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BOOK REVIEW

NOT BELOVED, ONLY BROKEN

***SEX DOLLS, ROBOTS, AND WOMAN HATING:
THE CASE FOR RESISTANCE* BY CAITLIN ROPER
(SPINIFEX PRESS, 2022)**

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CAITLIN ROPER'S *Sex Dolls, Robots, and Woman Hating: The Case for Resistance* presents an invaluable critical feminist analysis of the consumption of sex dolls and robots, particularly female-bodied ones. In her unflinching sense of justice, Roper's work builds on a tradition of women's critiques of pornography. Key early radical feminist influences on her work include Andrea Dworkin (1977/1993, 1981/1989, 1987/2007, 1992/1997), Susan Griffin (1981/1982), and Florence Rush (1980/1981). I first learned of Roper's advocacy through her work as campaigns manager with Collective Shout, a grassroots movement dedicated to fighting the sexual objectification of women and girls. Aside from her work with Collective Shout, Roper co-founded the *Feminist Academy of Technology and Ethics* (the Fates). Unsurprisingly, Roper's work combines a feminist critique of sexual objectification with a feminist approach to the philosophy of technology. Her critical understanding of prostitution and pornography and their harm to women and girls informs her analysis of sex dolls and robots. Against the dominant "sex-positive" and "techno-optimistic" point of view, *Sex Dolls, Robots, and Woman Hating* unapologetically argues for the human dignity of women and girls against their commodification.

For many readers, sex dolls and robots, specifically those critiqued by Roper, may be unfamiliar, seeming closer to something from *Westworld*. But, seeing the term "sex doll," the first image that comes to mind may be the inflatable kind, cartoonish and certainly not very lifelike. However, the sex dolls and robots that Roper critiques differ remarkably from past blow-up dolls, though present technology remains underdeveloped and crude, against proponents' optimism. Technology has not advanced to these representations being even remotely like what one sees in *Westworld*, an inconvenient fact for those arguing that sex dolls and robots can solve various problems (e.g., largely men's "loneliness"). In their contemporary form, sex dolls and robots are examples of what has been termed "sex tech": *sexual technologies*.

Host of the *Future of Sex* podcast Bryony Cole, an expert on the industry and leader in the field, defines “sextech,” or “sex tech,” as “any technology designed to enhance sexuality” (Martin, 2018). This industry, as Kate Devlin explains, has risen to a “\$30 billion global market,” attracting “techno-optimists” and critics alike (Reisz, 2017, p. 19). What, then, are “sex dolls” if they qualify under “any technology designed to enhance sexuality”? Sex dolls are “human-like, full-body, anatomically correct anthropomorphic dolls of different materials (e.g., rubber, plush, silicone, and thermoplastic elastomer),” made to order for almost exclusively male sexual use (Döring et al., 2020). They have removable, adjustable parts, including their heads, appendages, and genitalia, and their age and race, among other qualities, can be specified by the buyer according to his tastes.

Importantly, Roper notes that, despite carefully used gender-neutral framing, most sex dolls appear made in women’s likeness: *female-bodied*, with “lifelike” penetrable orifices. Even in rarer cases where dolls appear in men’s likeness, usually hairless and feminized, typically advertised by the ease of penetrability, their target market is also men. Also primarily made in women’s likeness, the developing robot forms adhere to a similar pattern as their less interactive doll counterparts. Though “very primitive,” Roper writes, they “have lifelike, silicone sex doll bodies and animatronic heads equipped with artificial intelligence software” (Döring et al., 2020; Roper, 2022, p. 10). With a sex doll as a “dead woman” and a sex robot as an “animated corpse,” they can be read as what artist and Lecturer in fine art Shirley MacWilliam calls “dead body objects” (as cited in Roper, 2022 p. 25). In these sexual technologies, the primary sexual objectification of women and girls appears to be what markets them to the men who purchase them for not only simulating abuse but also filming and distributing it online.

“Sex dolls,” Roper (2022) writes, “facilitate a form of pornography male users can actively participate in, an *embodied* [emphasis added] experience where they themselves can be both actors and pornographers” (p. 26). Man’s desire for this embodied experience of his sexuality derives from women’s *disembodiment*. Manufacturers even make sex dolls in the images of women whose likenesses the men use—with their living counterparts discovering after the fact that they have been sexualized into synthetic copies. In the lives of women and girls, this form of men possessing women constitutes another way men use technology to facilitate sexual violence (p. 53). Further, Roper criticizes the practice of using dolls made in the likeness of children, primarily girls, for adult men to engage in what the men regard as a “fantasy” of child sexual abuse.

Fiery and thoroughly researched, Roper’s book poses a fierce objection to the lie that a so-called “fantasy” of sexually abusing women and children has no deeper implications for violence experienced in everyday life. Such fantasy, for the abuser, *is* the reality to the abused woman or child. “Pornography is not imagery in relation to some reality elsewhere constructed,” Catharine A. MacKinnon (1984/1987) writes, “It is *sexual reality*” [emphasis added] (pp. 172-173). Like Dworkin and MacKinnon, Roper considers how men’s views of women become enforced *as* women’s meaning through sexual objectification, how men imagine women factors into men’s treatment of them in everyday life. Women cannot exist as fully human while simultaneously being regarded as commodities for men’s consumption that lack the dignity life deserves. Though challenging, we must confront this reality too long minimized, as Roper challenges us.

Almost exclusively female-bodied sex dolls and robots, including those made to look like children, embody the sexual objectification of women in the form of “dead

body objects,” corpselike representations of women and girls. They, Roper (2022) argues, “legitimise and entrench the sexual objectification of women, reinforcing women’s less-than-human status and the belief that women exist for men’s sexual use” (p. 1). In vivid and painful detail, Roper’s analysis clarifies how the production of sex dolls and robots should be understood as “the embodiment of woman hating” (Roper, 2022, p. 5). Campaigners for the rights of women and children have identified the harms of sexual objectification intrinsic to manufacturing sex dolls and robots modeled on the real bodies of women and girls. There is no lack of contemporary research to support Roper’s points on the harm, both psychological and physiological, which radical feminists, in particular, have exposed (Stark & Whisnant, 2004; Tankard Reist & Bray, 2011; Norma & Tankard Reist, 2016; Tankard Reist, 2022). Literature on the harm of sexual objectification shows that women have developed “higher levels of body dissatisfaction” and “greater tolerance of sexual violence toward women” (Ward, 2016, p. 560). Reifying and selling these stereotypes of women and girls has a quantifiable harm that has been overlooked in favor of upholding the desires of male consumers.

Proponents of sex dolls and robots defend “sex work,” usually framing prostitution and pornography as expressing women’s agency. These arguments neglect broader consideration of how poverty, for example, drives the traffic in women. Similarly, their analyses of sex dolls and robots rely on framing that omits inconvenient aspects of reality. Regulation of sex dolls and robots has been proposed, though Roper’s analysis underscores its problems—resembling problems with the regulatory approaches to prostitution and surrogacy (Raymond, 1993/2019, 2013; Klein, 2017). The problem has been that regulation leads to legitimization, which one can easily consider in the case of “therapy,” where men enact child sexual abuse. Those opposed to chattel slavery during the nineteenth century understood how the demand for human bodies creates an industry for possessing and consuming those bodies. They did not accept this demand as being the owners’ and sellers’ right, *especially sexually*. This dynamic essentially denies human beings their human dignity (Raymond, 2013; Farley, 2015; Norma & Tankard Reist, 2016). Liberal and libertarian approaches to the global sex trade, however, try to mitigate the harm by advocating for “compensation” and “harm reduction,” under what Rachel Moran (2016) calls “‘sex work’ ideology.” Though framed in favor of bodily autonomy, individual freedom, and personal choice, this point of view naturalizes exploitation and makes the indignities suffered by women and girls invisible. Another problem with introducing regulatory measures to “improve” or “humanize” dehumanization is, as Roper explains, that it “functions to legitimise the thing that is being regulated” (Roper, 2022, p. 136). Unable to be decreased by regulation, growing demand would only result in the *expansion* of the industry, not its *reduction*. A critical point made in Roper’s book deserves reiterating: As men’s “training” on these dolls and robots becomes increasingly normalized, sexual objectification will increase (Roper, 2022, p. 165). Harm to women and girls will increase, as the practice can never remain confined to fantasy; it always makes its mark on reality. “Where a sex doll is a lifeless replica woman that never says no,” Roper (2022) writes, “a sex robot could be a responsive replica woman that always says yes” (p. 166). The dynamic of “never say no” transitions into “always say yes” indicates a movement toward *gratification without limitation*. Technology has been said to solve all problems, but limits matter, as do the harms caused by a technocratic intensification of negative social conditions afflicting the lives of women and girls.

Whose interests do sex dolls and robots serve—and *why* does the literature use terms like “individuals” and “people,” even making token acknowledgment of *some* women, when *men* constitute the market? According to Roper, research on sex dolls and robots parallels research arguing that prostituted women can be “therapeutic” for disabled men in “need” of “companionship.” As cited by Roper, Sheila Jeffreys (2008) has analyzed academic literature that prioritizes male sexual entitlement to female bodies as being for “disabled people.” A conveniently used gender-neutral approach hides the sexual reality of men buying women’s bodies for consumption, which serves the interests of men and not women. Academics defending men’s consumption of child sex abuse dolls similarly frame their use as both “therapeutic” for the men and “preventative” for would-be victims. Defenders of “adult-child sex” have long presented it as being in children’s interests, even compatible with children’s human rights. But, as Florence Rush (1980/1981) writes, “The call for the sexual freedom of children, in the name of child welfare, is transparently focused upon *adult gratification* [emphasis added]” (p. 187). What has been marketed for children as their “sexual freedom” has served the sexual interests of adults, particularly adult men. Decades later, virtually the same attitudes have persisted in advocates framing the promotion of child sex abuse dolls as serving children’s interests. Containment approaches that make the reality of child sexual abuse into a fantasy used in so-called “therapy” paradoxically *expand* the exploitation. Roper’s survey of the advocates and researchers makes clear their reliance on purported “sex positivity,” which is revealed to be a synonym for the male sex right (Jeffreys, 2022). Sexual liberals position themselves against “conservatism” and, in theory, advocate for the ideal of the “sexual revolutionary.” In practice, they effectively prioritize the male sex right over female life, exhibiting fundamentally reactionary sexual politics.

No doubt, there will be readers who think nothing could possibly go wrong—that sex dolls and robots will be “companions,” if not like dildos and vibrators. Still unconvinced, they may appeal by saying that “pornography is not the problem”—perhaps to escape the inconvenient branding of “prude.” Or, they may argue that, *really*, sex dolls and robots are politically and morally neutral, a false assumption made about technology. Proponents may turn to “peer-reviewed” research that, emphasizing men’s orgasms, forgets the existence of women and children. This writing may as well be called *penis-reviewed*. Contrasting existing research informed by “sex work” ideology, Roper’s *Sex Dolls, Robots, and Woman Hating* is an original feminist critique that follows the abolitionist tradition. Her work contributes to a growing body of feminist literature featuring critics like Kathleen Richardson, founder of the Campaign Against Sex Robots and founding member of the Fates. Roper’s book precedes the forthcoming 2023 collection *Man-Made Women: The Sexual Politics of Sex Dolls and Sex Robots*, edited by Richardson and Charlotta Odlind. As seen in Roper’s and Richardson’s work, women’s voices in critical response to man-made women give us essential insights into the impact of sexual technologies on women’s rights.

Returning to the purpose of sexual technologies serving to “enhance sexuality,” it may be worth reflecting on whether sex dolls and robots produce any enhancement. They do seem to enhance misogyny, which may be mistaken for sexuality. Upon reading Roper’s work, we may ask: *How can men regard women as human while simultaneously regarding them as objects that can be replaced by synthetic corpses bought and sold?* We must question the reality in which rape has been mistaken for sex, and silence has ruled. Suppose the allegedly “positive” treatment or provision for men, whatever it may be, which presumably “fulfills” them sexually or “helps” them,

results in negative outcomes for women and children, especially girls. What do these assumptions, as critiqued by Roper in *Sex Dolls, Robots, and Woman Hating*, reveal about the understanding of human dignity and human rights for women today? “Either we believe in the rights, dignity, and humanity of women,” Roper (2022) writes, “or we do not” (p. 175). Any practice of women as sexual commodities or exchangeable parts to be purchased conflicts with any conception of women as human. Making the world in pornography’s image for men certainly does not enhance the status of women and girls, much less upholding their dignity as human beings. As Catharine A. MacKinnon (2011) writes, “We increasingly live in a world the pornographers have made” (p. 12). Sex dolls and robots present yet another dimension to the sexual-industrial reality being mapped onto the flesh of *real* women in *real* time. They embody what Susan Griffin (1981/1982) calls “the pornographic mind” and demonstrate the use of technology in men’s sexual violence against women (pp. 2-3). Before more harm can be done, we must really *think* about the ideology of misogyny and the ethics of sexual technologies. Never forgetting that *real* women and girls exist, Roper courageously calls us to resist.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Donovan Cleckley holds a BA in English and Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of Montevallo and an MA in English from Tulane University. His research has focused on women’s rights, gay rights, and sexual politics in literature. Cleckley’s work can also be viewed at his website <https://donovancleckley.com>.

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