

Bo Ruberg. *Sex Dolls at Sea: Imagined Histories of Sexual Technologies.* Media Origins Series. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022. 304 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-262-54367-5.



Reviewed by Rachel Maines (Columbia University)

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Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

The central message of Bo Ruberg's *Sex Dolls at Sea: Imagined Histories of Sexual Technologies* is that understanding myths about the past is at least as important as identifying and explicating historical truths. What we have chosen to believe about sexuality and technology will shape our possible futures, because it establishes our point of departure in the present. Ruberg argues that the choices we have made to believe in a maritime, heteronormative, and androcentric origin for sex dolls are both intriguing and consequential, particularly so in that there is virtually no factual evidence to support the chain of belief in the "sailors' sex doll" that they trace back to the nineteenth century. While descriptions in fiction and pseudoscientific works on sexuality were common in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ruberg tells us, full-sized, fully or partially functional sex dolls, whether inflatable rubber or fashioned by sewing fabric and leather, are not attested in any other kind of documentation before the mid-twentieth century. The historical artifacts are, apparently, figments of myth and fantasy.

As interesting as this hypothesis is, I found even more fascinating the heroic research tale the author recounts of slogging through reams of cheap nineteenth-century pornography and rubber goods catalogs in crumbling archives, museums, libraries, and other institutions that have struggled against social taboos regarding descriptions and depictions of sexuality. The historical record of human sexuality, as those of us who have spent many years hunting scarce resources in necessarily data-starved repositories have reason to know, is sparse at best and misleading at worst. Ruberg does a fine job of describing the frustrations, dead ends, false leads, and occasional thrilling finds of tiny scraps of data that characterize the historiography of sex. Both in notes and text, Ruberg pays homage to other sleuths who have explored areas of this vast and mysterious territory, who helped slash narrow paths through the vast global understory of historical resources on sexuality, including, among others, Marshall McLuhan, Jonathan Coopersmith, Rachel Maines, Donna Drucker, Lynn Comella, Julie Wosk, David

Levy, Cynthia Moya, Kate Devlin, Jessica Borge, Ruth Oldenziel, and the probably pseudonymous Evelyn Rainbird. Ruberg does an impressive job of integrating these and other earlier views on technology and sex into the narrative.

The second part of the book, “Interrogating the Story of the Very First Sex Doll,” focuses mainly on theoretical approaches to the narrative Ruberg establishes in part 1. Ruberg’s argument here relates to the conceptual complexities inherent in the sex doll narrative, especially in its persistence as a story with no reliable documentation anchoring it to definite loci in time and place. She argues that part of the attraction of the story of the “Very First Sex Doll” is that it is the perfect focus for a variety of fantasies that allow narrators to, as Ruberg expresses it, make “sexual technologies straight ... and then queer again” (p. 159). The sex doll fantasy moves with unanchored fluidity across a broad spectrum of sexual interests: strapping “macho” men pitting their strength against the mighty ocean while pining for feminine companionship, and these same strapping lads sharing a sexual experience with each other through the medium of an artifact they have stitched together (p. 167). Ruberg relates this fluid quality of the story to its trajectory through the historical literature of sexuality, saying of it that “the tale of the dames de voyage itself ... has been passed from hand to hand in much a similar way, moving not between lovers but between authors,” each adding elements of their own fantasies (p. 165). It is, Ruberg argues, a useful example of “how imagined histories come to form” (p. 172). The sailors’ dames de voyage story “renders the invention of such machines preeminently natural, placing the early construction of makeshift sex dolls into the hands of normatively masculine and conveniently historically vague subjects” (p. 209).

In chapter 6, Ruberg links the elements of the imagined sex doll history to those of “colonialism and race,” demonstrating how stories of other sex-related technologies, such as “bamboo wives” and

sheepskin and rubber condoms, form part of a larger theoretical framework in which sexuality and power are conceptualized. In Ruberg’s words, “the tale of the dames de voyage emerges as a tool in a larger white supremacist project of legitimizing not just the use of sexual technologies but also, by proxy, the abuse of real racialized subjects treated like sexual objects” (p. 186). On page 189, the author goes on to say that “the cultural imaginaries that surround technology cannot be separated from the cultural imaginaries that surround race.”

While there is much to ponder in Ruberg’s theoretical explorations, it is the gritty tales of research in understudied subject areas in part 1 of this book that impressed me as memorable and satisfying. It is warmly recommended, especially to young researchers facing challenges in their choices of obscure, poorly documented topics. In the immortal words of Manfred Mann’s song “Blinded by the Light” (1976), “But Momma, that’s where the fun is.”

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