SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES
OF ROBOTS AND AI

Man-Made Women

The Sexual Politics of Sex Dolls and Sex Robots

Edited by
Kathleen Richardson
Charlotta Odlind

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Social and Cultural Studies of Robots and AI

This is a groundbreaking series that investigates the ways in which the "robot revolution" is shifting our understanding of what it means to be human. With robots filling a variety of roles in society—from soldiers to loving companions—we can see that the second machine age is already here. This raises questions about the future of labor, war, our environment, and even human-to-human relationships.

Kathleen Richardson · Charlotta Odlind
Editors

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ISSN 2523-8523 ISSN 2523-8531 (electronic)
Social and Cultural Studies of Robots and AI
ISBN 978-3-031-19380-4 ISBN 978-3-031-19381-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19381-1

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For the humanity of women and girls

Acknowledgements

In 2021, the Campaign Against Sex Robots (now the Campaign Against Porn Robots) held an online event and invited international speakers to reflect on different aspects of technology and women. These talks enabled a community of feminists to come together to speak in different ways about how women's rights, dignity and humanity were undermined by new technologies. What is worse, despite the millions invested in 'ethics of technology' few of the academics in these roles spoke up for women and girls. Instead, they sided with pornographers, the prostitution industry and even advocated for abuse objects in the form of women and girls which they framed as 'therapeutic' and 'socially beneficial.' If it were not for the CAPR there would have been no public opposition to these dominant academic voices, nor a global discussion about the harms of these objects.

This book is written for women by women. It fully embraces an ethics of mutuality, reciprocity and attachment that underpins all human relationships.

This edited volume is an outcome of relationships between women who engaged in hundreds of conversations and close readings of texts, many academic texts which used ethics to rationalise the use of women as objects, and those that centred women's rights.

In our consciousness raising we took seriously the pain and vulnerability of women and girls in a culture where sexual violence is at crisis levels through a global industry that turns women into entertainment tools.

Thank you to the CAPR and to the FATES (the Feminist Academy of Technology and Ethics) which grew out of months of discussion. Thank you to all those women who helped us to conceptualise and develop alternative perspectives on these technologies, and usher in a politics that is not underpinned by the dynamics of domination and subordination, but egalitarian principles. This book is for all those that value human connection.

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Melissa Andrews has a law degree, a PGCE in English, a B.A. and M.A. in Classical Studies. Her M.A. thesis focuses on classical reception of the Pygmalion myth. She writes legal articles on contemporary human rights issues. Unsurprising for a former teacher, Melissa is a founding member of an independent organisation safeguarding children.

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Viviane Morrigan is a radical feminist, a writer, teacher and independent scholar. She has worked in laboratory and public policy genetics before gaining her M.A. (Hons) (*The Socio-Economic Shaping of Minor Tranquilliser Use*) and Ph.D. (*An Ethics of Reproductive Choice: Genetic Counselling and Prenatal Diagnosis*) in Science and Technology Studies, to then teach in cultural studies of science and technology at the University of Queensland. She is now an independent scholar with research interests in sex, gender, technologies of the body and what science says about bodies. She has been a feminist activist for over 35 years and her activism now focuses on work with COAL (Coalition of Activist Lesbians), an Australian UN-accredited lesbian organisation. She has published in *Journal of General Microbiology, Australian Journal of Biological Sciences, Organization*, *Human Relations, American Journal of Sociology, Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy, Journal of Management & Organization*, *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management, Metascience*. More recently she has published several short stories in *Flash Fiction* magazine and an excerpt from her memoir is in *On for Young and Old: Intergenerational Radical Lesbian Feminist Anthology*.

Charlotta Odlind is a freelance writer, coach and women's rights campaigner based in Brussels, Belgium. She has a B.A. (Hons) in European Studies with French and Spanish and an M.A. in International Relations. She has worked on child protection issues at Save the Children Brussels and volunteered with VSO for a year, advising on advocacy and communications strategies in a women's rights NGO in Kano, Nigeria. Working at FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless), she was editor of Homeless in Europe magazine. She is Campaigns Manager at the Campaign Against Porn Robots.

Kathleen Richardson is Professor of Ethics and Culture of Robots and AI at De Montfort University. She completed her Ph.D. at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Her fieldwork was an investigation of the making of robots in labs at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). After her Ph.D. she won a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (BAPDF), a position she held at University College London. Kathleen's postdoctoral work was an investigation into the therapeutic uses of robots for children with autism spectrum conditions. In 2013, she was part of the Digital Bridges Project, an innovative AHRC funded technology and arts collaboration between Watford Palace Theatre and the University of Cambridge. She is author of An Anthropology of Robots and AI: Annihilation Anxiety and Machines (2015) and Challenging Sociality? An Anthropology of Autism, Attachment and Robots (2018). In 2015 she launched the Campaign Against Porn Robots (formerly the Campaign Against Sex Robots) to draw attention to the ethical harms of normalising pornographic technologies of women and girls.

Caitlin Roper is a writer, activist and Campaigns Manager at Collective Shout: for a world free of sexploitation, a grassroots movement challenging the objectification of women and sexualisation of girls. She is a founding member of Adopt Nordic WA to fight sex trafficking. Her writing has been featured in the Guardian, Huffington Post, ABC, Sydney Morning Herald and Arena magazine, and she has been interviewed on The Project, ABC's Lateline and Triple J Hack. Her first book is Sex Dolls, Robots and Woman Hating: The Case for Resistance (2022) published by Spinifex Press.

CHAPTER 1

The End of Sex Robots—For the Dignity of Women and Girls

Charlotta Odlind and Kathleen Richardson

The absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation, we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.

The original version of this chapter has been revised online with Abstract. The correction is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19381-1_10

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K. Richardson and C. Odlind (eds.), *Man-Made Women*, Social and Cultural Studies of Robots and AI,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19381-1_1

> bell hooks (Outlaw culture: resisting representations 2006 [1994]: 243).

Interviewed in his home in Barcelona, Spanish engineer Sergi Santos and maker of the 'sex' robot Samantha, is enthusiastic in his delivery (Truly Channel 2018). His creations will save many marriages, he assures, and will help men who want more sex than their spouses. Surrounded by 'sex' robots in various stages of production in his home in Rubi, Catalonia, he rubs a silicone vagina exclaiming "she feels penetrated." Groping the machine's silicone breasts and waist and putting his fingers inside the robot's mouth, he affirms "if you touch her here, she will feel," and "I believe that having sex with a sex doll, penetration-wise is almost the same." He tells a story that "one day somebody came…and he came with his wife. And he said 'how can you sleep with that?' (points to a 'sex' doll) and I said 'and how can you sleep with that?'" (seemingly pointing to the man's wife).

This book is an urgent response to the rise of 'sex' robots and the uncritical responses to them by academics in the ethics of technology. We use 'sex' in inverted commas as we believe sex to be a mutual act that happens between human beings. We categorically reject that sex can be experienced with an inanimate object. Please see our thoughts on the term porn robot later in this chapter, along with Richardson's chapter in this volume.

Made of silicone and metal, 'sex' dolls and robots mimic (primarily) women and girls. Constructed as pornographic representations of females, they are designed with one function in mind: to be penetrable. With a choice of oral, vaginal and anal depth, 'sex' doll/robot buyers can choose from a large range of breast and buttock sizes, ethnicities, hair and eye colour, selecting from categories such as 'teenage, 'Asian' or even 'pregnant.' They range in height from a childlike 80 cm to adult sizes of 165 cm and can weigh up to 45 kg. Basic versions of 'sex' robots start at 1000 USD and can go all the way up to 100,000 USD, depending on how far they are customised. Academic narratives classify 'sex' robots as animatronic 'sex' dolls. In this book, all our contributors consider 'sex' dolls to be a precursory development for 'sex' robots and see their history and use as interconnected. In respect to the adult and child versions, the public is often against the latter, while ranging from supportive to ambivalent for the former. The authors of this book, however, believe

that the same mechanisms of abuse and degradation exist for the female adult versions as the child ones, and take issue with both.

Academia's response to these far from neutral objects has largely been in favour of their use, bestowing them with intrinsic therapeutic value, often claiming wide-ranging and extraordinary benefits (Danaher 2019a, b; Danaher et al. 2017; Devlin 2018). For example, in one article, Levy claimed they could cure 'sexual perversions' (Nevett 2018), while other academics propose they can treat paedophiles (Harper and Lievesley 2020), protect prostituted women (Levy and Loebner 2007), end loneliness for older adults [men] (Jecker 2021) and provide companionship (Langcaster-James and Bentley 2018). Furthermore it has been argued they can be beneficial for older men in retirement homes and to men incarcerated in the prison system, or in other single sex contexts such as monasteries and the military (Bendel 2021). In the last few years, we have witnessed the [mis]use of philosophical ethics of technology to justify men having orgasms into pornographic, plastic representations of women, framing it as a 'social good.'

The chapters in this volume demonstrate the gap between mainstream ethical narratives of 'sex' robots as socially beneficial and their actual role and function in propping up an existing socioeconomic order which relies on sexed inequality, female subordination and violence against women and girls as entertainment. This book offers a much-needed pro-women ethics informed by a radical feminist lens.

While still a niche object, the 'sex' doll/robot is increasingly being normalised in popular culture and has been gaining in popularity in recent years. In a recent survey, 48% of men responded that they would sleep with a sex doll (Rajnerowicz 2021). Sex doll brothels have opened in Barcelona, Berlin and Moscow in the last few years, while China has introduced sex doll cafés (Yonhap News Agency 2021). 'Sex' robots have appeared on TV, in script-written series as well as on morning talk-shows, in mainstream music videos and even as the subject of a public exhibition at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, South Korea. A number of books have appeared on the subject of forming relationships with 'sex' robots (Levy 2007a, b; Devlin 2018, Brooks 2021a, b), and new terminology from 'robosexual' to 'idollator' has been developed to describe those who have a sexual fetish for dolls

and robots. For those wanting to attend talks on the subject there is even an annual international conference on love and sex with robots.[1]

Isolation rules in place during the global Covid-19 pandemic have further given rise to a new marketing angle for 'sex' robots/dolls—they can provide a safe and virus-free way to have 'sexual relations' (Cookney 2020; Greep 2020).

In addition to being marketed as 'sex without risk' 'sex' dolls/robots have also recently been placed in public spaces, marking a milestone in the normalisation of their public display. The legal restrictions on social activities during the Covid pandemic led some business owners to fill near-empty public spaces with 'sex' dolls. They were used in sports stadiums, shopping malls and restaurants, spaces that experienced severely reduced footfall, use and attendance due to self-isolation, quarantine and social distancing measures introduced by governments in 2020. FC Seoul notoriously filled their football stadium in South Korea with 'sex' dolls to give more 'atmosphere' (The Guardian 2020) while others were reportedly used in restaurants in the US. Matt McMullan, CEO of Realdoll, loaned his 'sex' dolls to a San Diego restaurant with the following explanation: 'I read how some restaurants were placing giant stuffed animals or even mannequins in seats to create the appealing illusion of fullness while still keeping things safe. And my girls are a hell of a lot better looking than stuffed animals and mannequins' (Mencken 2020).

This book is a radical feminist response to prevailing discourse and a counterweight to current papers, books and articles that shy away from asking the real questions; who do 'sex' robots really benefit and to what cost? Who do they harm and in what ways? What does their existence tell us about technology and the way it is heading? What does the proliferation of academic texts in favour of love and relationship with machines tell us about our values and ethics? No valid analysis of these artefacts, however benign, 'titillating' or 'fun' they may appear, can be made without considering a host of ethical questions, acknowledging the deep-rooted misogyny that lies in their presentation and use, and challenging deep-seated patriarchal structures.

[1] The International Congress on Love and Sex with Robots. https://www.lovewithrobots.com/.

From Sex Robots to Porn Robots and the Rise of the FATES

In 2015, amidst a climate where interest in the potential and ethics of robots and Artificial Intelligence (AI) was at its height (Hawking 2014), few were concerned with their impact on women and girls. Richardson warned against the normalisation of these mechanical artefacts in our intimate lives with the publication of her article *The asymmetrical relationship: parallels between prostitution and sex robots* (2016a) and the launch of the Campaign Against Sex Robots in 2015. From many corners of the established ethics of technology community, one rationalisation after another of their social acceptability began to appear (Sandberg 2015; Devlin 2015). By contrast Richardson focused on the harms to women and girls by pornography, prostitution and child abuse and argued 'sex' robots were an outcome of these practices. Rather than marking a progressive development in human relationships, they represent the continued dehumanisation of women and girls as sexual property (Richardson 2016a, b). While the academic backlash against the campaign gained ground, it became a focal point for feminist academics and activists to unite and push back against the misogynistic framework that underpins the philosophical and ethical justifications for 'sex' robots. One significant development was to deconstruct the idea that these objects involve 'sex' and instead affirm their status as pornography and their presentation and use in society as forms of pornographic representations of women and girls. On the basis of this critical work, the campaign's name was changed in 2021 to the *Campaign Against Porn Robots* (CAPR) (Richardson 2021). Richardson explains the rationale for this in her chapter in this volume.

Another significant development was the event that informs the genesis of this book, namely an online seminar organised by the Campaign. It was held in the summer of 2020 during worldwide Covid lockdowns, giving speakers a chance to share their concerns about the development of 'sex' robots and what the emergence of this particular technology means for women and society as a whole. From the seminar emerged a feminist reading group made up of academics, journalists and activists. Meeting regularly online on Saturdays, calling in from multiple time zones, the group gathered in a bid to make sense of the driving factors behind 'sex' robot technology. Over time, a seed was planted that grew into the goal of producing a book, and further, establishing a new community of research in feminism, ethics and AI.

This is how the FATES (the Feminist Academy of Technology and Ethics) was born, Viviane Morrigan (chapter 6 this volume) came up with the name, inspired by the triple goddesses, past, present and future (see more here https://feministacademytechethics.com/). Examining how 'sex' robots facilitate and exacerbate the dehumanisation of women and girls, it quickly became apparent to the group that this mechanism is echoed in other technological arenas too. The remit of the FATES therefore expanded to also consider virtual porn, deep fakes, hologram girlfriends, the metaverse, online social media and surrogacy—all developments that are rapidly reshaping what it means to be in human social interaction.

We approached our analysis of 'sex' robots by employing a radical feminist method of consciousness raising. Developed in the 1960s by women who were isolated and disconnected from each other in the private sphere, consciousness raising gave them an opportunity to share and interpret their experiences, question their rights and status and moreover, start connecting individual experiences to wider structural phenomena (Shreve 1990). Honouring this politics of liberation, we set up a space for debate and theorising, talking to and about women, sharing not just ideas, articles and research, but also misgivings, disbelief and, often, outrage. As the FATES, we believe there is an urgent need to reiterate and defend women's humanity and make a clear case for reciprocity, mutuality, attachment and connection in all human relationships.

Our research highlighted that many academic accounts fail to acknowledge that issues shape women and girls' lives in ways that differ significantly from the experiences of men and boys. Women and girls are more likely to be impacted by sexual exploitation and abuse than men, who are far more likely statistically to be the perpetrators of abuse or sexual assault, and drive the demand that underpins the global porn (Dines 2010; Jensen 2017; MacKinnon 2018), prostitution (Jeffreys 2008; Moran 2015; Banyard 2016; Bindel 2017) and child abuse industries (UNICEF 2020). Moreover, report after report (Ofsted 2021; IWF 2019; Interpol 2018) highlights the link between porn and the harmful effects of the sexual objectification of women and girls. It should be pointed out that our research takes place against the backdrop of European and North American cultures, spearheaded by media and academia, that are generally in favour of pornography (seen as the height of liberating 'free speech')

and prostitution ('sex work is work'),[2] which rarely recognises or questions how this sanitises and normalises abusive, dehumanising and harmful practices.

Inspired by the women before us who've cut, spun and woven their liberating stories into intricate patterns, we've taken 'sex' robots as our starting thread and have unravelled their meaning, impact and symbolic force. The following chapters examine what 'sex' dolls/robots and their manufacture, use and consumption reveal about our society. Far from coming into the world from a neutral, technologically advanced space, a cultural imagining around 'sex' dolls/robots existed long before they became available. We argue that they can only have been produced in a world that objectifies women, has a voracious appetite for fetish and feeds off highly exploitative systems of dominance and submission as born out in pornography, prostitution, and child abuse. As MacWilliam argues in her 'Playthings and Corpses' chapter in this volume, 'there is nothing arbitrary or esoteric about the sex robot: it is a predictable expression of patriarchal sexual libertarianism.' The male sex right (Bates 2020) and an extreme reverence for big tech (mediated through figures such as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg and companies such as DeepMind, Google and Amazon to name a few) have further created fertile ground for their production and dissemination. Any serious analysis of 'sex' dolls/robots therefore must look closely at these issues as well as exploring the methodologies used to encourage their acceptance—namely intensive cultural grooming and persistent boundary pushing.

Hanging off metal hooks, dismembered, divided into genital parts, created in the forms of female children and teenagers—it's hard not to have a visceral reaction to images of 'sex' dolls. Uncomfortable to view and ill-fitting with a philosophy that strives for connection, compassion and empathy, we propose that an intuitive disgust for this kind of dehumanisation should not be as breezily dismissed and belittled as it currently is.

But of course objections to 'sex' dolls/robots go beyond an instinctive discomfort, and pinpoint instead the sexist, dehumanising mechanisms that made them possible in the first place. These criticisms are often met with derision, not least from academia that eulogises the aesthetic, social

[2] It is interesting to note that in 2021 the University of Leicester, UK produced a 'Student Sex Work Tool Kit' to help female students navigate the process of selling their bodies for sex.