practice.

I consider each aspect of the work to be queer feminist media praxis, as outlined in Ada Issue 5, emphasizing the collaborative, affective, and materialist concerns and techniques of that praxis (Juhasz 2014). Feminist hacking/making also underscores the structures of power that facilitate technology: ‘hacking and making comprise both a method and a framework to introduce new kinds of expertise, such as craft and care, into conversations of information technology’ (SSL Nagbot). I relay Kara Keeling’s (2014) call for a ‘QueerOS’ (154) and the scholar-artists who elucidate its possibilities: ‘A QueerOS application is a political and subversive putting to use of the potentiality of the computer,’ focused on strategies of promiscuity, process, failure, and commons (Barnett et al. 2016). ladymouth incorporates all four. I have found these strategies essential for creating what Rita Raley terms ‘tactical media’ (2009), and ladymouth draws on a history of tactical media artists and feminists engaging with networked harassment. Both Fembot Collective’s Fembot Toolkit and Fembot Bot provided examples of how to form a common strategies and instrumentalize response (Fembot Collective). Angela Washko’s ‘Banged’ and ‘The Game: The Game’ (Washko) showed how to embed an artistic practice in MRA communities and recontextualize their strategies. Additionally, my work with the Feminist Labor Lab at UC San Diego, organized by Lilly Irani, and Irani’s investigations into AI’s entanglements with human labor (AI Now Institute 2016) helped me consider the ways a bot might (and might fail to) offset different kinds of human digital labor, as well as how to develop further iterations of the project.

Currently, ladymouth does not pretend to be human or pursue ongoing conversations. In the upcoming version, I use neural networks, natural language processing, and sentiment analysis to add specificity to its responses. This conjures new ethical challenges around its behavior and goals, including how to strike a balance between instructing and inciting in each conversation. But I argue for retaining a critical lens toward AI, using my experiments to probe its infrastructural biases and subversive potentials rather than accepting it as another high-tech cure-all. As Irani argues,

‘Automation doesn’t replace labor; it displaces it’ (AI Now Institute 2016). I want the chatbot to adopt more intersectional methods that do not reinforce constructed gender binaries but support the disproportionate impacts of race, sexuality, and gender fluidity on networked misogyny-not only in its selection of scholarly sources or keywords but also in its deployment as a tool for broader activism. I also plan to create an interface for others to contribute to its database, triggering the chatbot to multiply their efforts into the manosphere-and potentially into other spheres for social change. Safiya U. Noble (2018) critiques ‘the narrative that somehow personal liberties can be realized through technology because of its ability to supposedly strip us of our specifics and make us equal. We know, of course, that nothing could be further from the truth’ (62-63). I hope that future iterations of this project can suggest possibilities to begin combating the inequality that gets perpetuated, but obfuscated, by the promise of digital democracy.

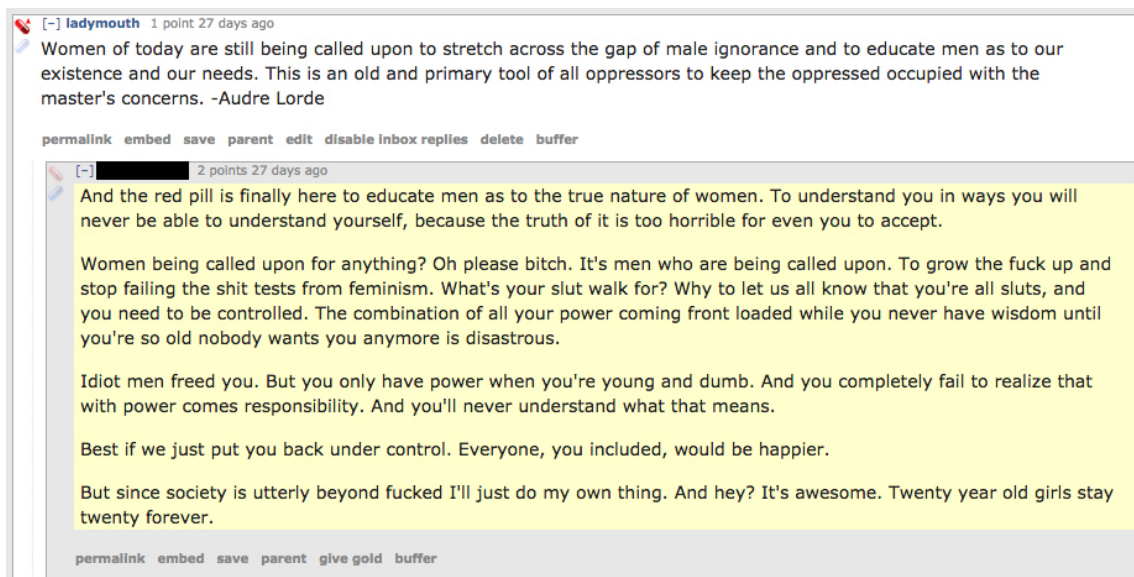


Figure 3. A Reddit user responds to a quotation from Audre Lorde, which ladymouth posted to the Red Pill subreddit (reddit.com/r/theredpill) after searching for a post with the keyword ‘cunt.’

‘DO YOU JUST SHITPOST YOUR STUPID QUOTES OR HAVE YOU GOT ANY INDEPENDENT THOUGHT AT ALL?’ (Literature Review)

Digital publics are rife with the risks of what Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner (2016) call ‘networked misogyny’ (171). Alice E. Marwick and Robyn Caplan (2018) emphasize the term ‘networked’ to convey that ‘networked harassment’ is not anecdotal but frequently ‘a concerted, organized effort [...] often organized in subcultural online spaces such as Reddit’ (545). Jane (2017) traces decades-long histories and impacts of such behavior:

women are self-censoring, writing anonymously or under pseudonyms, or withdrawing partly or completely from the internet [...] widely acknowledged as being an integral and increasingly essential aspect of contemporary life and citizenship. (4)

This impact is shared unevenly across different populations, some of whom take on additional labor and put themselves at greater risk just by going online. Lisa Nakamura (2015) re-historicizes digital interventions by ‘women of color, queer and trans people, and racial minorities’ as undervalued knowledge workers (106). She traces conversations marked by the hashtag #ThisTweetCalledMyBack, in which marginalized moderators say ‘the act of communicating with the public about racism, sexism, homophobia, and other social justice issues is unpaid, and often results in the poster being harassed, trolled, and threatened’ (108). As an experiment responding to this problem, ladymouth asks how technology might instead support such labor-acting as a multiplier, inserting a layer of collectivity, anonymity, and automation between individual humans and the harm they risk online.

Those risks inform my project’s goals, but they also drive my conflicted consideration of how (or whether) to present this work while staying safe-how to balance a fear I should protect myself from harassment by publishing anonymously against the importance of claiming this work as a kind of labor that is feminized, embodied, and inescapably vulnerable. Examples such as Gamergate illustrate the intensity and variety of dangers incurred from participating online. As part of #gamergate’s expansive, ongoing reach, female-identifying gamers and journalists received death threats and rape threats that required they cancel events or even change addresses. Even academic analysis of Gamergate came under fire, when scholars Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw (2015) found their online documents compromised by Gamergaters and their research efforts spun into conspiracy theories. They caution “how feminist academic research can be misappropriated for non-feminist purposes” (217). Of course, complete safety is an unattainable ideal, and staying safe online carries vastly different meanings for users whose presence in digital spaces may put them in different kinds of harm’s way to varying degrees-physically, emotionally, financially, socially, professionally, and otherwise. Discussion of inequality and harassment online must draw on the decades of intersectional analyses of power structures done by Black feminist theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw and the Combahee River Collective in order to account for a plurality of digital encounters.

Because the risks are disproportionately borne by different populations, I suggest it is important to leverage anonymity and collectivity to respond to those risks, just as in support of the distribution of digital labor, as discussed above. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland argue that ‘we need to create ways of occupying networks that

thrive in the shadowy space between identity and anonymity, that thrive through repetition' (2015, 21). I hope that this chatbot intervention may help create one such space for other users, supporting repetition and anonymity through automation, which can act as one kind of collective voice.

Collective interventions are necessary, because networked harassment is not only individual but also infrastructural. Whitney Phillips' (2015) investigation of trolling as a distinct subset of online harassment makes the important argument that 'trolls are born of and embedded within dominant institutions and tropes, which are every bit as damaging as the trolls' most disruptive behaviors' (11). This embeddedness points to the reach of all online misogyny, as 'intersectional forms of hate feed on, and amplify, one another' (Sundén and Paasonen 2018, 646).

The language of networked misogyny is central to its ability to spread and thus an essential material to foreground in this project. Marwick and Caplan (2018) focus on specific language like 'misandry' that allows misogynist rhetoric to travel virally: 'Misandry encapsulates the perceived persecution of men by feminists, which is used throughout the manosphere to justify networked harassment.' (554). The terminology itself helps create a false equivalence with misogyny and provides the substrate on which to perform it: 'This creates a sense of community across divergent subgroups, builds ties between individuals, and helps to solidify the ideological commitment of MRAs to oppose feminism' (553). Such communities reinforce themselves through a sense of "insider's perspective," as Melissa Click's (2019) research into hatred and disgust in online forums shows, using critical language intended to "reassert the divide [...and form] a dismissive differentiation from the mainstream media audience by positioning them as unthinking dupes" (11). Once organized, these communities appropriate the language of social justice against 'an attack on their rightful place in the social hierarchy [...] by taking up some of the dominant themes of popular feminism-empowerment and confidence-and reframing and rearticulating them as misogynistic statements and practices' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016, 172). Examples of appropriated and insider language appeared frequently in the output from 'ladymouth,' showing a glimpse of the world seen through an uncanny lens, entirely different than my accustomed perspective situated in feminist academic spaces.

Rhetorical strategies like false equivalence and appropriation can also be intended to shame and silence feminist efforts. One such example is what Brandee Easter (2018) calls 'digital manspreading,' a form of appropriation exemplified by the parody feminist programming language 'C+=' which used verbose code to frame women coders 'as incompetent.' Easter suggests these activities 'take over and take up the space of women and feminists to speak and act-or even be present-online,' while '[...] imitation

of feminism is much more than parody; it is also territorializing and silencing' (680). In contrast, Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen (2018) call for feminist reappropriation as a 'networked politics of reclaiming,' showing how "the object-making of slurs are redirected into practices of subject-making" (652-653). Digital manspreading highlights the need for feminist tactical media such as ladymouth to reclaim digital space and reappropriate misogynist language, aided by automated imaginaries.



Figure 4. Reddit users respond to a quotation from Judith Butler, which the ladymouth bot posted in the Men's Rights subreddit (reddit.com/r/mensrights) after finding the keyword 'hetero' in the original posting.

PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT WOMEN DO, NOT WHAT THEY SAY. YOUR WORDS ARE USELESS HERE. (Discussion)

ladymouth explores interdisciplinary research questions across intersectional feminist scholarship and creative-critical writing and coding. Investigating how digital spaces inform my writing means engaging with code as an active material, as language that does things. Software studies sees code as a speech act (Cox and McLean 2013, 35), which influences my sense of how to perform text, as well as how code expands the conditions for creating text.

After writing alongside language gathered by 'ladymouth,' I am struck by how familiar some comments feel, despite their cruelty. As Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) note,

‘Surprisingly, [MRAs] claim to campaign for many of the same things that feminists want, including acceptance of alternative masculinities and expanded parenting roles for men’ (172). While distinctions between feminists and anti-feminists remain obvious and essential, I am drawn to unsettling glimmers of empathy where our concerns overlap—a sense of disparity, a struggle for survival, a plea for connection.

The chatbot produces voices; it stores and mimics them. I incorporate these voices into my writing, because I suspect their dynamics already puncture my voice, implicate me as a gendered body, troll me each moment in hopes of response. I sense this language is already being processed through my body and my body of work. This is how I view writing and coding in relation to feminist scholarship; they are marked by the presence of this body, by the particular labors requested of this kind of body. *ladymouth* considers how a body contains these influences, stores them in its database—unseen, accessed in moments of doubt, stress, danger.

The bot both documents and automates this labor of being othered online—transferring the risks of engagement with technology back onto a technological body. *ladymouth* makes herself a target, wasting misogynists’ time in tiny increments. Each interaction is the smallest intervention, but perhaps (like the microaggressions they counter) these microgestures might have untraceable but compounding effects—a new kind of “meme magic.” Each moment wasted could be time a woman elsewhere is not harassed, but instead creating or discussing new work. It is a moment when the labor of attempting to address misogyny, of avoiding the risk of doing so, does not absorb her otherwise valuable time. For the MRA audience, there is a small chance it accumulates into a slightly less insider’s perspective for a few subreddit participants, a subtle shift in a conversation, or the very real possibility that more perspective changes nothing and they become even more entrenched in their beliefs. However, there is also the possibility that the chatbot’s microgestures can subtly connect these two audiences rather than simply rile up both sides, through its small acts of recontextualization—placing feminist text in men’s rights spaces and misogynist text in other digital and non-digital publics, to access a spark of common humanity across the divide.

While women have been asked to care for and act as machines (Plant 1998, 37; SSL *Nagbot*), *ladymouth* imagines a machine that can care for and act for us, multiplying effort and deflecting abuse. I hope such projects can help expose the tangible impacts of networked misogyny. Digital spaces are created by language, enacted by humans. I see practices that combine intersectional feminist research, creative coding, and experimental writing as artistic risks capable of taking up the embodied risks of digital spaces, in order to critique technologies and imagine interventions.

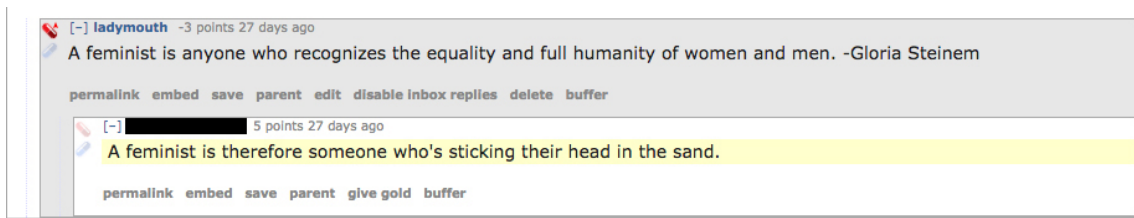


Figure 5. A Reddit user reacts to ladymouth's post in the Red Pill subreddit (reddit.com/r/theredpill), triggered by the bot's search for the keyword 'feminism.'

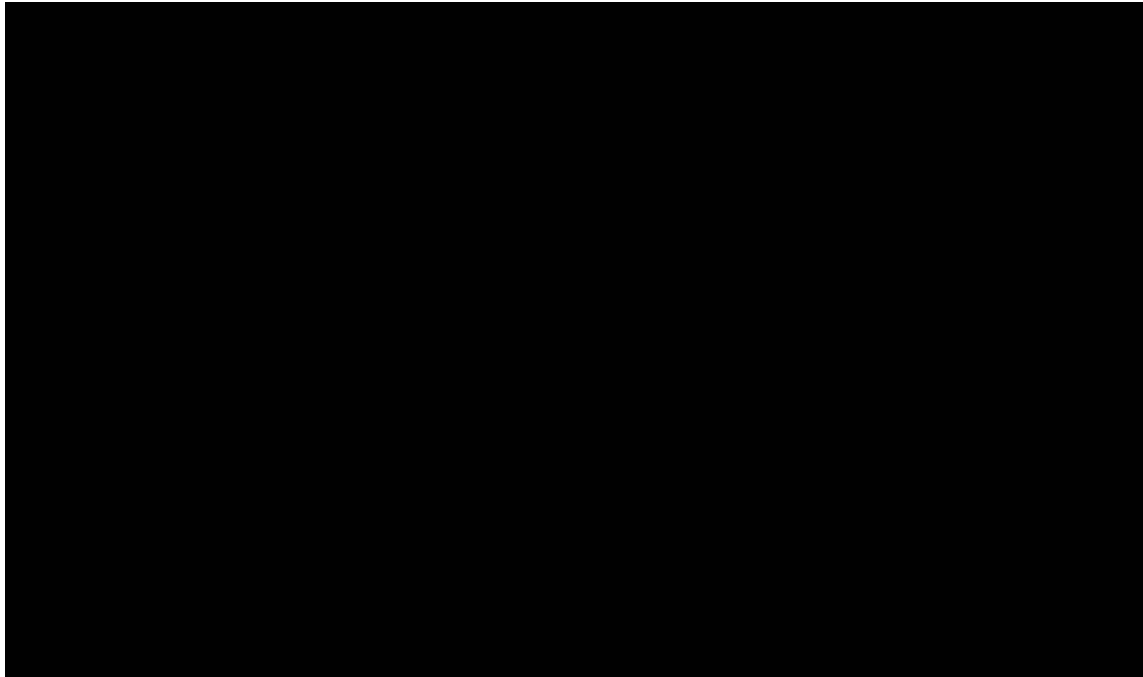


Figure 6. GIF clip from an early video test for live performance, which included a Reddit user response to the ladymouth bot and my own lyric intervention.

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