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Bo Ruberg, **Sex Dolls at Sea: Imagined Histories of Sexual Technologies**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022, 304 pp., $35.00 (paperback).

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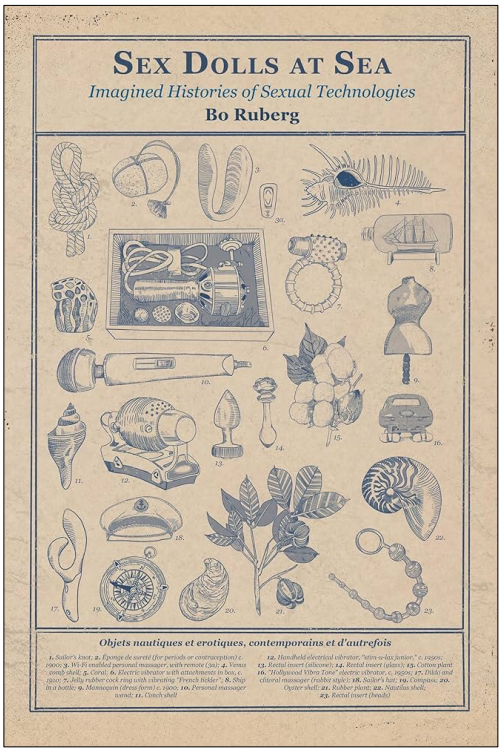

Sexual intimacy with robots has been a topic of academic conversation in science and technological studies, as well as cocktail parties, for decades. The notion of a complicit, always-consenting silicon woman may raise the heart rates of titillated men and the eyebrows of their lovers; however, the idea causes ample and deserving concern for feminist, communications, and technology scholars alike. Sex robot fantasies did not appear out of thin air; in fact, sex dolls have existed for centuries. At least that is what the tale of the *dames de voyage* (traveling women) purports. Bo Ruberg analyzes this history of the origins of the sex doll, focusing on the conception of the dames de voyage, in their text, ***Sex Dolls at Sea: Imagined Histories of Sexual Technologies***, analyzing the amalgamation of fact and fiction into history and its implications on race, gender, and sex tech. Diving deep into the citational traces of sex doll history and transitioning to the potential Afrofuturist retellings of the dames de voyage, Ruberg aims to alter the course of sex tech by queering and challenging the attempts to masculinize, heterosexualize and naturalize the all-male past of cited sex doll history.

The codification of myth, rumor, and full-out fantastical fiction into historical accounts makes up a large portion of Ruberg's analysis. A glaringly necessary text in both the communications and sexual studies fields, *Sex Dolls at Sea* works not only to analyze how to history of sex dolls came to be how to we know it today, but queries who has been left out of these retellings and ponders how the tales of the marginalized (who make up a vital role of sexual technological history) can be incorporated into the imagined histories of sex tech. Ruberg argues that despite the queer coding of the tale of the *dames de voyage*, including sailors, homoerotic spaces, and fetishized materials, sex tech and its sturdy ties to gender politics has worked overtime to compel contemporary scholars of a more heterosexual, naturalized past. Along with the attempt to "straighten" the history of sex dolls, Ruberg highlights the crucial link of the *dames de voyage* mythology to colonialism and racial fetishization. This is evident in chapter 6, where Ruberg outlines the importance of Dutch wives and citational lineage. As well, the author highlights the erasure of key figures of the creation of early sex dolls, such as prisoners, due to their "deviant" status. As we know, there is a disproportionate percentage of marginalized communities who are institutionalized due to systemic racism and the trickling impacts of colonialism. These individuals are thus deemed

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unsuitable to fit into the history of sex tech, at the risk of revealing the perfected facade held up by the fragile masculine and White Western narrative. This racist ideology is evident with media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, who pride White Western cisgender men as the technological masterminds who were able to use tech as an extension of themselves, leaving the natural "primitive" world behind, unlike marginalized others.

The first chapter of *Sex Dolls at Sea* outlines the contemporary understanding and scholarship surrounding the *dames de voyage*, "mapping its manifestations across a network of twenty-first century texts" (p. 31), including *Love and Sex with Robots* by David Levy (2007) and *The Sex Doll: A History* by Anthony Ferguson (2010). This section leads with questions that navigate both the goal of the text as well as the need for their subsequent pondering, positioning it as a necessary and urgent commentary on the gender politics of both the history and the future of sexual technologies. Noted with their extensive research and citational tracking, Ruberg highlights the lack of evidence in historical writings regarding the *dames de voyage*, attributing the myth to a culmination of fantasy, desire, and heteronormative social aspects. This notion of fantasy is investigated further in chapter 2, where Ruberg draws on Parisian erotic fiction and sexological works in an attempt to "render visible and even reclaim the process by which fantasy becomes history" (p. 86).

Ruberg outlines an essential industrial component of sex tech history—the rubber industry and subsequently, *femmes en caoutchouc* (rubber women). Not only does Ruberg mention the impact of colonialism that was tied to the rubber industry but also highlights another origin story that aims to naturalize and further masculinize the history of the sex doll. Through explorations of the famous 19th-century World Fairs to rubber jelly dildos, Bo Ruberg analyzes the importance of print media in relation to our understanding of sex tech history today. Chapter 5 aims to simultaneously question the historical lineage of the "very first sex doll," the *dames de voyage*, as well as queering it (p. 14). They write:

> By positioning the birth of sex tech in the supposedly all-male space of the sailing ship, the story makes it possible to tell the origins of sexual technologies as a story about men who desire women without any actual women in it. (p. 152)

Working against this attempted erasure and decentering of women, Ruberg queers this historical understanding by bringing the femininity of the sex doll to the forefront, de-objectifying her and instead incorporating her into the history of sex tech as an equal player. Chapter 7 works through the *dames de voyage*'s complex ties to colonialism and racism through the lineage of Dutch wives. The White- and straightwashing of the inventive nature of the creators of the "very first sex doll" is an essential aspect of the tale that needs urgent questioning and critique, which Ruberg does eloquently throughout the chapter with exploration and support of the short story "My Tale of the Bamboo Wife" (1985) and the film *Sleepless Night with Bamboo Wife* (2014; p. 178). The text concludes with a fascinating exploration of Anaïs Nin's *Mathilde* (p. 214), which Ruberg uses to reclaim the history of the *dames de voyage*, and the history of sex tech overall, under a feminine and queer codification. No longer naturalized by the past of heterosexual, White Western men who attempted to normalize the sexual desire toward the objectification of women by fornicating with machinery, the sex doll is reclaimed by the feminine and the queer with a deconstruction of the history we have been previously presented. Ruberg uses evidence, including the feminine identity of the

sea and the figureheads that guide the bows of ships; the queer affiliations of materials used, such as leather and rubber; the gentle, "womanly" work of sewing and clothing sex dolls; and the homoerotic nature of sharing one fabricated lover among a group of men, to highlight the fact that, perhaps all along and despite all the best efforts to alter history, the *dames de voyage* have always been queer and have always been feminine.

An essential aspect of *Sex Dolls at Sea* is Ruberg's attempt to redirect the credit of technological inventiveness toward those who have been erased from sex tech histories, including racial minorities. Ruberg excellently draws attention to specific examples of this erasure with the final chapter, noting the inventive nature of prisoners in their own all-male space of a correctional institution. An image that floats throughout all seven chapters of the text represents an image of a homemade doll. The origins of the image are discussed throughout, with some citational sources attributing the doll to sailors at sea, while Ruberg credits the inventiveness of prisoners. Ruberg notes an interesting and loaded perspective of Magnus Hirschfeld in their quote "he [Hirschfeld] uses this image to illustrate that 'primitive' people like prisoners (the word primitive bringing with it both racial and colonial overtones) make sex dolls that are supposedly less artful than those made by Helens" (p. 199), a direct nod to the myth of Pygmalion. It is difficult not to draw connections between Hirschfield and Marshall McLuhan, whose ideology, as stated by Armond R. Towns (2020), "assumed that there were some people who could come out of nature (the civilized, the white, the detribal, and the retribal), and other people who could not (the African, the Kenyan, the tribal, or the natural)" (p. 856). This disturbing connection highlights the impact of codifying fantasy into history in an attempt to naturalize and further masculinize the integration of technology into sexual history. In the field of technological studies, there have always been undertones of racial bias, with McLuhan privileging White Western men as the creators of tech, advancing humanity and leaving others behind. Bo Ruberg's 2022 text, *Sex Dolls at Sea*, achieves its goal of not only challenging the origins of these tales but actively working with the reader to incorporate the erased participants of sex tech's past into the tales, allowing the sex doll to be a subject rather than an object—and, as Ruberg reminds us in the conclusion, the sex doll does, in fact, fuck back.

Reference

Towns, A. R. (2020). Toward a Black media philosophy. *Cultural Studies (London, England), 34*(6), 851–873. doi:10.1080/09502386.2020.1792524