

Dystopian Panic, Transphobic Hatred, and Annihilation Anxiety:  
Critiquing Radical Feminist Opposition to Sex Robots

by

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I critically analyze radical feminist opposition to the development, sale, and use of sex robots, focusing on the Campaign Against Sex Robots and its affiliated scholars and activists. Drawing from theoretical frameworks including sex-positive feminism, queer theory, and posthumanism, I use a feminist critical discourse analysis to examine the ideological assumptions that underpin feminist anti-sex robot arguments. This thesis traces two interrelated themes: how ‘real’ womanhood is discursively defined and defended by anti-sex robot feminists through the violent exclusion of certain bodies, and how these feminists mobilize discourses of love, intimacy, and relationships to bolster normative heterosexual relationality. Ultimately, I argue that while anti-sex robot feminists claim to oppose systemic violence, their arguments reveal a deep *investment* in violence, particularly against trans women, in the name of protecting a narrowly defined ideal of womanhood and intimacy.

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## Introduction

*We know that we're at the start of something, we're at the precipice of something changing.* (Charlotta Odling in Fein, 2021)

*Women...have been increasingly maligned, we are being erased, there's no doubt about it. So this is actual reality, this is what is happening right now, and we're being replaced by bloody robots, sex robots!* (Poulton, 2021)

After years of development, female-bodied and feminine presenting sex robots have stepped out of the realm of fantasy and science fiction and are available for purchase. Some scholars suggest that as the technology behind them continues to advance, sex robots will radically redefine human sexuality, intimate relationships, and even childrearing (Adshade, 2017; Levy, 2007, 2016). The promise and/or peril of this new technology has elicited a wide range of responses, from utopian optimism to dystopian panic. Certain feminists, including those quoted above, warn that the normalization of sex robots poses an existential threat to women and to loving, intimate sexual relationships between humans. The fear among anti-sex robot feminists is that the existence and further development of this technology effectively means that women can be replaced by machines. They contend that sex robots will thus worsen already rampant gendered violence and contribute to a growing trend of tech-fueled isolation and detachment. So far, there is a dearth of empirical evidence pointing to any conclusion; at the moment, sex robots are simply far too new to prove any transformative or destructive societal effects.

The most advanced sex robots available for purchase come from Realbotix™, a collaboration between sex doll company Abyss Creations/RealDoll, AI and communications tech consultancy Daxtron Labs, and desktop assistant developer NextOS (Coursey et al., 2020). Their product, the RealDoll<sup>X</sup>, has the body of a hyper-realistic sex

doll, with a special robotic head that can make facial expressions, blink, look around, and speak (RealDoll, 2021).<sup>1</sup> While her body is flexible and poseable, “it is not equipped with animatronic parts *yet* [emphasis added]” (RealDoll, 2021). She comes with a choice of five different faces, and nearly every other aspect of her appearance, including her hairstyle, makeup, eye color, and nipple shape, can be customized.<sup>2</sup> The RealDoll<sup>X</sup> runs AI software that lets the user customize her personality and voice and interact with her, and she can be linked to a digital avatar through a subscription-based mobile app. She also has a Bluetooth-enabled insert that detects touch, allowing the user to bring her “from mild arousal to orgasm” (RealDoll, 2021). Realbotix<sup>TM</sup> CEO Matt McMullen has recently revealed that the company is working on a male sex robot that can be programmed to be gay or straight, and a lesbian version of the existing female robot (Wakefield, 2021). A fully animated robot body is also in development (Wakefield, 2021). For the time being, those interested in an artificial companion can purchase what is effectively a female sex doll with an animatronic head, running AI software similar to Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa. Sentient, fully mobile, truly human-like sex robots are beyond the limits of existing technology – for now, at least.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given that sex robots sit at the intersection of two notoriously contentious topics, *sex and technology*, their development, sale, and use has

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<sup>1</sup> Whatever one’s opinion is of sex robots, the artistry and attention to detail put into their design is impressive. They look strikingly human. Krizia Puig (2017), who visited the Abyss Creations/RealDoll factory for their own MA thesis research, describes being transfixed by their tiny, realistic details: “the modeling of their faces, the freckles on their shoulders and the wrinkles on their heels... I spent minutes looking at their pupils and detailing the pores of their silicone skin” (p. 65).

<sup>2</sup> To a point, at least. There is a narrow range of skin tones, facial features, hair textures, and body types to choose from. As they currently exist, these robots very much conform to normative ideals of feminine beauty, thinness, and whiteness (see Puig, 2017).

been the subject of viral media coverage<sup>3</sup> and significant scholarly consideration. A large portion of academic work on sex robots has focused on the ethical implications of this new technology. Some scholars suggest sex robots will be indisputably beneficial to humanity as the perfect sexual partners and even spouses (Levy, 2007; Levy 2016), while others warn they are inherently misogynistic and will intensify violence against women (Giutu, 2012; Richardson, 2015; Richardson 2016). Some have taken a more tentatively positive or neutral stance, examining how sex robots might impact moral codes, social norms, and more (Behrendt, 2020; Beschoner & Krause, 2018; Danaher & McArthur, 2017; Klein & Lin, 2018). Feminist and queer critiques (Cranny-Francis, 2016; Danaher, 2019; Devlin, 2018; DiTecco, 2020; Gersen, 2019; Knox, 2019; Puig, 2017) have examined sex robots in relation to pro- and anti-pornography feminism, sex work, the objectification of women, the performance of hyperfemininity, and the blurring of licit and illicit sex. Other areas of research include sex robots in media and popular culture (Devlin & Belton, 2020; Döring & Poeschl, 2019; Fabian, 2018; Wennescheid, 2018), law and policy implications (Adshade, 2017; Galaitsi et al., 2019; Goldfeder & Rezin, 2015; Lugano et al., 2019; Ryznar, 2019; Walter, 2020), and far-future speculation about sentient sex robots (Mackenzie, 2018a, 2018b; Rousi, 2018). Finally, some scholars have proposed a transformative reimagining of this new technology, calling for more abstract, genderfluid, or genderless designs that focus on pleasure and sensation (Devlin, 2018; Kubes, 2019), and the decentering of romantic love and intimacy (Puig, 2019).

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<sup>3</sup> Headlines include: “Sex Robots Increase the Potential for Gender-Based Violence” (Illes & Udwadia, 2019), “Will the Rise of Sex Robots Mean the End of Relationships?” (Geher, 2019), “Why Female Sex Robots Are More Dangerous Than You Think” (Gee, 2017), “Should We Ban Sex Robots While We Have the Chance?” (Kleeman, 2017), and my personal favourite, “Sex Robots May Literally Screw Us to Death” (Menegus, 2016).

My work builds on existing sex-positive feminist and queer explorations of this topic. Instead of examining sex robots themselves, I turn the analytical lens back onto the *responses* to this new technology. Specifically, this thesis examines feminist opposition to the development, sale, and use of sex robots. I focus on the work of the Campaign Against Sex Robots (CASR), a radical feminist advocacy group run by Dr. Kathleen Richardson of De Montfort University.<sup>4</sup> I use a feminist critical discourse analysis to examine blog posts, talks, conference presentations, podcasts, and interviews from CASR, Richardson, and other scholars and activists affiliated with the campaign. These anti-sex robot feminists argue that sex robots function in a similar way as sex work to subordinate and dehumanize women. They allow men to see women as “penetrable holes” for purchase rather than as people, which will worsen gendered violence and destroy the human capacity for intimacy, love, and empathy (CASR, 2020k). This understanding of sex as a site of inherent danger and violence for women is characteristic of CASR’s radical feminist approach, which views male sexual dominance as the root of women’s oppression.

Most scholarship that is critical of anti-sex robot feminism has challenged its simplistic, stigmatizing view of sex work as inherently violent and sex workers as exploited, non-agentic victims (Danaher, Earp, & Sandberg, 2017; DiTecco, 2020; Klein

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that since the writing of this thesis, CASR has announced that it has changed its name to the Campaign Against Porn Robots. In a YouTube video explaining the change, Richardson describes that the term ‘sex robot’ was inherited from “male thinkers” and is problematic and misleading, because robots are objects without “sexed bodies,” intimacy, or consciousness, and they cannot participate in sex, relationality, or love (CAMPAIGN AGAINST PORNBOTS, 2021). The new name highlights that these robots “[mimic]...the woman in pornography,” which Richardson describes as “a very degraded view of woman reduced...to a form with penetrable holes that can be sold off and commercialized” (CAMPAIGN AGAINST PORNBOTS, 2021). Because this change occurred after my research was completed, I continue to refer to the organization as CASR throughout this thesis. The campaign’s website URL and Twitter username remain the same.



& Lin, 2018). What interested me when I encountered the work of anti-sex robot feminists was less their arguments about why sex robots are dangerous and unethical, such as the comparison made to sex work, and more the underlying assumptions that animate these arguments. These include assumptions about what it means to be a woman, what it means to be human, how power operates, who is a true feminist subject and who an imposter, what intimate relationships ought to look like, how to have ‘good’ feminist sex, and what goals a feminist politics ought to have. For instance, when I first began my research I was shocked by the transphobic rhetoric deployed by many anti-sex robot feminists, which is largely unacknowledged in the academic literature. I thought to myself that this assumption about who counts as a ‘real’ woman was a thread worth pulling on, and wondered what other foundational beliefs grounded this feminist framework. This thesis asks: what ideological assumptions underpin feminist anti-sex robot arguments? What discourses, truth claims, and subjectivities do they (re)produce and reify, and what do they ignore or obscure? What are the political implications of these arguments? Are they useful for achieving feminist goals, or do they reinscribe the violence that they purport to challenge? To explore these questions, I focus on two interrelated themes that emerged from my analysis: how ‘real’ womanhood is defined and defended by anti-sex robot feminists, and how these feminists mobilize discourses of love, intimacy, and relationships in their arguments.

The first two chapters of this thesis lay the groundwork for my project. In Chapter One, I provide context on sex robots. I begin with a review of existing scholarly literature on sex robots, examining the arguments made by those in favor and those opposed to their development, feminist and queer responses to sex robots, representations of sex

robots in media and pop culture, law and policy implications, and the far-future possibilities of this technology. I then give an overview of activism and advocacy on sex robots, introducing CASR and contextualizing its work within the larger radical feminist movement, including the rise of trans-exclusionary radical feminism. Finally, I discuss legal responses to sex robots, and end with some speculation on how they might be regulated in the future. In Chapter Two, I explain the theoretical underpinnings and methodological approach of this thesis. I introduce my theoretical framework, which draws on approaches including sex-positive feminism, queer theory, and posthumanism. I then provide an overview of feminist critical discourse analysis and explain my analytical process, detailing my approach to data collection, sampling, and coding. I conclude by considering some of the ethical implications of this work.

The next two chapters present my analytical findings. In Chapter Three, I examine how ‘real’ womanhood is discursively defined, understood, and defended by anti-sex robot advocates, and explore how these arguments are linked to trans-exclusionary radical feminism through a fear of women’s replaceability and the annihilation of female bodies and personhood. Drawing on feminist problematizations of biological sex and posthumanist challenges to the sanctity of the human, this chapter asks what it means to police the boundaries of womanhood and personhood. In Chapter Four, I trace how the ideals of love, intimacy, and relationality are mobilized in anti-sex robot arguments. I link queer and feminist critiques of sexual and romantic relationships with analyses of systemic racism and settler colonialism, asking what political work discourses of love do and what they obfuscate or obscure. In particular, I examine the links between white supremacy and anti-sex robot feminism. I end by speculating on whether love ought to be

a feminist political goal and what a project of feminist future-making might entail. I conclude this thesis by briefly speculating on the unconscious motivations that might underpin the work of anti-sex robot feminists, before highlighting some potential areas for future feminist research on sex robots.

Although I examine this topic using a sex-positive feminist approach (Kaplan, 2014; Khan, 2017), my argument is not that sex robots and robot sex promise a queer, feminist future free of some current sexual repression, and that therefore opposition to their development and use is inherently backwards and prudish. Sexual subjects, sexual desires, and sexual discourses are always bound up in the operations of power (Foucault, 1976/1990). The focus of this project is not on the social or political implications of sex robots themselves, but rather on the discourses of sex, gender, personhood, love, and intimacy that circulate in and around radical feminist opposition to this new technology. Farfetched and strange as they might seem, sex robots are real, and they are poised to become an important part of at least some individuals' lives. This makes them an important subject of further critical inquiry. How feminist scholars engage with this technology *now* will impact the design, use, and social effects of sex robots in the future. I argue that part of this larger project of critically engaging with sex robots is challenging ostensibly feminist responses that are shortsighted, or simplistic, or exclusionary, or harmful. Ultimately, that is the goal of this thesis.

## **Chapter One – Contextualizing Sex Robots: Scholarship, Activism, and Law**

The ongoing development of sex robots has caused a flurry of media and scholarly attention in recent years. Academics, activists, and law and policymakers have begun to grapple with the potentials of this new technology and what its widespread adoption might mean for our social norms, relationships, and wellbeing. In this chapter, I provide context on the current state of sex robots in academic scholarship, activism and advocacy, and the law. I begin with a review of existing scholarly literature. The goal is not to give a comprehensive account of every piece of scholarship on sex robots (for a scoping review, see Döring, Mohensi, & Walter, 2020), but to provide context to the reader on the major themes in academic research and to locate this thesis within the field. Next, I introduce the UK-based Campaign Against Sex Robots (CASR) and its ongoing work to prevent the development, use, and sale of this new technology. I link the work of CASR with other developments in feminist activism and advocacy, including the creation of other radical feminist advocacy campaigns and the growing presence of anti-trans discourse. Finally, I give an overview of current legal responses to sex robots in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, concluding with some speculative thoughts about what the future of legal regulation might look like in Canada.

### **Existing Scholarly Literature**

Sex robots – outside of the realm of speculation and science fiction – are still a relatively new area of academic inquiry. There is little empirical research on how people will actually react to sex robots (Scheutz & Arnold, 2017; Szczuka, Hartmann, & Krämer, 2020). This is because, as sex doll and robot designer Matt McMullen points out,

“no one yet has a sex capable robot” (Bartneck & McMullen, 2018). So far, they are a niche product, and are closer to animatronic dolls or Siri-like chatbots than fully functioning, artificially intelligent robots. Because sex robots are a new and emerging technology that is still being developed and designed, the majority of existing research centers on their future possibilities rather than their current reality. A major focus in the literature is the ethical implications of this technology. Should sex robots even exist? What will their impact be on human relationships and social norms?

David Levy (2007, 2016) is perhaps the most cited pro-sex robot scholar. Levy argues that not only will intimate human-robot relationships be overwhelmingly beneficial to humanity, they are also inevitable “on a grand scale” (2007, p. 22). As he points out, humans already have relationships with robots (e.g., Roombas), and researchers have explored the therapeutic potential of human-robot relationships for vulnerable populations like children and the elderly.<sup>5</sup> To love and desire a robot is simply the natural next step in the ongoing development of robotics and artificial intelligence, and will one day “be regarded as...“normal”” (Levy, 2007, p. 22). This proliferation of sex robots will increase humanity’s access to romantic love, sexual pleasure, and meaningful relationships. In Levy’s words: “many humans will expand their horizons of love and sex, learning, experimenting, and enjoying new forms of relationship that will

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<sup>5</sup> Consider the beloved *Parks and Recreation* character DJ Roomba, an iPod dock attached to a robot vacuum that makes multiple appearances over the course of the show and is frequently anthropomorphized. First appearing in the Season 2 episode “Sweetums” (Yang & Holland, 2010), DJ Roomba is built by Tom Haverford and plays music while vacuuming his house. Jerry, the bumbling loser of the office, is accused of ‘murdering’ the robot vacuum after he accidentally steps on it and breaks it. DJ Roomba later returns dressed as a ghost, haunting Jerry. The robot appears in several episodes, most notably as a wedding DJ smartened up with a black bow tie, and has its own character page on the Parks and Recreation Wiki (n.d.). (A note to this note: I originally referred to DJ Roomba as a “he” before remembering it is a robot and does not have a gender – as far as we know, at least.)

be made possible, pleasurable, and satisfying through the development of highly sophisticated humanoid robots” (2007, p. 22).

Levy predicts that humans and robots will get married (2007, 2016) and by the end of the century could even “make babies together” (in Cheok & Zhang, 2019, p. 210). He likens the normalization of human-robot relationships and marriages to the growing social acceptance of interracial and same-sex couples (2007, p. 154). Cheok and Zhang (2019) make a similar prediction, suggesting that shifting public attitudes towards love, sex, and marriage have opened the door to “the possibility of social acceptance of human-robot love” (p. 17). Levy takes an optimistic and excited view of the future but, as Kate Devlin (2018) points out, his work is “very much written from a heterosexual male viewpoint” that privileges marital relationships and sometimes falls back on gendered stereotypes about love and sex (e.g., that men desire sex and women desire marriage) (p. 114). This sort of idealistic scholarship provides a glimpse at one potential future, but also avoids any significant critical engagement with the potential downsides, criticisms, or challenges of widespread sex robot use.

Neil McArthur (2017) also argues strongly in favor of sex robots. Sex, he states, is an indisputable good, and increasing access to sex would make humans happier and healthier. Sex robots would improve relationships between humans by providing an outlet for desire discrepancies or unshared fantasies, and could even be an educational tool. They would also help rectify the unequal “distribution of sexual satisfaction” by helping those who struggle to find human partners, such as prisoners, queer people, members of the military, individuals living with trauma or mental illness, and those belonging to stigmatized groups (McArthur, 2017, p. 38). Further, McArthur argues that a lack of

sexual prospects, particularly among young men, increases rates of crime, depression, and reliance on social services (2017, p. 40). The widespread adoption of sex robots would thus contribute to social stability as well as individual pleasure. Their introduction “will be, on net, a good thing” for humanity (McArthur, 2017, p. 48).

In contrast, some scholars oppose the development and sale of sex robots. Kathleen Richardson (2015, 2016) is the face of this resistance and perhaps the most staunch opponent of sex robot technology. She is an anthropologist by training and the director of CASR, which she co-founded in 2015 (De Montfort University, n.d.). I will speak more to the work of CASR in the next section; in the most general terms, their goal is the legal prohibition of sex robots. More recently, she launched the research group WERAID (Women, Ethics, Robots, AI, and Data) to examine the negative impact of technology on women and girls and advocate for a human-centered, women-inclusive approach to the ethics of tech (WERAID, 2021). In her academic work, Richardson argues that sex robots are problematic because they mirror the unequal gendered power relations of “prostitution,” which she considers inherently exploitative and violent towards women (2015, p. 290). Both sex workers and sex robots are treated as objects to be used for sexual gratification, rather than as complete persons who are deserving of human rights and empathy. She (2016) also links sex robots to pornography, arguing that the robots reflect a pornified version of femininity. Richardson claims that men already “lack empathy in comparison to females” (2015, p. 291), and warns that “prostitution encourages empathy to be effectively turned off” (2015, p. 292). Sex robots will reinforce these unequal relations of power between men and women; therefore, they are unethical and ought to be banned.

Canadian lawyer Sinziana Gutiu (2012) shares many of Richardson's concerns about the link between sex robots and women's subordination, including that they reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, reduce men's capacity to empathize and form human relationships, and are an extension of the inherent violence of pornography and prostitution. She adds that sex robots will distort men's understanding of consent and "[erode] the existence of mutual consent" in human-human sexual encounters (Gutiu, 2012, p. 21). Because sex robots almost always look like women and "allow men to experience sex with what essentially is a female sex slave," they risk teaching men that human women also lack sexual autonomy (Gutiu, 2012, p. 21). However, unlike Richardson, Gutiu calls for the regulation of sex robots rather than full prohibition. Her work relies primarily on speculation rather than empirical evidence. Citing Gutiu, Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy (2020) also express concerns about how men's use of sex robots might "accommodate violent sexual desires," thus "normalizing nonconsensual sex" (p. 138). They do not call for a ban on sex robots, acknowledging that they can be a source of "care and intimacy" even as they "contribute to misogynistic views and subcultures" (Strengers & Kennedy, 2020, p. 133). Instead, Strengers and Kennedy suggest that sex robots and other feminized smart devices must be redesigned to "ditch their subservient positions and overtly sexualized demeanors" (2020, p. 143).

Robert Sparrow (2017) similarly argues that the design and sale of realistic female sex robots is unethical because they are representations of human women. On one hand, if a female robot can give consent, and thus have its consent violated by the user, this violation represents the rape of a human woman "which may increase the rate of real rape, expresses disrespect for women, and demonstrates a significant character defect"



(Sparrow, 2017, p. 466). On the other hand, if a female robot *always* consents, this also problematically represents women's sexuality. Sparrow suggests that properly designed sex robots – those that looked explicitly like machines rather than like women – could sidestep these ethical concerns (2017, p. 475). Finally, Thomas E. Simmons (2016) warns that widespread use of “fornicatory androids” will worsen the objectification of women, normalize “rape and vice”, destroy empathy, lead to moral decay, and cause “debauchery and degradation” (p. 53). Lawmakers must act now, he argues, and prohibit or severely limit their development and sale, the same way some U.S. states have banned the sale of sex toys in the name of public morality.

These anti-sex robot arguments have been thoroughly criticized. John Danaher (2017) calls this line of opposition the “symbolic-consequences argument”: sex robots symbolize problematic norms of sex and gender, and thus their development will have negative consequences and should be opposed (p. 107). He points out that there is no empirical evidence of any of these alleged negative consequences. In fact, sex robots might carry *positive* consequences, which would need to be weighed against any harmful ones. Danaher concludes that even if one agrees the current symbolism of sex robots is problematic, there is no logical justification to ban them; instead, they could simply be redesigned. Danaher, Brian Earp, and Anders Sandberg (2017) also find anti-sex robot arguments unpersuasive, explaining that they rely on a simplistic negative view of sex work that does not reflect the views of the majority of scholars and sex workers, do not consider any possible benefits of sex robot technology, and fail to prove any connection between sex robot design and human behaviour. They conclude that there are few good reasons to pre-emptively ban sex robots, other than those that “hinge on a peculiarly

conservative and vice-related view of sex” (Danaher, Earp, & Sandberg, 2017, p. 66). Wilhem E. J. Klein and Vivian Wenli Lin (2018) likewise point out that the abolitionist approach to sex work advocated by Richardson ignores the demands of actual sex workers, who have advocated for “decriminalization of the profession to increase safety and reduce health risks and violence to those who do choose this profession” (p. 116). Further, it contributes to the stigma already faced by sex workers (Klein & Lin, 2018). This point is also made by Delphine DiTecco (2020), who argues that representations of sex robots as sex workers stigmatizes both sex workers and sex work clients while largely ignoring the voices and agency of those within the sex industry.

Overall, anti-sex robot scholarship is critiqued as overly speculative, logically inconsistent, and extremely sexually conservative despite (or maybe because of) its ‘feminist’ framing. Of course, most sex robot research lacks empirical evidence because of the newness of the technology, and there are many meaningful kinds of academic work that reject the importance and even the possibility of empiricism and objectivity. However, anti-sex robot scholarship also fails to provide any convincing theoretical grounding for its proponents’ doomsday predictions. For instance, that pornography and sex work are inherently misogynist is hardly a foregone conclusion even among feminists. I suggest that the intense, moralizing discourses deployed by anti-sex robot scholars and activists can be understood using a moral panic framework (see Coen, 1972; Garland, 2008; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2011; Hier, 2008), which I will introduce in Chapter Two as part of the theoretical grounding of this thesis.

While Richardson and Levy (and those who fall in line with their arguments) are often represented as the two main ‘poles’ in the sex robot debate, the majority of scholars

exploring the ethical implications of sex robots take a more neutral or tentatively positive stance. Much of this work takes a philosophical approach, using existing ethical frameworks, logical reasoning, or thought experiments to stake a claim (Behrendt, 2020; Frank & Nyholm, 2017b; Goldstein, 2017; Nyholm & Frank, 2019; Peeters & Haselager, 2019; Sullins, 2012). Some scholars take a robot-centered approach, attempting to discern the best, most ethical way for humans to treat their robot lovers (Beschoner & Krause, 2018; Petersen, 2017). Others debate the possibility of real, mutual love and partnership with robots (Carpenter, 2017; Frank & Nyholm, 2017a; Hauskeller, 2017; Kewenig, 2020; Migotti & Wyatt, 2017). These philosophical debates about ethics make up a significant portion of the literature on sex robots and thus are worth mentioning here. However, in relation to my own research, I am less interested in this type of work than I am in scholarship that critically examines how sex robots and their representations reflect, reproduce, or challenge what it means to be human.

Richardson explicitly identifies that her approach to sex robots is informed by feminist thought. However, not all feminist scholars identify with Richardson's strong opposition to sex robots, sex work, and pornography. There are a number of feminist and queer critiques of sex robots that take a more nuanced approach to gender and sexuality while remaining attentive to how this technology might reflect and reproduce unequal relations of power. Puig (2017), for instance, describes the sort of womanhood embodied by current sex robots as the "synthetic hyper femme" – an exaggerated, performative femininity that, even in its artificiality, reinscribes gendered social categories as essential and innate (p. 41). This womanhood is not just hyper gendered but also hyper racialized; as they write, sex robots' artificial beauty is as much informed by a performance of class,

thinness, and whiteness as by idealized femininity. Furthermore, Puig (2017) argues that there is a serious lack of attention to the intersections of racism, colonialism, classism, heterosexism, transphobia, and fatphobia in the mainstream sex robot debate. In my review of the literature, I, too, noticed that although much scholarship is preoccupied with how sex robots might replicate or represent relations of domination through their physical appearance and relationships with humans, there has yet to be engagement with tricky political and ethical questions that stretch beyond gender. For instance, what would it mean for a white person to purchase and own a non-white sex robot?<sup>6</sup> Scholars, as Puig (2017) rightly identifies, are not yet having these kinds of conversations.

A common line of critique among feminist scholars is that existing designs of sex robots perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards for women – stereotypically sexy with tiny waists, huge breasts, and beautiful faces, all customizable to the consumer’s desire. As Devlin (2018) writes, the majority of these robots are marketed specifically for heterosexual men: “they are built to serve the male gaze” (p. 95). Devlin rejects Richardson’s views on sex work but she is sympathetic to her concerns about unrealistic representations of women’s bodies (2018, p. 133) Anne Cranny-Francis (2016) likewise acknowledges that the current design of sex robots might reinforce sexist stereotypes. Humans already form affective bonds with non-living things like robot vacuum cleaners – what will happen when our robots look like humans? Cranny-Francis argues that the strong bonds we will share with sex robots have the potential to transform “human gender, sexuality, and love” (2016, p. 4), so it is essential that they are developed in a way that is “ethical, egalitarian and equitable” (p. 5). Danaher (2020) points out that the

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<sup>6</sup> I examine white supremacy in relation to anti-sex robot feminism in Chapter Four.

appearance of sex robots is not the only important site of feminist intervention; it is also necessary to include women's voices in their production and sale, and to have better conversations surrounding the social contexts in which they are used. Sex is "a human good" for people of all genders – so if current sex robots are not feminist, then why not make feminist ones (Danaher, 2020, p. 140)?

Some feminist and queer scholars have proposed a radical rethinking of sex robots outside of normative understandings of sex, bodies, and relationships. Tanja Kubes (2019) suggests that sex robots could usher in a new era of sexual liberation and pleasure, redefining human sexuality and relationships in exciting and even feminist ways. Sex robots are "neither *inherently* evil" nor do they guarantee a utopian future free of loneliness and bad sex (Kubes, 2019, p. 11). They do, however, blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and object, and man and machine. Sophie Wennescheid (2018) similarly suggests that the "stereotypical sexiness" of sex robots is less important than "their otherness that transgresses human's self-centeredness, arouses strong feelings, and reminds us of what it means to be a desiring (post)human" (p. 48). A robot is not simply a tool but "something with which we form bonds, something that affects us and touches us" in what Wennescheid calls "networks of desire" (2018, p. 41). She concludes that sex robots and our the intimate relationships with them will radically challenge anthropocentrism and the dualisms that undergird it. Janna van Grunsven and Aimee van Wynsberge (2019) write that while scholars critique the lack of bodily boundedness and limited emotional expressivity of sex robots – in other words, the things that make them 'less human' and less capable of replicating reciprocal relationships – "we should be careful not to romanticize human-to-human context, especially when

sexually contoured” (p. 303). They point out that these ‘flaws’ could make robots particularly useful to those who struggle to understand complex social cues.

Kubes argues that sex robots “epitomize the decoupling of sexual craving from biological/social sex and/or gender” and have the potential to open up new forms of desire and pleasure outside of the mainstream (2019, p. 10). She calls on feminists to become actively involved in the sex robot industry and shape how this technology is designed and developed. Unlocking the radical potential of sex robots requires the decoupling of sex from anthropomorphism and normative understandings of gender and sexuality. Just like the design of vibrators has shifted towards artistic abstraction rather than anatomical correctness, “why should a sex robot look like a human?” (Kubes, 2019, p. 10). Devlin (2018) makes a similar argument, suggesting that sex robots move away from the hypersexualized, “pornified fembot” towards a more abstract form (p. 162). This would not only rectify the feminist criticism that sex robots objectify women and entrench gender stereotypes, but would also untether sexual pleasure from the restraints of the human form. Devlin explains: “Why not pick the features that could bring the greatest pleasure? A velvet or silk body, sensors and mixed genitalia; tentacles instead of arms?” (2018, p. 162). A sex robot might be aesthetically beautiful, sexually gratifying, and completely removed from any sort of anthropomorphism or human embodiment.

Lastly, Puig (2019) writes that any truly revolutionary future form of sex robots must extend beyond reproducing normative romantic and intimate relationships. Abstraction from the human form “in itself is not transformative” unless it accompanies a decentering of individualistic, humanistic understanding of love and care (Puig, 2019, p. 508). The “regime of love scarcity” that sex robots are built upon – improving our lives

by remedying a lack of romantic partners for the undesirable – is result of a world where love is hierarchical, with romantic love deemed the single most important type (Puig, 2019, p. 511). Puig argues that this reinforces “the idea that we are fixed and fully knowable entities locked within Eurocentric conceptual, affective, and symbolic universes” (2019, p. 511). Truly radical, transformative forms of sex tech ought to disrupt “hierarchical modes of relationality” and “traditional codes of loving” that position individual romantic relationships as central to our fulfillment and wellbeing (Puig, 2019, p. 512). Future-making, they argue, must explicitly include those whose ways of being, living, and feeling exist outside of the normative.

Another prominent area of research examines representations of sex robots in media and popular culture. Reviewing 710 examples of both fictional and non-fictional media, Nicola Döring and Sandra Poeschl (2019) find that representations of sex robots and robot-human relationships tend to reflect stereotypical gender roles, privilege heterosexuality, and focus on sex to the exclusion of emotional intimacy. Non-fictional representations typically feature hypersexualized female robots and male users who are presented as conventionally unattractive, socially inept, or having a disability, while fictional representations are more likely to attribute free will, emotions, and sentience to robots and depict non-heteronormative relationships. Döring and Poeschl argue that these representations are important because they inform public opinion of sex robots, which then shapes how sex robots are developed and designed (2019, p. 666). Rebecca Hawkes and Cherie Lacey (2019) make a similar point, suggesting that depictions of sex robots in science fiction movies both reflect and reproduce the “cultural anticipation” of real-life sex robot technology (p. 111). Desire, they contend, is an important driver of

technological development, and fictional depictions make consumers desire sex robots – even when they are shown violently breaking free from human control.

Some scholars focus specifically on representations of gynoids, or female-bodied sex robots. Kate Devlin and Olivia Belton (2020) find that in science fiction films, gynoids are hypersexualized and hyperfeminine and uphold a strict gender binary in both appearance and social role. They argue that these depictions reflect both heterosexual male desire *and* patriarchal anxieties. Gynoids are supernaturally beautiful, always sexually and emotionally available, and under the total control of their user, but undergirding this fantasy is “the anxiety of malfunction, that the machine-woman will spiral out of masculine control” (Devlin & Belton, 2020, p. 360). Carly Fabian (2018) similarly argues that gynoids in pop culture reflect larger cultural anxieties surrounding femininity and technology. She identifies three key fears in these fictional narratives: the feminist anxiety that women will be replaced and/or relegated to “sexual objects and domestic slaves” (Fabian, 2018, p. 40), the patriarchal anxiety of losing control over both women and artificial intelligence, and the fear that humans will ‘go too far’ with technology and lose their humanity. In line with Hawkes and Lacey (2019) and Devlin and Belton (2020), Fabian describes that fantasies of the perfect artificial woman always exist alongside “anxieties that she will spin out of control” and use her sexuality as a weapon against her creators, users, and/or humanity (2018, p. 3).

Legal scholars have begun to explore how the widespread use of sex robots might impact law and policy. Jeannie Suk Gersen (2019) takes an ambivalent approach, suggesting that although sex robots are controversial because they blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman and licit and illicit sex, it is too soon to know either the



positive or negative consequences of their introduction or how robot sex will be regulated. Some scholars (Galaiti et al, 2019; Lugano et al., 2019) have pointed out that unregulated sex robots could pose risks to their users and therefore require government intervention under the umbrella of consumer protection. For instance, they may cause injury or infection from poor design or cheap materials (a common problem with today's sex toys), and the incredibly sensitive personal data they will collect about users could be vulnerable to hacking and other cybersecurity risks (Galaiti et al., 2019; Lugano et al., 2019). They urge the public sector to protect consumers by regulating this new technology as it develops (Galaiti et al., 2019), and the private sector to prioritize the security of customer data (Lugano et al., 2019).

The future of marital relationships and family law is also a common topic of discussion amongst legal scholars. Nicholas J. Walter (2020) suggests that the arguments made in favor of legalizing 'non-traditional' marriages (i.e., same-sex couples) would also support human-robot marriages. Similarly, Mark Goldfeder and Yosef Rezin (2015) write that legal precedent in the United States would not prohibit human-robot marriage; it is foreseeable that robots will one day be considered legal persons and be capable of consent, and therefore could enter into legitimate marriage contracts. However, as Margaret Ryznar (2019) points out, marriage is an economic relation in addition to an expression of love, and human-robot marriages and divorces leave questions about the division of marital property and custody of children unclear.

Looking further into the future, Marina Adshade (2017) argues that not only will human-robot relationships be morally and legally permissible, they will fundamentally alter the norms of marital and sexual relationships. Marriage and sex will become

separate; marriages will occur between parties wanting to have children but not sex together, because marriage will remain the “most efficient way to raise families” (Adshade, 2017, p. 294). Further, she contends that non-monogamous relationships will be normalized and the legal regulation of marriage will relax, giving individuals the freedom to choose how to arrange their own personal marital relationship outside of state interference. Adshade argues that these changes will disadvantage those in lower socioeconomic brackets, as they will be unable to purchase sex robots to access their benefits, and may even be economically harmed by non-monogamy (e.g., from a lack of financial support for children). Therefore, sex robots must be made affordable so that the benefits of this new technology and changing marital norms are accessible for all.

Finally, a small but noteworthy area of research takes a speculative approach to the far-future possibilities of sex robots. Rebekah Rousi (2018) warns that “utopian imagery of docile, obedient, love-filled robots” ignores the distinct possibility that future sex robots will possess free will, legal rights, and their own emotions, and will not necessarily want to choose humans as their intimate partners (p. 2). Robin Mackenzie’s work (2018a, 2018b) examines the ethical implications of designing and owning sex robots who are “sentient, self-aware, feeling artificial moral agents” (2018b, p. 1). She explains that the intimacy and vulnerability of intimate relationships opens up the possibility that humans may mistreat sex robots, as they do other humans. Sentient sex robots, she argues, will have a claim to personhood and ought to “be included in humans’ moral circle of care and concern” (2018b, p. 6). There will need to be “legal and ethical mechanisms” to allow sentient, self-aware sex robots to transition from purchased commodities to moral and legal persons (2018a, p. 10). Elsewhere, Mackenzie (2020)

asks what ethical issues will arise when sex robots become more intelligent and powerful than their human creators – will they love us? Destroy us? Humans, she argues, need to reject anthropocentrism and develop an ethical framework that is respectful and compassionate toward all sentient beings in order to “avoid the Roboapocalypse and encourage a harmonious future” (2020, p. 70).

Overall, academic scholarship on sex robots is a small but growing area of interest for scholars in several disciplines. There is a need for further research on this topic, particularly work that goes beyond an exclusive focus on gender-based harm and that challenges the humanist assumptions of most existing scholarship. This thesis contributes to the growing body of feminist and queer responses to sex robots that reject a sex-negative, technophobic view of this new technology. Following the scholars who examine representations of sex robots, I am interested in the mix of desire and anxiety that sex robots so strongly provoke, particularly feminist anxieties. And, like the legal scholars who are beginning to broach this topic, I am interested in how sex robots will be understood in relation to law and legality in the near future. Whatever position individual scholars take on sex robots, there is consensus that this new technology will disrupt many of the things we now take for granted as natural or innate. Norms of gender, sex, legality, marriage, desire, bodies, love, and intimacy all promise to be overturned by the introduction of sex robots into daily life. Whether this is threatening or revolutionizing or both or neither depends on each scholar’s disciplinary background, theoretical framework, and personal perspective – and ultimately remains to be seen. But like it or not, “the robots are cumming” (*The Guardian* user GordonLiddle, 2015).

## Activism and Advocacy

In addition to being the subject of academic inquiry and debate, sex robots have been the focus of activism and advocacy in the public sphere. As previously mentioned, Kathleen Richardson's CASR is the most vocal group working in opposition of the development and sale of sex robots. Founded in 2015 by Richardson and her colleague Erik Billing (who appears to no longer be connected to the campaign), CASR categorically opposes sex robots. The campaign has six goals: abolishing female-bodied sex robots, offering a "relational model of sex and sexuality informed by mutuality", challenging the idea that sex robots can replace women in relationships, opposing the development of child sex dolls and robots, offering "an alternative vision of technology" that centers women and girls, and working "across the political spectrum with those who value the dignity of women and girls" (CASR, 2021a). CASR's position is similar to the one Richardson advances in her academic work: sex robots and sex dolls are harmful to women because they replicate the misogynistic and objectifying power dynamics of sex work and pornography. Further, they are harmful to *humanity* because they, like other new forms of technology, discourage meaningful intimate relationships between humans. CASR has been particularly active in 2020 and 2021, hosting a virtual conference in July 2020 that featured nine speakers and included a keynote from lesbian feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys. The campaign has also been very active on Twitter, tweeting regularly from @RobotCampaign. Despite its name, CASR does not focus exclusively on sex robots. A broad range of sexuality-related topics feature prominently on its website, conference agenda, and social media presence – the campaign is explicitly opposed to

pornography, sex work, surrogacy, ‘male fetishism’, child sex abuse, and the growing visibility of and rights accorded to trans folks, particular trans women.

CASR explicitly identifies itself as feminist, with Richardson citing radical feminist figures such as Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin as inspiration for her work (see Richardson, 2019). Richardson has even been called “the Catharine MacKinnon of the robot age” (Danaher, 2020, p. 139). Radical feminism originated in the 1970s and 1980s, with scholars such as Susan Brownmiller (1975), Mary Daly (1978), Dworkin (1981), MacKinnon (1983), and Jane Caputi (1989) locating *sexuality* as the root of women’s oppression and men’s domination. In this view, domestic violence, sexual assault, pornography, and sex work exemplify the role of sexuality in maintaining male dominance and power over women. Women are understood to be categorically oppressed by men: “all things m – men, masculinity, maleness – dominate all things f – women, femininity, femaleness” (Halley et al., 2019, p. x). Detractors of this branch of feminism sometimes use the terms dominance feminism (Halley et al., 2019) for its view of gendered relations of power, or carceral feminism (Bernstein, 2007) for its focus on criminal justice remedies to violence against women. In the 1980s, the work of radical feminists was instrumental to the introduction of laws prohibiting sexual harassment and marital rape. MacKinnon and Dworkin are particularly well-known for their attempt to regulate pornography by introducing civil ordinances that would allow those harmed by the production, consumption, and/or existence of pornography to sue for damages (Colombo, 1994). Radical feminists also took part in the Sex Wars of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, where feminists who opposed things like pornography, sex work, and s/m in the name of women’s equality squared off against those who saw sexuality – including

sexual practices labelled patriarchal by radical feminists – as a potential site of agency and liberation.<sup>7</sup>

While the original Sex Wars skirmishes have ended, debates around the role of sex and sexuality in feminism endure, and radical feminism continues to inform contemporary feminist activism and advocacy. In her work on the #MeToo movement, Brenda Cossman (2018) has suggested that feminism is experiencing a Sex Wars 2.0. I see this parallel too, as a new generation takes up the reigns of radical feminist scholarship, activism, and advocacy in campaigns such as CASR, and other feminist scholars like myself challenge, critique, and dispute them. Along with CASR, other radical feminist groups have sprung up to perform legal advocacy in a number of areas related to sexuality. One notable example is We Can't Consent to This, a UK-based campaign aiming to ban the 'rough sex defense', in which men on trial for killing their sexual partners claim to have done so accidentally during consensual choking and receive reduced charges, mitigated sentences, or are found not guilty. As I have examined in previous work, this campaign largely relies on anti-pornography and anti-s/m discourse by framing the 'rough sex defense' as a crisis rooted in the normalization of consensual choking and other s/m-related activities through men's consumption of porn (Penich, 2020). Again, this campaign and CASR are both premised on a sex-negative approach to gender relations, wherein sexuality is a weapon wielded against women by men.

Why does this decades-old branch of feminism still hold appeal? One possibility is that many of the issues championed by radical feminists, such as sexual assault and

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<sup>7</sup> This sex wars narrative is, of course, a bit of an oversimplification. As Ummni Khan (2014) describes, the pro-sex and anti-sex factions were "heterogenous" and motivated by "distinct but overlapped analyses and agendas", and some feminists took what they saw as a neutral stance in between (p. 54-55).

harassment, remain prominent areas of concern in mainstream feminism today. I suggest it is also relevant that public attitudes towards things like pornography, s/m, and sexuality in general have shifted since the late twentieth century. Consider, for instance, the commercial success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series and the widespread use of internet pornography. The growing acceptance, visibility, and accessibility of sexual practices perceived to be essentially patriarchal makes the concerns of early radical feminists still extremely relevant for contemporary feminists who share their view that sexuality is primarily a site of gendered harm.

One notable aspect of feminist anti-sex robot technophobia is its explicit overlap with transphobia. In conjunction with analyzing the ideology and panic around sex robots, this thesis will tease out how feminist anti-sex robot campaigns and discourses align with trans-exclusionary ones, and are often perpetuated by the same activists, scholars, and organizations. Therefore, it is important to contextualize the work of CASR within the proliferation of trans-exclusionary radical feminist<sup>8</sup> voices in mainstream discourse. This ideology twists the radical feminist principle that sex is the root of women's subordination to position biological sex as the essence of what it means to be a woman. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists construct trans women as a threat to the rights and safety of 'real' (cisgender) women. They argue that trans people uphold the

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that these feminists reject the label of trans exclusionary radical feminism (proponents of which are colloquially called TERFs), and often refer to themselves instead as 'gender critical'. Some argue that TERF is a sexist slur. The controversial feminist blogger Meghan Murphy (2017) calls the term a form of hate speech and an incitement to violence that echoes Nazi propaganda. However, as Sara Ahmed (2016) points out, the name 'gender critical' misleadingly implies that "trans activism (or trans existence) requires being gender *uncritical*", erasing "the long and varied critiques of the category of gender" made by trans individuals and communities (p. 30). I would add that there is little that is 'critical' about this feminism's essentialist and biologically deterministic view of sex. In this thesis, I follow Ahmed in continuing to use the term trans exclusionary radical feminism, not as a slur but as a factual description of this movement's view of trans people, particularly trans women.

gender binary by disallowing the existence of masculine women or feminine men, while queer theory and ‘cancel culture’ are seen as patriarchal backlash against women’s rights, aiming to erase cisgender women and their lived biological reality as females. Language that is inclusive of trans and non-binary people (e.g., using ‘people who menstruate’ when discussing period products) is a particular target of anger and derision.<sup>9</sup> As I examine later in this thesis, trans-exclusionary discourse goes beyond calls for a renewed focus on cisgender women’s biological sex and concerns with the erasure of woman as a meaningful category. Trans women are argued to be ‘men’ colonizing or stealing women’s embodied experiences, infiltrating women-only spaces for violent purposes, or even trying to ‘replace’ women. Importantly, while the existence and visibility of trans people is often framed as frighteningly new by trans-exclusionary radical feminists, similar fears surrounding trans women also featured in radical feminist discourse during the Sex Wars. Trans panic (like trans existence) is not a new phenomenon. See, for instance, the vehemently transphobic work of Janice Raymond (1979), oft-cited by CASR and its affiliated scholars and activists, and trans scholar Sandy Stone’s (1987/2006) response, now considered a foundational essay in trans studies.

As hateful and extremist as these views are, trans-exclusionary feminism is becoming increasingly visible on social media.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most high-profile example is the 2020 scandal surrounding Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, who received

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<sup>9</sup> One example of many: a Christmas card shared by CASR on Twitter shows a nativity scene with Mary labelled as “holy person with a uterus” and baby Jesus as “child whose gender must not be assumed” (Campaign Against Sex Robots, 2020j). “Best Christmas card ever... I wondered if Joseph identifies as a carpenter [five laughing emojis]” (Campaign Against Sex Robots, 2020j).

<sup>10</sup> Ahmed (2016) points out that from the outsider perspective of a cis person (like myself), transphobic speech appears to be increasing; however, many trans people have long experienced “relentless harassment” as part of their daily existence (p. 28). She explains: “what I first heard as a turning up of the volume [of transphobic discourse] was just more of the same thing that had been going on all along for many trans people: that volume switch was already stuck at full blast” (2016, p. 27).



significant criticism after sharing transphobic views on Twitter. Many Harry Potter fans, particularly queer and trans folks, expressed disappointment and anger at Rowling for using her massive platform to espouse transphobia. Other people defended her as a victim of ‘cancel culture’; for instance, a number of publishers and authors signed a letter in support of Rowling, which alleged that she was experiencing “hate speech” and misogyny in response to her personal views (The Sunday Times, 2020). CASR itself has tweeted in support of Rowling and other feminists who have been criticized for holding transphobic views.<sup>11</sup> CASR is an active participant in the emboldening of trans-exclusionary radical feminists on social media and the wielding of transphobia under the guise of women’s rights. I will explore this important ideological nexus between anti-sex robot and trans-exclusionary feminism further in Chapter Three.

Finally, a note: Richardson and the other scholars and activists who work alongside CASR are not the only voices speaking out against sex robots. However, CASR is currently the only organized advocacy campaign, and Richardson and its affiliated scholars and activists are the most visible and vocal feminist opponents. I will provide more detail on the parameters of my data collection in the next chapter.

## **Legal Responses**

Perhaps because sex robots are a new and emerging technology and are not yet available for widespread purchase, there have been relatively few attempts to explicitly regulate or prohibit their development, production, and sale. It is also worth noting that

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<sup>11</sup> “Jk [sic] Rowling didn’t “declare” males and females. An evolutionary processs [sic] did. In all cultures in all societies there is evidence to prove the existence of biological sex as binary. It is merely an accurate description of sex. #IStandWithJKR” (Campaign Against Sex Robots, 2020i).

current examples of legal responses to sex robots have considerable overlap with those targeting realistic sex dolls. As previously mentioned, in one of the most aggressive strategies for legal intervention CASR has campaigned for a complete ban on sex dolls and robots in the United Kingdom. The campaign's website even offers a prewritten "Letter to Your MP/MEP/MSP" for its supporters to download, sign, and send to their political representatives (CASR, 2020j). Despite the work of CASR, as of the writing of this thesis a ban on sex robots is not being considered in the UK. Similarly, neither Canada nor the United States currently has federal, provincial, territorial, or state legislation prohibiting the development, sale, or possession of (adult-bodied) sex robots. However, the lack of an explicit prohibition does not mean that sex robots are not subject to law. Rather, the legal regulation of sex robots tends to be subsumed under existing legislation, including municipal bylaws regarding business licencing and zoning, and federal laws governing obscenity, child pornography, and the import of foreign goods.

One area of present legal regulation is the opening of so-called 'robot brothels' where customers can rent time with a sex robot or doll, typically in a private room on the premises. They are, as one article documenting the opening of a sex doll rental service memorably begins, "hoping to penetrate the luxury masturbation market" in many major cities (Clarkson, 2020, para. 1). These businesses have generally received a chilly reception from local governments, and some municipalities have gotten creative with bylaws to avoid the establishment of robot brothels within their limits. In Houston, KinkySDolls proposed to open a 'try before you buy' robot brothel in 2018, where customers could rent a sex robot prior to purchasing one (Dart, 2018). These plans were scrapped after a city ordinance was passed requiring owners of "adult arcade[s]" to obtain

a permit and prohibiting sexual activity with “an anthropomorphic device” at such establishments, effectively banning robot brothels (City of Houston, 2018, p. 2). In late 2019, the City of Mississauga pressed charges against sex doll rental company Aura Dolls for violating zoning laws by operating without a permit (Cornwell, 2019). In general, sex robot brothels that open are shut down by municipal governments using zoning laws that regulate or prohibit ‘adult’ businesses.

The area that has seen arguably the most legal intervention is the development and sale of child sex robots. As I will explain in Chapter Two, my analysis excludes child sex robots; however, the legal responses to their existence are worth mentioning here because robot/doll-specific legislation is still so unusual. In the United States, three states – Florida, Kentucky, and Tennessee – have legislation in place specifically prohibiting the possession, display, and sale of child sex dolls and robots (Buchanan, 2020). In 2018, the House of Representatives passed the Curbing Realistic Exploitative Electronic Pedophilic Robots (CREEPER) Act prohibiting the importation or transportation of child sex dolls and robots. However, the bill was not passed by the Senate and ultimately failed to become law (GovTrack, n.d.-a). In 2019, the Jurists United to Stop Trafficking Imitation Child Exploitation (JUSTICE) Act was introduced in Congress, also aiming to ban the import or transport of child sex dolls. As of the writing of this thesis, it has not yet been put to a vote by the House (GovTrack, n.d.-b). More recently, Republican Representative Vern Buchanan has announced that he will reintroduce the failed CREEPER Act to Congress following “a grotesque incident” where a child sex doll for sale on the internet was made in the likeness of a Florida girl (2020, para. 1).

In the UK, it is a criminal offence to import a child sex doll (considered “an obscene or indecent article”) but not to possess one (Shaw, 2017, para. 18). A special operation set up by the National Crime Agency and the Border Force seized 123 dolls from March 2016 to July 2017; during that time seven people were charged with importation offences (Shaw, 2017). Canadian authorities have also apprehended child sex dolls at the border. A 2018 report by CBC shows that in a span of less than two years, the Canada Border Services Agency seized “at least 42” dolls, considered to be child pornography prohibited by the *Criminal Code* (Celli & Harris, para. 2). So far, only one criminal case involving a child sex doll has gone to trial in Canada. In 2013, Kenneth Harrison purchased a child sex doll online; he was later accused of possession of child pornography, mailing obscene matter, and two charges of smuggling and possession of prohibited goods (CBC News, 2019). On trial, he was found not guilty.<sup>12</sup> The judge stated that while “he believed the doll linked to Harrison is child pornography,” the Crown had failed to prove his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt (CBC News, 2019, para. 3).

If and/or when sex robots become more readily available, more popular, and more technologically advanced, it is unclear how the legal regulation surrounding them will change. One possibility is that sex robots will be regulated as a form of three-dimensional pornography, in line with how they are described by CASR (2020k). In Canada, it is a criminal offense to sell, expose to public view, or possess for that purpose obscene materials under section 163 of the *Criminal Code* (1985). However, not all sexually

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, in this case the defence challenged the *Criminal Code* definition and prohibition of possession of child pornography, arguing that it violated Harrison’s rights to freedom of expression (s. 2), life, liberty and security of the person (s. 7), and equality before and under the law and equal protection and benefit of law (s. 15) as established by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (R. v. Harrison, 2018). The judge dismissed the *Charter* challenge on the grounds that the harms of child pornography override any rights granted by s. 2 and s. 7, and that “pedophiles” are not a group protected under s. 15 (R. v. Harrison, 2018, para. 14).

explicit materials fall under the umbrella of obscenity. The line between legally permissible erotica and criminal obscenity is drawn by the community standards test articulated in *R. v. Butler* (1992). Would sex robots pass the *Butler* test and be deemed permissible in the eyes of everyday Canadians? On one hand, they might become so common and normalized, like Levy (2007) predicts, that they are accepted as a permissible sexually explicit object (and perhaps even as legitimate ‘partners’ in their own right). On the other hand, they might be viewed as deviant, pathological, and a threat to community morality, particularly if their owners bring them into public spaces. It is simply too soon to know. However, as Cossman (2002) points out, in existing case law the courts have typically taken a conservative view of sexual mores.

Entering into the realm of pure speculation, it is also possible to imagine a future where sex robots advance to the point that they become autonomous, sentient, and perhaps even indistinguishable from a ‘real’ human.<sup>13</sup> Under these circumstances, sex robots might fall under laws regulating the sale and purchase of sex; indeed, some scholars predict that robots will at least partially replace human sex workers (Carpenter, 2017; Levy, 2007).<sup>14</sup> The purchase of sex is a crime in Canada under section 286.1 of the *Criminal Code* (1985), and although selling sex is technically legal, it is highly regulated under sections 213 and 286. Perhaps designing a sentient, artificially intelligent robot

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<sup>13</sup> This may sound far-fetched, but many scientists have suggested the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence is just around the corner. Futurist and inventor Ray Kurzweil predicts that an AI will pass the Turing Test (effectively matching human intelligence) by 2029 (Thomson, 2017, para. 7). An open letter calling for more research into AI has over seven thousand signatories, including AI experts, scientists, and tech industry leaders (among them physicist Stephen Hawking, Tesla founder Elon Musk, and Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak) (“Research Priorities for Robust and Beneficial Artificial Intelligence”, 2015). The accompanying list of research priorities acknowledges the possibility of both general artificial intelligence and superintelligent machines (Russell, Dewey, & Tegmark, 2015). Further examination of AI is beyond my expertise and the scope of this research, but is a undoubtedly worthy topic of future inquiry.

<sup>14</sup> See DiTecco (2020) for a more thorough explanation of the links between sex robots and discourses surrounding sex work.

simply for sex will be illegal and viewed as exploitative and unethical. Or perhaps the sale and purchase of sex will by then be decriminalized, as sex workers themselves have been demanding. Again, it ultimately is too soon to know how sex robots will develop as a technology, how widely they will be adopted, how social norms will shift to accommodate or reject them, and how the law will respond. It seems very likely they will become an important object of consideration for law and policymakers in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has laid the groundwork for my thesis, providing background and context on the current state of sex robots in academia, activism, and law. As I have shown, sex robots are a relatively new area of academic interest, with scholars primarily interested in the ethics of robot sex, gender relations, pop culture representations, law, and far-future speculation. In activist and advocacy circles, anti-sex robot sentiments with radical feminist roots prevail. There are also significant law and policy implications to the development, sale, and use of this technology, and lawmakers and politicians have only just begun navigating these waters. There is clear a need for more critical engagement with the social and political implications of sex robots – particularly work that challenges the sex-negative radical feminist analyses that predominate anti-sex robot conversations. It is these anti-sex robot discourses that this thesis will examine, critique, and deconstruct. In the next chapter, I continue to build on this foundation by laying out the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this research project.

## **Chapter Two – Theory and Methods**

In this chapter, I describe the theoretical framework and methodology of this thesis. First, I trace the broad strokes of my theoretical grounding, introducing concepts such as sex-positive feminism and posthumanism that frame my work. I make some early connections between these overarching theories and my analysis. I then provide an overview of my methodological approach, which is discourse analysis, with specific attention given to feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007, 2018). Next, I detail the data collection and analysis process. I discuss how I selected anti-sex robot materials to examine, including articles, videos, and webpages, and describe my preliminary analysis and coding practice. Finally, I conclude by considering some of the ethical implications of this project, including my positionality as a researcher and the political goals of my work.

### **Theoretical Framework(s)**

This project is, first and foremost, a feminist one. Simultaneously, it is critical of certain branches of feminism. Feminism is not a single, monolithic entity or a particular set of beliefs, but rather an umbrella term for a heterogenous group of theories and practices. Some of these different theories and practices are contradictory or oppositional. For instance, radical feminism, which I discussed in the previous chapter, is feminism; so is sex-positive feminism, which takes a completely different view of gendered relations of power and the role of sex and sexuality in challenging or maintaining them. Therefore, it is worth taking some time here to specify my feminist theoretical and methodological

approach and make it clear the ways in which I understand gender and sex in the context of this thesis.

Drawing from Judith Butler (1990, 1993), I conceptualize gender and sex as discursive products. Butler argues that gender is performative: “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990, p. 33). Gender is not an essential attribute or stable identity of the subject, something one has, but is made to appear real through its repetition, something one *does*. In other words, gender is the expression or the “doing” itself, which “[constitutes] the identity it is purported to be” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Importantly, the coherency of gender identity is dependent on compulsory heterosexuality and the binary opposition of man and woman – the two are only intelligible in relationship to each other. This means that there is no stable, universal category of ‘woman’ that can be pinned down as a representative subject of feminism, because womanhood is “an ongoing discursive practice...open to intervention and resignification” (1990, p. 33). Further, Butler argues that there is no pre-discursive, ‘pure’ gender that exists outside of power relations; however, just because we are forced to “operate within the matrix of power” does not preclude us from critiquing and subverting relations of domination and subordination (1990, p. 30).

Likewise, biological sex is not the ‘real’ point of reference for a socially constructed gender – sex, too, is discursively materialized (Butler, 1993). Butler does not deny that sex is material and embodied, but argues that this does not make it irreducible. It is not a stable, biological fact that precedes discourse or power relations. Instead, sex is forcibly materialized as an effect of power, such that “the matter of bodies...[is]



indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Sex is a norm, an ideal that constitutes which bodies are culturally intelligible as subjects worthy of life and personhood. Those who do not “materialize the norm” of sex do not qualify as subjects or as ‘bodies that matter’ (Butler, 1993, p. 16). Importantly, the normative subject “is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection,” meaning it exists only in its relationship to those who are excluded from subjectivity and cultural intelligibility (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Butler’s argument that sex does not precede or signify gender and cannot be located as the natural, innate, and irreducible root of a socially constructed gender is central to my work, and especially to my critique of trans-exclusionary radical feminism (which Butler herself has vigorously criticized; see Ferber, 2020). Her work also raises questions about how robots might be discursively materialized as gendered and sexed subjects. I will further discuss critiques of biological essentialism and the subject of feminism in Chapter Three.

Since the publication of Butler’s work in the early 1990s, norms of gender and sexuality have shifted significantly. The state now recognizes and protects a much wider range of gender identities and sexualities. In Canada, same-sex marriages have been recognized for over fifteen years, individuals can legally change their gender with the option to be represented by a gender-neutral ‘X’ instead of male or female, and discrimination based on sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression is prohibited by law. Arguably, significant progress has been made. However, many scholars have argued that inclusion of *some* queer identities in the norm still leaves the normative subject, and the exclusionary logics it is predicated on, intact. Lisa Duggan (2003) writes of an

emerging “homonormativity”, a “politics that does not contest heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (p. 50). Same-sex marriage, for instance, neatly slots into normative ways of organizing familial and sexual relationships; marriage is reaffirmed as the ‘right’ way to express love and kinship, and its role in governing the population is obscured (Osterlund, 2009). Couples who are newly included in the institution of marriage reap its legal, financial, and social benefits, but those who challenge or reject normative kinship structures remain excluded. The norm, Butler reminds us, only makes sense in relationship to those excluded from it. Even though the parameters of subjectivity and intelligibility have changed since her work was published, the normative gendered and sexed subject that Butler describes remains, as does the realm of abject others who do not materialize the norm.

As Susan Stryker (2006) describes, Butler's work has been “tremendously influential within transgender studies,” particularly for the productive possibilities of its “non- or postreferential epistemological framework” (p. 10). However, it has also been critiqued by some trans scholars. For instance, Viviane Namaste (2009) suggests that although Butler and other feminist theorists have taken up trans embodiment as a theoretical concept, feminism has largely failed to include trans women in knowledge production, consider their lived experiences, or meaningfully benefit them. Indeed, trans scholars have made important interventions into feminist and queer theory. Particularly relevant to this thesis is the work of Julia Serano (2007), who coins the term trans-misogyny to describe the vitriol and violence aimed at trans women for ‘choosing’ “to be female and/or feminine” when womanhood is deemed inferior (p. 311). As she writes, both trans and cis women are harmed by – and stand to benefit from challenging – the

pervasive notion of femininity as inferior, weak, disempowered, and passive. Serano argues it is essential that feminism recognize the experiences and contributions of trans women, explaining that what “unites feminists is not a shared history...but our shared commitment to fighting against the devaluation of femaleness and femininity” (2007, p. 311). Taken together, both Namaste (2009) and Serano (2007) emphasize that trans women are not objects for feminist inquiry nor are their knowledge and experiences tangential to feminist concerns; instead, they are active, important feminist subjects.

This thesis is also informed by sex-positive feminism, which understands sexuality not as a site of inherent danger and oppression but rather as one of potential liberation and pleasure. Khan (2017) writes that sex-positive feminism primarily emerged in the 1980s as a response to the radical feminist view of sex that dominated mainstream feminist discourse at the time.<sup>15</sup> Rather than seeing sexual pleasure as inherently suspect, sex-positive feminism celebrates it as a potential resource to challenge and subvert relations of domination, sometimes by re-appropriating practices from patriarchal culture (Khan, 2017). In contrast, a sex-negative approach views sexual practices like s/m or pornography as irreparably tainted by patriarchal violence. Given radical feminism’s penchant for criminalization as a solution to inequality, this can have serious effects for those, even feminists, who are having the ‘wrong’ kind of sex. As Gayle Rubin (1984/2011) explains, the arbitrary line drawn between ‘good’ sex (monogamous, heterosexual, vanilla) and ‘bad’ sex (kinky, blasphemous, pornographic) not only dismisses the morality and personhood of certain sexual subjects, but also makes these

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<sup>15</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, a radical feminist approach views sexuality as the root of women’s oppression and subordination by men, as exemplified by pornography, sex work, and sexual assault (for example, see MacKinnon, 1983). Introducing or strengthening criminal penalties for these ‘patriarchal’ expressions of sexuality has been a key strategy among radical feminists.

‘bad actors’ the target of social and legal sanctions that can have devastating consequences. A sex-positive framework challenges the line drawn between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex by suggesting sexual pleasure itself has value in and of itself (Kaplan, 2014).

The term sex-negative has been reappropriated by some feminists as a critique of compulsory sexuality. Kristina Gupta (2015) defines compulsory sexuality as “the assumption that all people are sexual” and the “social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality....and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity” (p. 132). Gupta explains that “the intensification of sexual desires, the adoption of new and varied sexual practices, and the consolidation of sexual identities” is funded in part by consumer capitalism, which pro-sex feminism and queer theory unintentionally reify by promoting sexuality as liberatory (2015, p. 144). Indeed, critics of sex-positive frameworks argue that they are rooted in neoliberal notions of individualism and agency and ignore the larger systemic issues surrounding sexual relationships and practices (Gupta, 2015; McClusky, 2009). Some feminists, like Lisa Downing (2012, 2013), propose a sex critical rather than sex-positive feminism, which subjects all sexual practices, including normative ones, to critical analysis of their underlying ideological effects. The implication, of course, is that sex-positivity *fails to do this* – a common thread amongst these critiques. Taking a different approach, Aya Gruber (2019) suggests combining queer theory with a “sex-indifferent” position to capture how feminist debates surrounding sexual harm use sex, granted unique importance by each side of the debate, as a stand in for other forms of social harm (p. 106). Essentially, she argues for

strategically decentering sex when examining “the thornier aspects of the contemporary debate over sex regulation and reform” (Gruber, 2019, p. 106).

I argue that a sex-positive framework does not foreclose critical examination of the construction of sexual identities and practices by viewing pleasure as an intrinsic good and a potential resource for liberation and empowerment. Sex-positive feminism does not argue that all people must be sexual to be freed from oppression; it suggests that sexual pleasure is an option in the feminist toolkit rather than being inherently patriarchal or dangerous. I reject the framing of the debate surrounding sex as an either-or choice in which feminists can either celebrate and enjoy sex *or* be critical of how sexuality is tied up in systemic relations of power, but never both. Further, as Rubin (1984/2011) argues, framing sex-positive and sex-negative feminism as two “equally extremist” poles that require a moderate middle ground is a false representation that only reinforces the marginalization of those whose sexual identities and/or practices are constructed as bad or wrong (p. 174). In the context of this thesis, sex-positivity does not signal an ““anything goes” libertarianism” that is devoid of critical analysis of sexuality and its role in systemic power relations (Rubin, 1984/2011, p. 174). Following Margo Kaplan (2014), I suggest that sexual pleasure is a human good in and of itself (a position also taken by some pro-sex robot scholars like McArthur, 2017). I take seriously the radical potential of sexual pleasure to subvert relations of domination, and I also acknowledge sexual pleasure as something inherently valuable even when it does not meet a political end. However, per Gruber (2019), sex is not the sole focus of my analysis; I am thoughtful of when sexual harm is used as a proxy for other harms and fears. In addition to informing my analysis of anti-sex robot discourses, sex-positive feminism helps give

this project its political orientation. As I describe in more detail later, it is important to me that this thesis provide an alternative to other (sex-negative) feminist responses to sex robots that fail to consider sex as something desirable or important.

Janet Halley (2006) has critiqued feminism for assuming that harm is inherent within gender relations. She proposes that feminism can be distilled down into the following key principles: there is a distinction between m (men, masculinities, etc.) and f (women, femininities, etc.); m has power over f; and most importantly, “feminism opposes the subordination of f” in the name of “justice and emancipation” (Halley, 2006, p. 23). Central to this framework is what Halley calls the “feminist politics of injury”, in which women are understood to be injured and incapable of causing harm, and men are understood as immune to injury (2006, p. 194). Gendered harm can only travel in one direction: from men, against women. Halley (2006) describes how the politics of injury renders feminism oblivious to its own immense productive power and how it may actually *cause* harm in the pursuit of its political goals. Ignoring harm towards men – and the very idea that men may be injured, *particularly by women* – is a serious epistemological deficiency. Further, by insisting upon women’s injury, feminism may unintentionally reify that women *ought* to be suffering (Halley, 2006, p. 210). What this means, Halley proposes, is that it is sometimes necessary to take a break from feminist theory and view things through a different lens.

My approach in this thesis is not animated by this politics of injury. Like Halley, I am critical of feminisms that perpetuate a static ontological understanding of gender and power by positioning all m as dominating all f, and solidifying m and f as a natural, unbreakable binary. Instead, I use feminist theory to position gender as central to my

analysis. In other words, I understand gender as a key line of insight into anti-sex robot discourses, but not specifically because of the ways that sex robots might reflect, reproduce, or challenge male dominance and harm towards women. As I will argue, the gendered relations of power here are far more complicated and fluid. I still “carry a brief for f” – gender equality matters – but I also recognize the complexity of how social and individual harms are experienced and distributed (Halley, 2006, p. 215-216).

Halley’s critique of feminism is indebted to the work of Black feminist scholars such as Angela Y. Davis (1981) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who argue that mainstream feminism has ignored or even perpetuated Black women’s experiences of systemic racism. Davis (1981) was critical of early radical feminists like Susan Brownmiller, whose widely-praised analysis of sexual violence against women Davis argued was “pervaded with racist ideas,” including stereotypes of Black men as sexual threats to white women (p. 178). Crenshaw (1991) is well known for her theory of intersectionality, now a mainstay in feminist work. Black women, she argues, sit at an intersection between sexism and racism; they experience both forms of oppression in unique ways from white women and Black men, yet their experiences have been largely ignored within feminism and anti-racism. Crenshaw rejects a universal experience of womanhood, suggesting instead that multiple systems of oppression intersect to contour women’s experiences of violence and subordination. Like sex-positive feminism and Halley’s politics of injury, intersectionality is a direct challenge to radical feminism because it undermines both the essentialized categories of ‘m’ and ‘f’ and the unilateral direction of gendered harm. Women can injure other women (e.g., by universalizing

white women's experiences), and women can injure men (e.g., by capitalizing on anti-Black racism and the construction of Black men as dangerous to white women).

Intersectionality is pervasive in feminist research, but it has also been critiqued. Jasbir K. Puar (2012) describes that in practice, intersectional feminism can work at times to ironically reinforce white women as the center of feminism by focusing on the *difference* of women of color. Further, she explains that because of its assumption of a humanist subject with innate identity features, intersectionality may be less equipped to address the instability of the subject or the construction of the human/nonhuman binary. Puar proposes that intersectionality may thus be less suited to account for "how societies of control tweak and modulate bodies as matter, not predominately through signification or identity interpellation" (2012, p. 63). However, she also suggests that intersectionality is particularly useful for examining the experiences of certain bodies who are subject to discipline through inclusion/exclusion (Puar, 2012, p. 63). In this thesis I take up intersectionality in both ways, drawing on both the concept itself and Puar's critique. Like Puar, my work seeks to destabilize subject positions and identity categories and challenge the human/nonhuman divide. At the same time, intersectionality informs my critique of radical feminism and its essentialist and universalizing construction of 'real' womanhood and women's experiences. I examine how anti-sex robot feminist arguments obscure and/or perpetuate relations of domination relevant to a critical evaluation of sex robots, such as heteronormativity and white supremacy, through their single-minded focus on sex/gender. Additionally, control through exclusion along lines of 'identity categories' is relevant in my analysis, because of how trans women – singled out for their



gender identity – are constructed within anti-sex robot work as outside of both feminism and ‘real’ womanhood.

Alongside feminist theory, this project also draws on posthumanism.

Posthumanism is a difficult approach to pin down, as it is taken up in different ways by different scholars in multiple disciplines (Umbrello, 2018). Most generally, posthumanism disrupts the seemingly natural boundaries between human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, and agentic and nonagentic. A posthumanist approach destabilizes the human subject by arguing that it is not natural or pre-existing, but instead is only intelligible in relation to the nonhuman. It challenges the humanist and anthropocentric assumptions – lingering relics of Enlightenment philosophy<sup>16</sup> – that humans have innate characteristics (such as agency and intentionality) that make them uniquely special and important, that they are separate from and superior to nonhuman entities, and that human rights, progress, and self-determination are inherent goods (Smart & Smart, 2017; Umbrello, 2018; Wolfe, 2010).<sup>17</sup> Despite the reification of the human/nonhuman binary, in practice some humans have been constructed as sub-human and more akin to animals or objects, and thus as not entitled to the special rights and dignities afforded to humans, for example through the logics of colonialism and enslavement (Malatino, 2017; Smart & Smart, 2015; Wolfe, 2010). These logics of exclusion and domination are one reason to

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<sup>16</sup> For an in-depth description of humanism as a philosophical tradition, see Davies (1997).

<sup>17</sup> Juanita Sundberg (2014) writes that it is important to recognize that the humanist and anthropocentric assumptions critiqued by posthumanism are not universal, but rather are specific features of Euro-Western ways of thinking (p. 35). As Zoe Todd (2016) points out, posthumanism is deeply indebted to the traditional knowledges and academic work of Indigenous peoples; however, this debt is rarely acknowledged by the major players in this field. Recognizing the sentience of the natural world and humanity’s deep interconnections with it is not ‘new’ or revolutionary when Indigenous peoples have been conceptualizing the world in this way for centuries (Todd, 2016). For one example of how Indigenous thought (in this instance, the knowledge of Koyukon Athabascans) blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman, see Watson and Huntington (2008).

critique and move beyond humanism. Another, Alan and Josephine Smart (2015) argue, is that humanism ironically fails to capture what it means to be human, because we are inseparable from our relationships with nonhuman beings and objects (p. 6). Humans are deeply dependent on the “more-than-human elements” that we shape and are shaped by, and a posthumanist approach centers these relationships (Smart & Smart, 2017, p. 2).

This focus on the interconnectedness of humans with nonhuman entities and objects makes posthumanism uniquely positioned to examine our relationships with technologies and how technological advancement shapes the meanings we attach to the human and nonhuman. Despite the novelty of technological advancements like sex robots, a posthumanist approach acknowledges that our relationship with technology has *always* been inseparable from our humanity (Smart & Smart, 2017). Donna Haraway’s (1985/2006) concept of the cyborg is a touchstone in this literature. The cyborg, she writes, is “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism” that has emerged at a time when the boundaries between human and animal, human and machine, and physical and non-physical are blurry and fluid (Haraway, 1985/2006, p. 104). Cyborgs may be “the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism,” but they do not have to be faithful to these violent origins (Haraway, 1985/2006, p. 105). In fact, as Haraway writes, cyborg imagery opens up new possibilities for feminist theory and practice through its embrace of irony, partiality, fluidity, fragmentation, and contradiction. First, as the cyborg reveals a breakdown of boundaries and the possibility to thoughtfully construct new ones, feminists must resist the urge to reinscribe dualisms and rely on “universal, totalizing theory” (p. 116). Second, feminists should not ally themselves with nature against technology, and must “[refuse] an anti-science

metaphysics, [or] a demonology of technology” (Haraway, 1985/2006, p. 116). Cyborgs may be strange and monstrous but they are not the enemy of feminism. The challenges to dualism, identity, and universality posed by technological advancement are instead incredibly useful to feminist thought.

Crucially, Hilary Malatino (2017) points out that cyborg politics and embodiment are not inherently radical and transformative, although they tend to be taken up this way. Technological advancement and its blurring of traditional boundaries has also spurred the rise of transhumanism, the view that technology is a way for humans to transcend the limitations of our biology, materiality, and embodiment by biohacking everything from disease, to aging, to death (Malatino, 2017; Smart & Smart, 2017). There is a profoundly ageist, ableist, and fatphobic streak in promises that technology will eradicate obesity, ugliness, cognitive decline, and disability; further, biohacking represents a hyper-individualized, commoditized way for the wealthy to pay “to become the sovereign authors of their own humanity” (Malatino, 2017, p. 182). Posthumanist scholars are very clear to demarcate transhumanism from posthumanism, and argue that transhumanism’s goal of transcending materiality and the natural world reifies rather than challenges humanist assumptions (Malatino, 2017; Smart & Smart, 2017). In practice, however, I suggest the distinction between the two is messier. It is difficult to neatly separate a ‘good’ posthumanist use of sex robots (e.g., building relationships with the nonhuman and challenging normative understandings of humanity) from a ‘bad’ transhumanist one (e.g., choosing a sex robot as a partner because they are perfectly suited to you and will never age or die). Technological advancements can be taken up for multiple, even

contradictory reasons, and neither posthumanism nor transhumanism is *inherently* progressive or transformative.

A useful concept pulled from the realm of posthumanism and other new materialisms is *assemblage* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). John Law (2004) writes that assemblage is “a process of bundling, of assembling...of recursive self-assembling in which the elements put together are not fixed in shape, do not belong to a larger pre-given list but are constructed at least in part as they are entangled together” (p. 42). It is a joining together of disparate elements – people, places, ideas, things – into something new which comes into being through those relationships and interconnections. As Puar (2012) describes, assemblage is also a useful concept politically, because assemblages “encompass not only ongoing attempts to destabilize identities and grids, but also the forces that continue to mandate and enforce them” (p. 63). In other words, assemblage is a useful way to conceptualize how subjectivities and identity categories come to appear and function as fixed in the first place, as well as for challenging this apparent fixedness. For the purposes of this thesis, I use this term to signify the diverse array of concepts my analysis encompasses. In examining anti-sex robot discourses, this thesis explores a whole assemblage of related things – the materialization of both human and nonhuman bodies as gendered and sexed, fears surrounding technology, annihilation anxiety, disagreements about what intimate relationships are and ought to be, sex-negative feminism, normative assumptions about heterosexuality and what it means to be a man or a woman. I bring these together to suggest that anti-sex robot sentiments cannot be isolated from this larger context within which they are constituted.

At face value, my methodological choice of discourse analysis and theoretical choice of posthumanism seem incompatible, if not oppositional. Much of posthumanist and other new materialist work is motivated by a turn *away* from the discursive and towards the materiality of the social. As Cary Wolfe (2010) explains, the normative human subject is produced through the transcendence of our biological, material embodiment, and therefore a posthumanist approach brings materiality and embodiment back to the forefront (p. xv). Karen Barad (2003) likewise writes that “language has been granted too much power” to the effect that “the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter” (p. 801). Both Wolfe (2010) and Barad (2003) point out that language is a key site where the boundary between human and nonhuman is articulated. Therefore, Barad (2003) argues that to keep discourse as a meaningful analytical concept, it cannot be understood as words or language (i.e., as a uniquely human phenomenon) but rather as “boundary-making practices” that enact matter as bounded, meaningful, and propertied (p. 818). Research that affirms the primacy of the discursive over the material simply reinscribes the human/nonhuman divide.<sup>18</sup>

I cannot fully reconcile this tension. This project analyzes human language to examine how we understand ourselves and our relationship to nonhuman entities.

However, I do not reject or subsume the material and I take seriously embodied,

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<sup>18</sup> Indigenous and anti-colonial scholars have also critiqued the fetishization of written sources in academia and elsewhere. For example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes that Indigenous knowledges and histories may be “stored within genealogies, within the landscape, within weavings and carvings, even within the personal names that many people carried” (p. 34). However, writing “has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions” (Smith, 2012, p. 30). The primacy of writing and literacy, rooted in colonialism, has facilitated the delegitimization and erasure of Indigenous epistemologies. As Michael Marker (2015, 2019) writes, place, land, and materiality hold a special importance in Indigenous scholarship that cannot necessarily be captured through conventional academic (i.e., Euro-American) writing. See also Abdi (2007).

biological experiences – loneliness, sexual desire – as real and meaningful rather than dismissing them as weaknesses to be transcended. Further, discourse analysis need not dispute the materiality of social life and the significance of matter. Indeed, the idea that discourses have meaningful “material and phenomenological consequences” for social actors is a central principle of feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). In drawing from these two different approaches, I follow Butler’s (1993) articulation of how the discursive and the material are inextricably linked. She argues that conceptualizing discourse as productive does not mean that language precedes or is the originator of all matter, but rather that “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (Butler, 1993, p. 10). We cannot reference materiality *outside* of discourse, and our reference in turn shapes that materiality. For instance, we experience our physical bodies and their urges as real, pressing, and sometimes in tension with our minds, but how we communicate these bodily experiences to ourselves and others is discursive and tied up with the ideological strands of our language systems. In this view, language does not precede or outweigh materiality; instead, the two are always entwined, interdependent, and irreducible to each other (Butler, 1993, p. 69). Ultimately, what it means to have a body, to be human, and to have a relationship with the nonhuman are central questions raised by sex robots and are key to my analysis. Therefore, bringing posthumanism into my analysis is vital to parsing through the threads of anti-sex robot discourses – even if some tension lingers there.

In examining the intersections of sex and technology, I also draw on the framework of moral panic, first popularized by Stanley Cohen (1972) in his study of youth subcultures in 1960s Britain. A moral panic, write Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-

Yehuda (2011), is an “*outbreak of moral concern over a supposed threat from an agent of corruption that is out of proportion to its actual danger or potential harm*” (p. 21).

Moral panics emerge in response to a perceived threat to morality and/or the social order, often posed by non-normative subjects, the “cultural scapegoats whose deviant conduct appalls onlookers so powerfully precisely because it relates to personal fears and unconscious wishes” (Garland, 2008, p. 15). For instance, young people are a popular target of moral panics, both as the instigators of moral decay and as the most vulnerable victims of its effects (Cohen, 1972; Orben, 2020). Moral entrepreneurs then spring into action to campaign against the threat, with panics sometimes resulting in lasting social change and sometimes fading away (Cricher, 2008). David Garland (2008) identifies five key features of moral panics, per Cohen’s work: concern is raised about a potential threat to the moral order; there is hostility towards the ‘folk devils’ seen as threatening; there is consensus about the nature of the threat; the reaction to the perceived threat is disproportionate to its actual danger; and the response is volatile, meaning it can disappear from relevance and concern as quickly as it appeared (p. 11).

More recently, the field has shifted away from a homogenous, monolithic, consensus-based understanding of moral panics (i.e., a unified society versus powerless social deviants) towards one that is more heterogenous, fragmented, and complex. As Garland (2008) describes, contemporary moral panics are more likely to “[resemble] American-style ‘culture wars,’” with some experts and activists making sensationalist moral claims and others countering them (p. 17). Some folk devils may also actively challenge their construction as deviant or dangerous. In this way, “the meaning and value

of the conduct in question...[tends] to be much more contested, and the power imbalances between contending groups much less asymmetrical” (Garland, 2008, p. 17).

As with my use of assemblage, I take some liberty here with how I define and apply moral panic in this thesis. I am interested in moral panic as an analytical concept rather than as an empirical phenomenon requiring a checklist of defining attributes. I see this concept as a thread that ties together the fears surrounding gender, sex, and technology that animate anti-sex robots discourses. Technology and sex have long been the subject of moral panic and are perhaps its most archetypal targets. The written word, novels, telephones, crossword puzzles, radio, television, movies, video games, fantasy roleplaying games, the internet, and social media have all elicited moral panics about the negative societal changes critics argue they will inevitably bring (Bowman, 2016; Orben, 2020). Amy Orben (2020) describes that technology panics happen in a “Sisyphean cycle”: each time a new technology emerges, almost identical fears and anxieties reemerge (often centering on addiction, immoral behavior, protecting the vulnerable, and societal decline) (p. 1144). She identifies technological determinism, the idea that technological innovation is the primary driver of major societal change and “society...[has] little power to influence the technologies themselves,” as a key contributing factor to these recurring fears (Orben, 2020, p. 1146). New technologies thus become a convenient scapegoat for unwanted societal changes.

Whereas technology panics focus on external emerging threats to the social order, sexual panics focus on internal threats posed by those perceived as sexually dangerous. Herdt (2009) posits that sexual panics are “a form or subspecies of moral panic” in which “the sexual other, whether oversexed, or undersexed...is stripped of rights, and the



cultural imagination becomes obsessed with anxieties about what this evil sexuality will do to warp society and future generations” (p. 5). Targets have included pornography, sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS, sexual education in schools, and child sexual abuse (Herdt, 2009; Irvine, 2008; Lancaster, 2011; Rubin, 1984/2011). Rubin (1984/2011) describes that “sexual activities often function as signifiers for personal and social apprehensions to which they have no intrinsic connection. During a moral panic, such fears attach to some unfortunate sexual activity or population” (p. 168). Those deemed sexually deviant or dangerous become the targets of morality campaigns, social sanctions, and sometimes criminal punishment; the effects of the panic also extend to the general public through lasting social and legal changes (Rubin, 1984/2011, p. 168). As with technology panics, fears of societal decline, immoral behaviour, and the corruption of the vulnerable (i.e., women and children) are pervasive (Irvine, 2008; Lancaster, 2011; Rubin, 1984/2011). Janice M. Irvine (2008) writes that emotions play an important role in both driving sexual panics and reifying a hierarchy of sexual identities and practices. She describes that through sexual panics, “affective conventions of sexuality – in particular, sexual shame, stigma, fear, disgust – enforce and reinforce this regulatory system” in which some sexualities are produced as normal and natural and others as disgusting or dangerous (Irvine, 2008, p. 3). Ultimately, sexual panics reaffirm what Rubin calls “the imaginary line between good and bad” sexual identities and practices (1984/2011, p. 151).

Some scholars have moved away from moral panic, instead using concepts like moralization, moral regulation, and risk society to think through these episodes of moralized fear and anxiety (Hier, 2008; Hunt, 2011). For instance, Sean P. Hier (2008) argues that the volatility of moralization (his term for moral panic) is an extension of

rational governance and risk management through which ‘the self’ and ‘others’ are produced. The moral panic framework has been criticized because the term itself implies a normative stance: that the reaction to a social issue is overblown, exaggerated, or irrational (Hier, 2008). The problematic assumption here is that a researcher can somehow objectively determine whether a response is disproportionate (Garland, 2008, p. 22). Like Hier (2008), I suggest that moral panics help produce the ‘dangerous others’ that they target. However, I continue to find moral panic a conceptually useful term, in part because it helps link anti-sex robot work to past radical feminist campaigns that scholars argue helped fuel and were fueled by sex panics (Duggan, 1995; Rubin, 1984/2011). Further, I do not deny that I take a normative stance in this thesis. I critique the work of anti-sex robot moral entrepreneurs and aim to offer an alternative, more critical and nuanced feminist response to this emerging technology. This is based on critical analysis rather than empirical evidence, because sex robots are a new and emerging technology and there is no data to suggest whether the fears surrounding them are overblown. However, I do not suggest that anti-sex robot work is *irrational*. Instead, I follow Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2011), who argue that “moral panic is always about *something*” (p. 22). As I will show in Chapters Three and Four, fears surrounding sex robots are entangled with deeper social anxieties and center on familiar ‘dangerous others’. I argue that these fears speak more to the present social moment and the lingering influence of the past than what harms (or benefits) this new technology may actually bring in the future.

A final fundamental piece of my theoretical framework is the notion that the past – discourses, subjectivities, relations of power – is not static or ‘over’ but persists in the

present. One place this can already be seen is in the echoes of Sex Wars discourses that have shown up in the first two chapters of this thesis; these arguments and fractures within feminism are now four decades old yet keep bubbling up in my discussion of sex robots. Avery Gordon (2008) calls this a haunting, in which a ghostly presence alerts the researcher to “a determining formation that seems inoperative (like slavery) or invisible (like racially gendered capitalism) but that is nonetheless alive and enforced” and having some lingering effect on the present (p. 183).<sup>19</sup> William N. Eskridge (2000) uses the metaphor of sedimentation to explain how older discourses continue to shape the new discourses that seem to replace them. As he writes, “the old arguments do not disappear; they remain as foundational layers over which new arguments intellectually sediment” (Eskridge, 2000, p. 1331). The old discursive layers remain under the new discursive layers, shaping them even in their apparent absence. Sometimes, in certain social contexts, these older layers peek through or are exposed. In this way, discourses are “cumulative and layered rather than competitive and displacing” (p. 1331).

An alternative metaphor offered by Jacqui M. Alexander (2005) is the palimpsest, “a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly visible” (p. 190). The past and present are (re)inscribed on the same document, with lingering remnants of past inscriptions mixed in with the newest ones. In this view, the present is “structured through the “old” scrambled, palimpsestic nature of time... [which] thus rescrambles the “here and now” and the “then and there” to a “here and there” and a “then and now””

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<sup>19</sup> This notion of haunting is rooted in the work of Black writers and scholars who grapple with the ongoing legacies of enslavement, segregation, and ongoing anti-Blackness. See, for instance, the work of Audre Lorde (1973), Toni Morrison (1987/2004), and Christina Sharpe (2016).

(Alexander, 2005, p. 190). Ultimately, a key theme in this project is that despite the “patina of ‘newness’” associated with sex robots and other technological advancements, they and the new behaviours and norms associated with them are ultimately entangled with “pre-existing social practices” and discourses (Vitis, 2019, p. 204).

### **Methods: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

To examine anti-sex robot materials for their underlying ideological assumptions, I use a feminist critical discourse analysis. What is *discourse*? The term, Stephanie Taylor (2001) describes, is “wide-ranging and slippery” and defined differently by different scholars and within different disciplines (p. 8). Drawing from Michel Foucault, Sara Mills (2004) identifies three definitions of discourse “used almost interchangeably” by most discourse theorists: “utterances and texts which have meanings and...effects in the real world,” groups of statements that are “regulated in some way and...seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common,” and the “rules and structures” that produce utterances and texts (p. 6). As Mills (2004) writes, Foucault is one of the most influential theorists on discourse studies, and it is his approach that I use to frame my project.

According to Foucault (1976/1990), discourse does not simply represent or reflect the social world but instead *does things* – renders certain ways of being and doing as knowable and legitimate, establishes the categories by which we understand and make sense of the world and ourselves, and demarcates the boundaries of the unknowable and indescribable. More than language, discourse is “something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect) rather than something which exists in and of itself” (Mills, 2004, p. 15). Mills (2004) writes that this approach hinges on the interplay

of power, truth, and knowledge as “this configuration is essentially what constitutes discourse for him” (p. 15). Foucault (1975/1977, 1976/1990) argues that power is not simply top-down and repressive but rather is diffuse, complex, and productive; the exercise of power incites discourse and materializes ways of being and knowing. Knowledge and power – or knowledge/power – exist in a circular, co-constitutive relationship (Foucault, 1980). Likewise, truth is not an objective, external thing but rather is an effect of power that is actively produced, often with much effort, and “induces regular effects of power” of its own (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). Power incites discourse, which shapes how we come to know ourselves and the world around us, which feeds back into relations of power, and so on.

Caroline Hodes (2018) writes that “critical discourse analysis...is neither a method or a theory” but rather a linguistics paradigm and approach to research used by scholars in the humanities and social sciences (p. 74). CDA is an umbrella term that covers a heterogeneous group of methodological approaches, used by scholars in a variety of disciplines, who employ varying theoretical frameworks to understand their research and the world (Barker, 2008; Hodes, 2018). In general, this approach involves using the framework of discourse to critically examine the relationship between language and the social world, with a focus on how power, history, and ideology shape and are shaped by this relationship (Wodak, 2001). Speech, written documents, and even bodies (see Butler, 1990, 1993) can all be understood and analyzed as texts, or “specific and unique realization[s] of a discourse” (Wodak, 2008, p. 6). As Hodes (2018) describes, there is no single ‘correct’ way to conduct a critical discourse analysis. Unbound by a specific theoretical or methodological approach, scholars using CDA generally “take a pragmatic

approach to theory and method by relating theoretical questions and concepts directly to the specific problems under investigation and choosing those methods that will equip them with the best tools to answer their research questions” (Hodes, 2018, p. 74). In other words, under the umbrella of CDA there are a diverse range of theoretical and methodological tools for researchers to draw on.

The goal of CDA is not to determine the truth of a text or discourse; indeed, as Meyer (2001) writes, “strict ‘objectivity’ cannot be achieved” through this approach (p. 30). Instead, scholars aim “to discover the support mechanisms which allow [a statement] to be said and keep it in place” as authoritative or legitimate (Mills, 2004, p. 45). CDA is explicitly political, typically focusing on uncovering unequal relations of power, and requires the researcher to take a normative stance on the topic being examined (Gibbs, 2018, p. 99). To this end, examining the larger context surrounding discourses and texts is a key part of CDA. Discourses always work in relation to other discourses, and texts are always connected to other texts; these two relationships are called, respectively, *interdiscursivity* and *intertextuality* (Wodak, 2008, p. 3). Even hegemonic discourses are not immovable, and are constantly being challenged and undermined even as they are reproduced and reified. Discourse is ultimately “a site of struggle, where forces of social (re)production and contestation are played out” (Lazar, 2007, p. 144).

A *feminist* critical discourse analysis focuses on “gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations” as important sites of discursive production, negotiation, and contestation (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). Michelle M. Lazar (2018) articulates six key tenets of feminist CDA. Several of these principles overlap with conventional CDA: discourse and the social are co-constitutive; positive social change is an explicit goal; and power,

conceptualized in the Foucauldian sense as diffuse, complex, and productive, is a central focus of analysis. Additionally, feminist CDA understands gender as a hegemonic ideological structure that shapes and constrains social institutions and individual practices, but can also be challenged or undermined. Gender “exists in a matrix of other socially stratified identities including sexuality, race/ethnicity, [and] class,” such that it is “neither materially experienced nor discursively constructed in the same way for all women and men” (Lazar, 2018, p. 373). In other words, gender is complex, contextual, and always linked to other discursively mediated identity categories. Critical reflexivity is also a central practice of feminist CDA. Researchers are attentive to how feminist discourses can be taken up in ambiguous or harmful ways, and self-reflect on how their own positionality impacts their work. Finally, this approach acknowledges that “gender struggles are similar, yet different – and vice versa – across many parts of the world,” and places emphasis on localized, contextual analysis that still engages with “wider social and discursive processes” (Lazar, 2018, p. 375).

CDA has been taken up widely to study gender relations but, as Heiko Motschenbacher (2018) writes, it is also useful to examine sex and sexualities. Like gender, sexuality is a site of discursive production, reification, and contestation. Indeed, as Foucault (1976/1990) argues, the very concept of sexuality as an innate and essential identity category has materialized over time through the exercise of discursive power. Likewise, which sexual identities, desires, and practices are considered normal, natural, and socially acceptable, and which are deemed deviant, pathological, or dangerous, is a function of discourse (Motschenbacher, 2018). For scholars interested in the discursive production of sexuality, Motschenbacher explains that “public media genres” are a useful

site of analysis as they both “[represent] our social world in certain ways” and reify or challenge discourses of sexuality (2018, p. 389).

I selected a feminist critical discourse analysis for this project for a few different reasons. First, this approach is appropriate for the sort of data that is available on sex robots and accessible to me as an MA student writing a thesis during a pandemic. It suits my theoretical framework (at least to a point, as discussed previously) and is a useful approach for examining gender and sexuality, both of which are of particular interest to this project. The flexibility of choosing a theoretical and methodological framework that best suited my research, rather than a prescriptive set of steps and rules, also appealed to me. Most importantly, feminist CDA offers a way to go beyond the obvious or common-sense responses to anti-sex robot rhetoric. Real-life sex robots are a new phenomenon and it would be easy to categorize opposition to them as an equally new, isolated kind of thing. I propose that it is not. A key principle of CDA is that discourses and texts always connect to others and arise out of a particular time and space, in relation to the interplay of power, history, and ideology. How are anti-sex robot discourses and texts linked to other discourses and texts, particularly feminist ones? What underlying ideological assumptions, truth claims, subjectivities, etc. do they (re)produce? In what contexts do these discourses emerge? These are the questions that animate my analysis.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Tim Rapley (2011) refers to the data collection process as generating an archive, in recognition that it is an active practice by the researcher and that data includes a variety of different materials (in my case, both textual and audio-visual). In researching



and selecting materials for analysis, I played an active role “in producing [these] materials as ‘data’” (Rapley, 2011, p. 9). My dataset includes a selection of different materials to represent CASR, including presentations from their July 2020 conference, blog posts from their website, and interviews and talks given by founder Kathleen Richardson and other scholars and activists associated with the organization. I located data by conducting internet searches and by looking for materials cited by other materials (for instance, one article referencing or linking to another). Initially, my intention was to include every available anti-sex robot source I could locate. However, my preliminary list of materials was far too large for the time and space limitations of this thesis. This data was narrowed down, first, by focusing exclusively on CASR and its associated scholars and activists, and second, by limiting my sources to those published from 2018 onward to ensure I was examining the most recent and relevant arguments.<sup>20</sup> I also excluded materials that focus on child sex robots and/or dolls, which raise issues of pedophilia that are beyond the scope of this project. My primary strategy was then to use an iterative process in which the preliminary themes I identified in my initial dataset helped me choose which materials to examine in my larger analysis.

To do this, I conducted a preliminary analysis of the sources: reading articles, listening to audio files, transcribing videos, and tracking evidence of the initial themes I identified. I was particularly interested in examining themes that have not yet been explored in existing scholarship on anti-sex robot work.<sup>21</sup> I then categorized the sources

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<sup>20</sup> Data collection concluded in March 2021.

<sup>21</sup> For example, several scholars have examined sex work in relation to sex robots (Carpenter, 2017; Danaher, Earp, & Sandberg, 2017; DiTecco, 2020; Klein & Lin, 2018). Therefore, although references to sex work are pervasive in anti-sex robot arguments, this was not a key theme I identified for my own analysis. See Chapter One for an overview of existing sex robot scholarship.

by these themes, excluding those that did not fit in a group. For instance, I was interested in examining what I saw as undercurrents of transphobia in many of CASR's arguments. Following my identification of this initial theme, I chose sources that helped me tease out the underlying ideological assumptions about gender and biological sex in anti-sex robot discourses. My final dataset contains 22 sources: 12 videos, 7 blog posts, 2 podcasts, and 1 audio file. For a full list of sources, see Appendix A.

One difficulty of relying on online sources is that the internet is always changing. Websites, articles, videos, and blog posts are edited or deleted. This was a challenge when accessing sources from CASR's website, because the campaign deleted a significant number of blog posts and then shut its site down for maintenance for several months during the course of this project. For this reason, I occasionally rely on the Wayback Machine, a free internet archive, to access materials that have since been removed by CASR. In the reference list, archived sources are dated according to when they were originally posted online, not when they were archived. The URLs associated with these sources link to the archived version. Please note that not all of my materials are still available in their original location. Sources from the CASR were retrieved as of March 2021 and may have changed since data collection concluded; this date is also noted in the citations for these materials.

Martin Barker (2008) points out that while a qualitative dataset, which he calls a corpus, cannot meet the empirical rigor of a quantitative sample, qualitative researchers should still have "good grounds" for their selections (p. 163). He suggests that if possible, qualitative researchers ought to justify the significance of their corpus using independent evidence (Barker, 2008, p. 165). It is difficult to independently justify my data collection

because there is very little information on sex robots, and no empirical research that is relevant to my research question that might point toward a particular sample. However, references to Richardson and CASR are pervasive throughout the literature on sex robots, particularly in scholarship that examines those opposed to this technology. Furthermore, CASR has ramped up its online presence in 2020 and 2021, hosting a virtual conference, collaborating with other radical feminist organizations, staying active on social media, rebranding the organization, and launching a redesigned website. To me, this suggests that the work of the campaign is worthy of more in-depth analysis. I also recognize the limitations of this project. To be clear, this thesis does not intend to tell the singular ‘truth’ of sex robots or make universal statements or generalizations. There are plenty of other analytical threads to pull on here and many other angles that inquiry into anti-sex robot discourses could take. Ultimately, I hope that this research can serve as a jumping off point for future scholarship.

Analysis took place in several different stages. My aim was to uncover and critically examine the underlying ideologies, power relations, and truth claims of my selection of texts. My initial reading of each source served as a preliminary analysis; in my notes, I flagged key themes, overlaps between sources, and areas of interest for further explanation. I also transcribed audio-visual materials, again making note of the themes and ideas that jumped out at me from the sources.<sup>22</sup> I then thematically coded the resulting textual data with NVivo software. Graham R. Gibbs (2018) describes thematic coding as a form of “intensive reading” in which the researcher goes beyond face-value, common-sense, or descriptive understandings of the text(s) to examine the underlying

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<sup>22</sup> Due to accessibility, some audio-visual sources were transcribed in full for textual analysis, while others were subject to a preliminary analysis of key passages and transcribed partially.

analytical and theoretical themes (p. 57). Thematic coding involves selecting and classifying segments of each text to “establish a framework of thematic ideas” about the dataset as a whole; these classifications, or codes, are then categorized, compared, analyzed, and theorized (Gibbs, 2018, p. 54). I used a template analysis approach, in which the researcher creates a preliminary coding framework based on a subset of their data (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 203). This framework is flexible, allowing it to be amended as needed throughout the coding process to best fit the data (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 203). Many of my codes and themes first emerged during the initial reading of my texts; these formed my preliminary framework, which I then revised and refined during subsequent analysis and NVivo coding. Coding took place in two cycles, with the first cycle akin to a “first draft” and then second cycle a “revised draft” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 193). For a complete list of my final codes and subcodes, see Appendix B. Throughout the research process, I also kept informal analytical memos to document the progression of the project, work through challenges and roadblocks, and jot down insights and ideas.

### ***A Brief Note on Ethical Considerations***

This project does not involve any human (or robot) participants, and so no formal ethics review was required by Carleton University, sought by the author, or granted by an institutional Research Ethics Board prior to its completion. However, that is not to say there are no ethical considerations required by this work. There are, and in this final section I will briefly address them.

First, my positionality as a researcher is relevant here. Even if we accept, as I do, that identity categories are messy, unstable, partial, and linked to particular

epistemological imperialisms (Puar, 2012), my experiences as a white, straight, cisgender, middle-class, able-bodied woman have undoubtedly shaped my worldview and my work. This project is deeply indebted to the research, theory, literature, art, activism, and advocacy of people of color, particularly Black and Indigenous women, and queer, non-binary, and trans folks.<sup>23</sup> It could not exist without this important foundational work, for which I am deeply grateful. My positionality as a researcher has also impacted my data collection, my analysis, my coding choices, what themes I chose to focus my attention on, my theoretical framework, and the structure and writing of this thesis. As Saldaña (2013) describes, a researcher's unique individual personality impacts their analytical decisions as much as their relationship with the data, style of note-taking, social position, theoretical framework, and methodological approach (p. 7). The aim of this project is not objective empiricism; instead, I recognize and try to attend to the subjectivity and partiality inherent to this type of qualitative analysis. As described earlier, reflexivity – attending thoughtfully and critically to one's positionality as a researcher – is a key part of feminist practice and methodology, including my own.

My work is also not politically neutral, nor does it aim to be. As previously mentioned, a goal of feminist critical discourse analysis (and discourse studies more generally) is positive social change. In the present moment, sex robots are contested ground, and the question of who gets to claim *the* 'feminist' response to this emerging set of technologies, norms, and relations is an important one to answer. How feminist scholars engage with this technology now will impact the design, use, and social effects

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<sup>23</sup> Individuals whose work has been influential on my scholarship and shaped my understanding of racism, colonialism, heterosexism, and transphobia include, but are not limited to, Dean Spade, Robin Maynard, Vivek Shraya, Alok Vaid-Menon, Sara Ahmed, Ivan Coyote, Jasbir K. Puar, Sherene Razack, Audra Simpson, Lee Maracle, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Monture.

of sex robots in the future. Disputing sex-negative responses to new technologies is an important, ongoing project for sex-positive and sex-indifferent feminist scholars and activists. This thesis contributes to a growing number of pro-sex feminist and queer voices exploring sex robots and what they mean for our collective future.

I am also particularly concerned about the normalization of transphobia from individuals and groups who call themselves feminist. I argue that there is little political utility and a significant amount of harm in naturalizing the connection between binary sex and womanhood. As a cisgender woman, I am not a target of transphobic harassment and violence. However, as Sara Ahmed (2016) writes, chipping away at the walls that trap us in (and exclude others from) a narrowly defined category of ‘woman’ is a collective project that we can all learn to be attentive to and engage in. She explains:

When we are not at home, when we are asked where we are from or who we are, or even what we are, we experience a chip, chip, chip, a hammering away at our being. To experience that hammering is to be given a hammer, a tool through which we, too, can chip away at the surfaces of what is, or who is, including the very categories through which personhood is made meaningful – categories of sex and gender, for instance, that have chipped away at us.” (Ahmed, 2016, 22)

In other words, when we experience the harm of oppression, we can learn a new skill – we see the sometimes invisible walls that pin each of us into normative subject positions and are handed a tool to begin chipping away at these walls. Ahmed calls this an affinity of hammers: a reciprocal project of breaking down harmful categories and norms, enlarging the spaces we exist in, cracking through institutional barriers, allowing others in or out of the room of ‘womanhood’, and creating space for new and different ways of

being. Chipping away at these categories of personhood is a collective effort that benefits us all. However, as Ahmed writes, some feminisms choose to build walls to protect a narrow definition of womanhood, at the expense of reifying harmful categories and excluding others (2016, p. 32). This means that sometimes feminism must be the object we chip away at (Ahmed, 2016, p. 32). This project aims to be a hammer on those ostensibly feminist walls – “chip, chip, chip” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 33).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have described the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this thesis. The bulk of this chapter has been dedicated to laying out the theoretical framework of my project, which weaves together approaches including sex-positive feminism, queer theory, and posthumanism. Next, I gave an overview of feminist critical discourse analysis and described my analytical process, including my approaches to data collection, sampling, and coding. Finally, I discussed some of the ethical considerations of my work and located myself as a researcher. The final two chapters examine my research findings. Each chapter focuses on one key theme from my analysis, centering around a set of discourses identified in my data: Chapter Three examines sex robots and ‘real’ womanhood, and Chapter Four explores sex robots, love, and relationships.

### Chapter Three – Sex Robots and Womanhood

In this chapter, I explore how ‘real’ womanhood is discursively defined, understood, and defended in feminist anti-sex robot arguments. I begin by giving an overview of the discourses of womanhood that circulate in these arguments, explaining how womanhood becomes inextricably linked to subjugation, female-sexed bodies, and personhood. As I explain, the policing of real womanhood not only indicates who can be a woman, it also demarcates who is *excluded* from this category. I argue that both implicitly and explicitly transphobic arguments are used by anti-sex robot feminists to position trans women, like sex robots, as outside of and threatening to ‘real’ womanhood. I then explore the links between transphobia and the fears surrounding sex robots, arguing that feminist anti-sex robot activism is driven by underlying anxieties that women are replaceable, irrelevant, and at risk of annihilation. Drawing on feminist problematizations of biological sex and posthumanist challenges to the sanctity of the human, I examine how trans women and sex robots are presented as threats to the stability of categories cherished by anti-sex robot feminism. I conclude with some thoughts on whether clinging to narrow constructions of womanhood and personhood can ever serve feminist political goals, and draw an important distinction between the implications of anti-sex robot discourse and anti-trans discourse.

#### Discourses of Womanhood

Sex robots, obviously, are not considered real women by anti-sex robot feminists: they are man-made machines, artificial constructions in the shape of female bodies. As Richardson argues, they represent “the logical endpoint of patriarchy” in which “woman



herself is totally man-made,” shaped to meet men’s desires and “stripped of any kind of subjectivity” (Fein, 2021). Artificial women, such as sex robots, are positioned in feminist anti-sex robot arguments as inherently threatening to the real women they mimic, for reasons I will explore in a later section. First, I propose it is necessary to examine who exactly the ‘real’ women are that are in need of defending from artificial women. What does it mean to be a woman? In this section, I examine how womanhood is defined and understood in feminist anti-sex robot arguments. I identify three primary ways women are discursively constructed within these arguments: as victims of patriarchy, as female, and as human persons. Any attempts to expand or redefine these boundaries, which anti-sex robot feminists argue are natural and innate, are perceived as attacks on the existence of ‘real’ women.

First, womanhood is defined primarily in relation to male dominance. As described in Chapter One, CASR is a radical feminist organization, and their view of gendered power relations reflects this theoretical grounding. Radical feminists understand women to be categorically oppressed by men, with sexuality forming the root of male dominance. Likewise, violence against women, especially sexual violence, is a frequent topic of discussion by anti-sex robot feminists. As one CASR (2020k) blog post explains, sexual violence characterizes women’s lives from the time they are children:

women experience sexual violence and objectification on a daily basis. It often starts as young as 8 or 9 and impacts on women throughout their life... This happens because a sexist culture permits men to see women and girls as subhuman, as penetrable holes and not human beings.

This is echoed in other feminist anti-sex robot materials, which describe “a woman hating culture” in which men victimize women through sexual assault, revenge porn, upskirting, grooming, stalking, domestic violence, strangulation, and murder (2020j). Womanhood is thus characterized by the constant threat of male violence, which Sheila Jeffreys describes as living under “siege conditions” (CASR, 2020a). Again, it is specifically *sexual* violence that is the primary focus of feminist concern. Sex robots, Richardson argues, will contribute to this already rampant violence against women by further dehumanizing them in men’s eyes (Fein, 2021).

While women are first and foremost framed as victims of male domination, anti-sex robot feminists also celebrate how they challenge their subordination. They describe women as fighting to earn and maintain their legal and civil rights, tackling rampant male violence, and risking their careers and reputations for feminist causes. Kate Davis even suggests that sex robots were invented as a response to “women fighting back” against their subordination (CASR, 2020d). Speaking out against patriarchy demonstrates the agency women have, even under conditions of male dominance. However, when Richardson is asked by an interviewer if sex workers have agency, she dismisses the question as irrelevant (O’Connor, 2018). She argues that discussing agency merely distracts from the objective fact that sex cannot be bought or sold – like a vote, sex “is non-transferrable...[and] belongs to the person” (O’Connor, 2018). There is tension here: on one hand, women who choose to resist ‘patriarchal’ activities like sex work are celebrated, while those who choose to engage in them are reframed as outside of the realm of choice entirely. In this way, only choices that align with the political aims of anti-sex robot feminists, such as opposing sex work, are deemed choices at all. If

womanhood is characterized by male dominance, women are either its passive victims or its outspoken feminist opponents. Either way, these feminists understand male dominance to shape the contours of all women's lives.

Next, women are defined in relation to their *biologically female* bodies. Anti-sex robot feminists argue that while femininity is a patriarchal social construct that oppresses women, biological sex is an objective fact. Real women have vaginas and uteruses and periods, and their embodied experiences, including those of male violence, are innately tied to their primary and secondary sex characteristics. As Richardson explains, one of CASR's primary goals is to protect "women's sex-based rights" and ensure that "women as a sex are centered [and] valued" (CASR, 2021b). Anti-sex robot feminists argue that being female is inseparable from women's experiences and existence; to detach womanhood from the female sex is thus to erase real women. This is why they are so opposed to gender-neutral language like "menstruators or uterus-havers," because it separates female sex characteristics from women in what they contend is an inherently false way (Fein, 2021). By hinging 'real' womanhood on female-assigned biological characteristics, this argument is implicitly transphobic: according to anti-sex robot feminists, trans women are not, and can never be, considered real women. I explore this idea further in the next section.

Notably, women's female bodies represent another form of 'challenge' to men. As Davis explains, they are messily human: they bleed, cry, and vomit, they feel physical and emotional pain, they grow old, they have sexual desires that do not necessarily align with those of men, and they deny men access to their bodies (CASR, 2020d). Women's bodies are also naturally imperfect, unlike the "massive tits or...tiny waist" of a sex robot

or a surgically altered (i.e., artificial) body (CASR, 2020f). The physical proportions of a sex robot, Yagmur Uygarkizi argues, are “humanly impossible” (CASR, 2020h). While messiness and imperfection are part of what makes real women *real*, anti-sex robot feminists argue that these qualities are undesirable to men. Artificial women such as sex robots do not share these difficult and undesirable embodied traits. As Raquel Rosario Sánchez describes, they are “perfect women, according to patriarchy” (CASR, 202f). Indeed, that sex robots are physically ‘perfect’ to men is argued to be a large part of their appeal over real women.

Finally, womanhood is defined in opposition to machines and objects. Real women, unlike sex robots, are human persons. Indeed, “[embracing] and [honouring] the full humanity of women and girls” is one of the key values of CASR (2021a). Anti-sex robot feminists primarily express the importance of women’s humanity by condemning their dehumanization and objectification. Sex robots, they argue, are the product of a culture in which women are seen as subhuman and interchangeable with objects. As Richardson contends, the “sex robot exists because of female dehumanization, it can’t exist in any other context. If women were recognized as human beings, nobody would come up with the idea of a sex robot” (Fein, 2021). The importance of humanness goes beyond the fleshy, organic, dichotomously-sexed bodies discussed previously; being human has significance as a distinct *legal* and *moral* category. Not only are women legal persons protected by hard-won civil rights, humans are also understood as a unique type of being, separate from and superior to nonhuman animals and objects. Anti-sex robot feminists argue that human women simply cannot be equated to or replaced by machines or other artificial constructs, because they are thinking, social beings that exist in relation

to others, and not property to be owned. Or, as Richardson puts it, “human beings aren’t machines, and their relationships with each other aren’t mechanical processes” (Fein, 2021). Real women are thus fundamentally different from sex robots. To even suggest that a machine might take the place of a human woman is to undermine women’s personhood, because it challenges the sanctity of human persons over nonhuman objects. Ultimately, this means that the mere existence of sex robots poses a threat to women.

In sum, anti-sex robot feminists stake out a narrow definition of ‘real’ womanhood based on victimization, biological sex, and personhood. Demarcating the boundaries of womanhood not only reveals those whose rights are considered worth defending by these feminists, but also who or what must be *excluded* from womanhood in the name of protecting women. If ‘real’ women must be victims of male dominance, female-sexed, and human persons, then who or what *cannot* be a real woman? In the next section, I examine how both sex robots and trans women are constructed as outside of womanhood and thus threatening to ‘real’ women, and draw parallels between the anxieties surrounding them.

### **“Manufactured Females”: Linking Sex Robots and Transphobia**

Sex robots, as previously mentioned, are the archetypal artificial woman, but trans women are also openly excluded from ‘real’ womanhood in feminist anti-sex robot arguments. Indeed, these feminists seem almost obsessed with trans women.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Trans men are not subject to the same level of fear and derision as trans women in anti-sex robot feminist discussions. In fact, they barely feature in them at all. One exception is when Raquel Rosario Sánchez argues that “the options presented to very young girls...are either your mold your body to fit the ever more impossible beauty standards placed on women, preferably through surgery, *or else you must be a boy* [emphasis added]” (CASR, 2020f). These feminists view trans men as masculine or gender non-conforming women who are ‘told’ they must be men because they are not feminine enough to be women. Like cisgender women, they are seen as victims of patriarchy rather than its perpetrators.

Transphobia emerges in their arguments in multiple ways. Sometimes it is implicit, as in the definition of ‘real’ women being limited to biological females. This is also reflected in offhand comments made by campaigners: Richardson (Object UK, 2020) says that “obviously, sex exists” when discussing the difference between men and women, and Uygarkizi (CASR, 2020h) states that “there are women and there are men, end of story”. More often, however, transphobic discourse is explicit in anti-sex robot feminist arguments. For instance, Heather Brunskell-Evans argues that “transgenderism is the trojan horse that has smuggled the ancient authoritarian rights of men to control women’s bodies and the rights of men to control our language” (CASR, 2020b). Anti-sex robot feminists exclusively misgender trans women as men, and link them to violent crime and/or sexual deviance. Janice Williams suggests that most trans women are “autogynephiles,” delusional and self-obsessed men who “[get] off” by pretending to be women (Object UK, 2020).<sup>25</sup> On one level, trans rights are seen as part of a constellation of interrelated social issues – including sex work and pornography – that anti-sex robot feminists oppose. For example, CASR’s July 2020 conference features a presentation focusing entirely on “the colonization of the female body” by trans women, with no mention of sex robots at all (CASR, 2020b). On another level, sex robots and trans women are discursively constructed in similar ways, and in some cases directly compared, by anti-sex robot feminists.

As previously described, these feminists see sex robots as a form of patriarchal backlash against women’s rights. They argue that sex robots are a man-made replacement for those “pesky women” who have opinions, say no to sex, and cannot be controlled by

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<sup>25</sup> For a feminist critique of the theory of autogynophilia, see Serano (2020).

men (CASR, 2020f). Sex robots have the hypersexualized, hyperfeminine female body that men desire, but not the female *person* that men “are trained...to find disgusting,” making them the perfect sex objects (CASR, 2020a). Indeed, they are the literal embodiment of how men view women: nonhuman “penetrable holes” (CASR, 2020k). Trans women are similarly understood by anti-sex robot feminists as artificial, male-constructed replacements for women. Men themselves *become* women, displacing and misrepresenting real female women. Like sex robots, being trans is argued to be “a form of masturbatory stimulus” in which men get off on women’s subordination without having to interact with the women they despise. Williams claims that these ‘men’ “have a power trip...and start changing their secondary sexual characteristics,” forcing real women “to pretend that they are women” (Object UK, 2020). As Jeffreys argues, countless women are “enormously distressed” from being forced to go along with men’s sexual fetishes, including “transvestism” (CASR, 2020a). Trans women and sex robots are thus linked in feminist anti-sex robot arguments because they both represent a patriarchal ‘threat’ to real women. Each is a way for men to replace women while still enjoying the sexual pleasure of their domination – either by building sex robots, or by becoming women themselves.

Anti-sex robot feminists’ revile of sex robots and trans women is also centered on their embodiment of femininity. There is a deeply femmophobic streak running through these arguments, in which femininity is devalued as a sign of women’s subordination and objectification. Anti-sex robot feminists view femininity as a “sexist social [construct]...that patriarchy constantly constructs and reconstructs to give ideological effect to women’s oppression” (CASR, 2020b). By embodying femininity to ‘become’

women, sex robots and trans women are seen as naturalizing women's inferiority – they re-attach femininity and thus subordination to female bodies. In doing so, they “[lie] about...what women really are” (Object UK, 2020). A sex robot's “French style” nails and “perfectly applied” lipstick are thus a symbol of women's subordination (CASR, 2020f). Similarly, Williams argues that “the version of womanhood that many transgender...men seek...to attain seems to come straight from porn. Sexualized, long haired, very appearance focused” (Object UK, 2020). These pornographic, robotic beauty standards are then passed on to real women, who perpetuate their own objectification by attempting to embody them. Indeed, Jo Bartosch suggests that with the introduction of sex robots, women have adopted ‘artificial’ beauty practices like applying “plastic eyelashes [and] plastic fingernails” to “almost become more robotic” (Poulton, 2021). Together, sex robots and trans women represent “a culture of manufactured females,” in which real women must alter their bodies in increasingly hyperfeminized and hypersexualized ways to keep up (CASR, 2020f). The patriarchal social construction of femininity is intensified, as natural biological sex is undermined.

In some instances, sex robots and trans women are directly equated by anti-sex robot feminists. When Richardson is asked why action ought to be taken on sex robots, she compares their future repercussions to the legal recognition of gender identity:

when people agreed to that twenty years ago, they didn't realize that twenty-five, thirty years later women would be described as menstruators or uterus-havers because no one wanted to use the word woman anymore... These are things that are going on that need our attention now, not in twenty years. (Fein, 2021)



Her interviewer, Luba Fein, laughs and replies, “we didn’t stop the trans issue fifteen years ago, so you got me” (Fein, 2021). Similarly, Bartosch warns that like “transgenderism,” the normalization of sex robots could shift them from “a niche thing” to “a human rights campaign” (Poulton, 2021). In this brave new world, a man could “turn up at work with a doll in a wheelchair” and force others to “pretend it’s his girlfriend,” with those who deny his delusion punished under “hate crime legislation” (Fein, 2021). The growing social acceptance and legal recognition of trans people is thus a cautionary tale for anti-sex robot feminists. They argue that action must be taken now, lest relationships with sex robots become normalized or even legally protected.

Anti-sex robot feminists take issue with other feminists whom they see as apologists for trans rights or sex robots, or what Bartosch calls “penis pandering” (Poulton, 2021). Queer theory is a frequent target of derision, typically collapsed in with liberal feminism as an individualistic, uncritical approach that condones male violence.<sup>26</sup> Richardson describes that “liberal” and “queer” feminists fail to consider “a structural analysis” or “the harms” to women posed by sex robots (Fein, 2021). She argues that in proposing “women could have sex robots,” these feminists and queer theorists excuse men’s behaviour and ignore thousands of years of women’s sexual objectification (Fein, 2021). Charlotta Odlind similarly claims that “liberal feminists” justify violent behaviour by suggesting “women also like to abuse men, to pay for sex,” and to engage in “casual sex” (Fein, 2021). Richardson describes this “liberal feminist queer paradigm” as an “absolute horror” and “basically a men’s sexual rights...movement” (Fein, 2021). In comparison to these men’s rights apologists, anti-sex robot feminists position themselves

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<sup>26</sup> This echoes the critiques of sex-positive feminism I discussed in Chapter Two.

as *real* feminists. For instance, Richardson repeatedly suggests that she and CASR represent the only critical feminist voices in the sex robot debate. She argues that other scholarship fails to consider systemic power relations, which her work centers. Bartosch similarly describes that Richardson “locates the idea of sex robots in a...much wider context,” and suggests that her work is uniquely “critical of patriarchy” compared to others in the field (Poulton, 2021). Anti-sex robot feminists thus see themselves as bravely swimming against a tide of male-dominated scholarship that disregards or erases the experiences of real women.

Furthermore, anti-sex robots contend that they, as the *real* feminists, are being silenced for defending women’s rights. Richardson explains that she and Jeffreys are “struggling with academia as a place where independent thought takes place” (Object UK, 2020). Women who face consequences for espousing hateful transphobia are seen as the victims of a patriarchal backlash against feminism. As Brunskell-Evans puts it, “when feminists today critique the patriarchal status quo it is we who are alleged to be the extremists for not allowing men’s interests to control our narrative” (CASR, 2020b). Critiquing the patriarchal status quo, for Brunskell-Evans, means arguing that trans women are violent male predators who have infiltrated the state and other powerful institutions to purposely undermine women’s rights (CASR, 2020b). Notably, anti-sex robot feminists draw parallels between the ‘cancelling’ and ‘no-platforming’ of trans-exclusionary radical feminists today and the historical oppression of women. For instance, drawing on fears of the racialized Other, Bartosch compares women being deleted on social media to an ancient Middle Eastern law that “decreed if a woman

speaks out of turn then her teeth will be smashed by a brick” (CASR, 2020c).<sup>27</sup> Likewise, sex robots are a “21<sup>st</sup> century twist” on this “time-honoured tradition” of silencing women (CASR, 2020b). As Sánchez argues, sex robots “emerge during a time when women with opinions and with the subsequent...desire for human rights have been deemed phobic, problematic, and so troublesome that they must be cancelled” (CASR, 2020f). Anti-sex robot feminists position themselves as beleaguered freedom fighters, the true daughters of the feminist movement, part of a long line of women punished for their refusal to behave.

It is ironic that these claims of being silenced are coming from women who hold clear public platforms. Richardson, for example, is a professor, and those affiliated with CASR range from regularly published journalists, to academics with countless articles and books, to activists working for non-profit organizations. Indeed, as Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen, and Ben Vincent (2020) describe, in the UK so-called ‘gender critical’ ideas have found mainstream support from media outlets and politicians “across political lines” (p. 685). While the vast majority of feminists champion trans rights and dignity, trans-exclusionary radical feminism has found traction among certain legal and political actors. Anti-trans voices are hardly being silenced; instead, they enjoy power in particular places that they simply refuse to acknowledge. Further, by framing transphobia as an innocent opinion or an assertion of basic rights for which women are unfairly punished, anti-sex robot feminists obscure the violence that trans women experience and their role

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<sup>27</sup> Bartosch’s invocation of the victimized Middle Eastern women ties in with larger stereotypes about Islam as inherently backwards, violent, and patriarchal, and Western women as the liberated subjects of feminism. It is interesting that the Middle Eastern woman is called upon here as a victim of patriarchal violence when discussions of race as it directly relates to sex robots are largely absent from anti-sex robot feminist conversations. I will further discuss the links between white supremacy and anti-sex robot feminism further in Chapter Four.

in perpetuating it. As Ahmed (2016) explains, this line of argumentation *itself* is an incitement to transphobic violence: “to give an account of trans people as causing violence (by virtue of being trans) is to cause violence against trans people” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 26). If trans *existence* is violence, then violence against trans people can be justified or even deemed necessary for the protection of others.

Strikingly, these anti-sex robot arguments share significant parallels with conspiracy theories and Trumpian right-wing discourses. These include: the fixation on so-called cancel culture and freedom of speech; the villainization of ‘left-wing academics’ and ‘global elites’; the claim that innocently asking questions or having opinions is being unfairly punished; the skepticism towards scientific thought and evidence; and the notion of a deep state conspiracy where one group controls the government, media, and other powerful institutions. In some cases, the speakers themselves even draw these parallels. Sonia Poulton (2021), referencing the dangers posed by sex robots, argues that “this is no longer a conspiracy theory, it’s a conspiracy fact”. Poulton’s online show is hosted on Brand New Tube, a video platform almost entirely populated by conspiracy theorists.<sup>28</sup> During her live interview with Bartosch, Poulton (2021) periodically reads out comments from her viewers, which include that “porn has been foisted onto the Western societies to break down relationships,” and that sex robots are “part of a wider transhumanism movement being...pushed by the global elite” and “part of the plan to downsize the world, family units destroyed”. The general

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<sup>28</sup> Media Bias Fact Check (n.d.), an independent media bias resource, gives Brand New Tube its highest rating for Conspiracy Level (“tin foil hat”) and Pseudo-Science Level (“quackery”), and its lowest rating for factual reporting. Indeed, “almost every video on the service is related to conspiracy theories or pseudoscience,” including that the COVID-19 pandemic is fake and vaccines are “weapons of mass destruction” (Media Bias Fact Check, n.d.).

idea among Poulton's viewers is that sex robots are part of an insidious attempt to undermine the nuclear family – a symbol of traditional values, societal stability, and Western superiority – whether engineered by global elites or political enemies. The safeguarding of traditional family values seems incongruous with the feminist beliefs of anti-sex robot campaigners, given the role of the family in naturalizing the subordination of women to men. However, as I describe in Chapter Four, these feminists defend a very narrow definition of 'intimate relationship' from the perceived threat of sex robots, which largely sticks to the normative, heteropatriarchal script. Ultimately, the links between anti-sex robot rhetoric and right-wing conspiracy theories put anti-sex robot feminists in a strange ideological alliance with political groups that are linked to violence and misogyny.<sup>29</sup> It is certainly noteworthy that CASR and its affiliates have emerged at the same time as a global social and political trend towards right-wing populism and authoritarianism.

The ultimate fear behind these anti-trans and anti-sex robot arguments is that 'artificial' women render real women irrelevant, replaceable, and therefore at risk of annihilation. This fear of women being replaced is particularly evidenced by anti-sex robot feminists' preoccupation with the possibility of sex robots existing in public spaces. Sex dolls are already popping up in public, including on a British morning talk show and in empty soccer stadiums and restaurants during the COVID-19 lockdowns (CASR n.d.-c, 2020k). Richardson (2018) warns that without legal intervention, "sex robots could become a commonplace feature of our public places – the school run, libraries,

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<sup>29</sup> This echoes the anti-pornography movement of the 1980s, where radical feminists and Christian social conservatives formed a powerful alliance around their shared political goal: the censorship of pornographic expression (see Duggan & Hunter, 1995 and West, 1987).

supermarkets, nightclubs”. In a blog post, CASR (n.d.-c) argues that putting these “pornographic representations of women” into public spaces is “a form of sexual harassment...and a child safeguarding issue”. It does not seem coincidental that ‘the school run’ and ‘libraries’ are places where children are likely to be, mobilized to stir fear about children’s safety and their exposure to sex. Ironically, these are also public places where women are likely to be doing feminized labour – caring for children, purchasing supplies for cooking and cleaning. This raises the specter of sex robots replacing women *beyond sex*, in their normative roles as caregivers and partners.

The endpoint of women being supplanted by artificial replacements is that real women cease to exist entirely. As Richardson (2018) argues, women “are threatened with *existential risk* [emphasis added] in every single country of the world”. Likewise, Bartosch warns that dehumanization, which she claims is worsened by pornography and sex robots, is “one of the stages of...genocide” (Poulton, 2021). Note that, as Williams argues, transgenderism also “[has] the aim of... switching men off from any need...to relate to women as human beings” (Object UK, 2020). Thus, sex robots and trans women do not just *replace* real women, they dehumanize them and thus justify their obsolescence. These fears echo the annihilation anxiety that exists around the development of artificial intelligence more generally: the worry that AI will inevitably destroy humanity, accidentally or on purpose.<sup>30</sup> The difference is that for anti-sex robot

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<sup>30</sup> Nick Bostrom, director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University, describes that an AI given the innocent job of producing paperclips might accidentally lead to an extinction event. In an interview with Andrew Leonard (2014), Bostrom explains: “One thing [the AI] would do is make sure that humans didn’t switch it off, because then there would be fewer paper clips. So it might get rid of humans right away, because they could pose a threat. Also, you would want as many resources as possible, because they could be used to make paper clips. Like, for example, the atoms in human bodies”. He goes on to describe that a AI tasked with making humans happy might stimulate our brains’ pleasure centers and get rid of any brain tissue not associated with pleasure, “filling the universe with these vats of brain tissue, in a maximally pleasurable state” (Leonard, 2014). I find AI fascinating, but it is beyond the scope of this

feminists, the robots themselves are inanimate objects through which human desires are fulfilled, not agentic or intelligent beings with goals of their own. Indeed, Richardson describes robots as “mechanical puppets” that are programmed to create the “fantasy” of independent behaviours and interaction (UNSW, 2018). To anti-sex robot feminists, sex robots and trans women are the pinnacle of patriarchal oppression, destroying the women men loathe and who dare to challenge their power. While these feminists describe physical violence against women as one aspect of male dominance, the genocide referenced by Bartosch is less about murdering women than destroying their *humanity*. Women face a more symbolic ‘existential threat’ – female bodies lose all significance, real women’s voices and experiences are silenced and ignored, women are no longer persons worthy of empathy but objects deserving of violence, and the word ‘woman’ itself ceases to be spoken.

Overall, transphobia permeates anti-sex robot feminist arguments in both implicit and explicit ways. Sex robots and trans women are framed as silencing, erasing, replacing, and ultimately eradicating so-called real women: female-sexed, human women who speak out against the male dominance that characterizes their lives. In the next section, I examine and problematize the categories of ‘womanhood’ and ‘personhood’ that anti-sex robot feminists claim are being so dangerously undermined.

### **Border Patrol: Securing Womanhood and Personhood**

Anti-sex robot feminists understand themselves as defending the objective material reality of womanhood and personhood. A recurring theme in the data is their

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research and outside of my field of expertise. Those interested in this topic might enjoy Tim Urban’s (2015) “The AI Revolution,” an entertaining and accessible series on the development and future of AI.

fear that sacrosanct, inviolable boundaries are being blurred – between male and female, human and nonhuman, persons and property, and fact and fiction. For instance, Richardson argues that posthumanism and other new materialisms dangerously undermine material reality. Critiquing Donna Haraway, she contends that her work “[argues] against any kind of meaningful distinctions in the world,” including between “male and female” (Object UK, 2020). She goes on: “obviously sex exists... it’s the breakdown of fact and fiction” (Object UK, 2020). While Richardson acknowledges that these paradigms made some important contributions by rejecting “the idea that there were some people who were more human than others”, she also contends that they

didn’t just reject the political hierarchical structure of ideas, they went further and said everything is made up. And if everything is made up, we can unhinge everything from any material understanding of the world. And I think that is part of the problem. (UNSW, 2018)

Part of the threat posed by sex robots and trans women is that they similarly undermine the distinctions between person/object, human/machine, male/female, and reality/fantasy. Anti-sex robot feminists thus position themselves as the guardians of these essential boundaries, which they claim have come under attack. But if ‘woman’ and ‘human’ are truly such stable, inevitable, natural, and objective categories, why do they need to be so vigorously defended against potential threats? In this section, I argue that they are *not*. I suggest that part of the reason sex robots and trans women are understood to be so terrifying and threatening by feminist sex robot opponents is *because* they suggest that personhood and womanhood do not have real or meaningful boundaries. Therefore, the *appearance* of these boundaries must be defended.



Although anti-sex robot feminists position themselves as defending objective truth and material reality – that sex is real and humans are distinct and special – these apparent truths are actually the artifacts of Euro-Western ontological and epistemological frameworks. For instance, many scholars have problematized biological sex, arguing that sexual dimorphism is a relic of certain modes of scientific knowledge production and *not an objective fact*. Veronica Sanz (2017) explains that the two-sex model emerged in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century, as scientists sought to empirically ‘prove’ sexual dimorphism. She describes that “the assumption that sex is a binary was never questioned because it was never a hypothesis: it was the taken-for-granted starting point” for scientific research (Sanz, 2017, p. 20). Indeed, the multiple variables scientists have discovered to ‘determine’ sex – anatomy, gonads, hormones, chromosomes, genes, the brain, the genome – are imperfect, fail to demonstrate dimorphism, and frequently contradict one another. Some, like hormonal sex, “[make] no sense from a scientific point of view” (Sanz, 2017, p. 7). Yet the two-sex model persists, “despite empirical flaws, contradictory data, and counterexamples” (Sanz, 2017, p. 21). Similarly, research shows that the physical traits typically associated with sexual dimorphism, “such as height, build, and voice timbre,” actually show “considerable overlap” between males and females instead of two distinct categories (Blackless et al., 2000, p. 161). The sexes are far more alike than different, and the variations that do exist between human bodies cannot fit neatly into two diametrically opposed categories. As Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) describes, “sex and gender are best conceptualized as points in a multidimensional space” rather than as a binary or even a continuum (p. 22).

Even though sexual dimorphism is a scientific construction, the supposedly innate differences between males and females have long been used to claim that women are physically and mentally inferior to men, justifying their subordination. Furthermore, the (re)production of sexual difference is also intimately linked to the scientific construction of racial difference, a key fault line along which some bodies have been deemed less human than others. Charles Darwin (1871/1981), for instance, argued that not only are women physically and mentally weaker than men, they have mental “faculties...characteristic of the lower races,” thus relegating women and racialized people to the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder (p. 327).<sup>31</sup> Sally Markowitz (2001) explains that sexual dimorphism was used by scientists as ‘evidence’ of white superiority and evolutionary advancement. Racialized groups were ‘scientifically determined’ to be less sexually dimorphic, with females considered to be inappropriately masculine and/or males inappropriately feminine. In this way, sexual dimorphism is not a universal characteristic shared by all human beings, but rather “serves as a human ideal against which different races may be measured and all but white Europeans found wanting” (Markowitz, 2001, p. 390). However, as Markowitz points out, even these ideological foundations of sexual difference betray that sex is “is not as binary as it seems”: “an ideology that considers sexual dimorphism to be embodied only in European “races” has already, in a sense, thought beyond it” (2001, p. 391). Ultimately, the scientific construction of sexual and racial difference naturalizes relations of domination by positioning inferiority as innate and biological.

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<sup>31</sup> Darwin’s well-documented racism and sexism is used by anti-science, fundamentalist Christian organizations in an attempt to undermine the theory of human evolution (for example, see Bergman, 1994). To be clear, my point in this section is not that scientific knowledge is evil or inherently false, just that it is always mediated by the social and political context of its producers.

Indeed, the construction of humanity and personhood cannot be separated from white supremacy. As the histories and ongoing legacies of slavery and colonialism demonstrate, the line between who is considered fully human and deserving of the rights and dignities of personhood, and who is deemed 'less human' and therefore is not, has been drawn along racialized lines. Human is not a static, natural category, but instead is a social and political idea that has shifted over time. Similarly, the idea that humans are a special type of being, superior to and separate from others, is not an objective fact. As I describe in Chapter Two, scholars such as Sundberg (2014) and Todd (2016) have pointed out that anthropocentrism is a feature of Euro-Western epistemology and ontology, rather than a universally acknowledged truth. While posthumanism and other new materialisms have more recently sought to challenge the human/nonhuman binary within Euro-Western scholarship, Indigenous ways of knowing have long rejected a hierarchy of beings that positions humans as unique, special, and superior (Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016). Euro-Western ways of knowing are not dominant because they tell the 'truth' of an objective material reality, but rather as the result of colonialism and the systemic erasure of Indigenous knowledge (Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016). There is nothing natural, innate, or inevitable about anthropocentrism, nor is humanism the only philosophy that values human life and wellbeing. As I discuss in Chapter Two, one of the driving forces behind the posthumanist theoretical turn is its critique of how humanism's reliance on the human/nonhuman binary actually impedes the goal of supporting human rights and dignities (Malatino, 2017; Smart & Smart, 2015; Wolfe, 2010). Like biological sex, humanity and personhood are not natural or objective categories, and cannot be disentangled from their role in upholding and naturalizing domination and subordination.

In defending narrow definitions of womanhood and personhood, anti-sex robot feminists are not stating the natural order of things, nor are they defending objective truth and material reality. They are perpetuating a particular ideological framework that has deep historical roots in Eurocentric violence and dehumanization.

Even anti-sex robot feminists themselves sometimes reveal the instability of these binary categories in their arguments. For instance, when asked to define how she would describe a full, rich sense of personhood, Richardson's answer is "rejecting any element of property inside personhood" (O'Connor, 2018). To be a person, in other words, only makes sense in opposition to what personhood is *not*. It is only intelligible in relation to the Other, the non-person: property. Similarly, anti-sex robot feminists unwittingly reveal that the line between human and machine is less solid than they purport it to be. It is the human-like nature of sex robots that they argue makes them particularly horrific and frightening. As Sánchez argues, "if sex robots are simply machines, then...why are they built to be woman-like?" (2020f). Charlotta Odling points out that unlike other sex toys, sex robots are marketed like women and given personalities, interests, and backgrounds (Fein, 2021). Bartosch mockingly reports that some men even live in "pseudo-relationships" with them (Poulton, 2021). Yet at the same time, Richardson repeatedly emphasizes the technological limitations of sex robots, dismissing the technology behind them as unimpressive, overexaggerated, and less advanced than the average cell phone. They are both too human and not human enough, occupying a strange interstitial space between the human and nonhuman that suggests the two categories are not as solid or oppositional as these feminists purport.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Roboticians have a term for this not quite human, not quite nonhuman space: the uncanny valley. Masahiro Mori (1970/2012) explains that the more humanlike an object appears, the more affinity we feel

Both sex robots and trans women expose these fractures in womanhood and personhood. Sex robots uncomfortably straddle the line between human/machine and person/property, while trans women challenge the supposedly innate connection between womanhood and female-assigned biological characteristics. This, I argue, is why they are positioned as threatening and terrifying – not because of any actual danger they pose to women, but because they blur the boundaries of what anti-sex robot feminists presuppose to be distinct, unshakeable categories. They suggest that personhood and womanhood are leaky, unstable social constructs. In her study of taboo and pollution, Mary Douglas (1966/2002) argues that just as all cultures have systems of classifications that govern social behaviour, they also have provisions for addressing “ambiguous or anomalous events” that threaten to challenge these classifications (p. 48). This “matter out of place” might be viewed as a certain kind of event, physically controlled, avoided, labelled as dangerous, or used in ritual to maintain the dominant classification scheme (Douglas, 1966/2002, p. 50). Drawing on Douglas’ work, Deborah Durham (2011) writes that embodied feelings of disgust and fear police the borders of “what we consider human and non-human,” as well as social categories such as race, class, and gender (p. 138). She explains that “a sense of danger – and power – haunts those spaces and items that violate categorical distinction” (Durham, 2011, p. 138). They reveal the limits of our “cherished classifications,” and thus must be condemned (Douglas, 1966/2002, p. 45). Danger and power is similarly attributed to sex robots and trans women because they violate the systems of classification held dearly by anti-sex robot feminists.

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for it, until it appears *too* realistic and becomes unsettling, frightening, or disgusting. Pictured on a graph, our affinity for an object trends upwards as its human likeness does, before steeply dropping, and then rising again. The uncanny valley is the realm of bodies and objects that are humanlike but not quite human – prosthetic hands, corpses, and zombies are some of Mori’s examples (1970/2012).

As targets of fear and horror, mobilized to shore up the boundaries of womanhood and personhood, sex robots and trans women must exist *outside* of these categories. This explains why a feminist campaign that claims to champion human rights and the dignity of women and girls can espouse hateful transphobia. In describing trans women as narcissistic, perverted, violent monsters, anti-sex robot feminists position them as outside of humanity and personhood. The human rights of ‘real’ women are framed as being under attack by these categorical aberrations, who themselves exist outside of the realm of human rights. Butler (1993) argues that the formation of subjects requires “the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings,” whose very exclusion from subjectivity gives it meaning (p. 3). Like sex robots, trans women are constructed as monstrous, artificial threats, not human persons worthy of empathy, dignity, and respect. Again, this replicates the exclusionary logic implicit to humanism: the human, rights-bearing subject is only intelligible in relation to the nonhuman or inhuman. Or, as Butler (1993) puts it, “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection” (p. 3). In anti-sex robot feminist arguments, it is trans women whose bodies do not matter. Like sex robots, they serve as a foil for the rights and subjectivity of ‘real’ women, at the expense of any consideration of their own humanity. The borders of womanhood and personhood are policed by keeping ‘others’ locked outside.

Ultimately, one of the key assumptions underpinning anti-sex robot feminism is that womanhood and personhood are objective, bounded categories that feminists ought to safeguard in the name of women’s rights. As I have shown, these categories have been persuasively contested by scholars; they are the products of dominant ontological and epistemological frameworks, rather than a reflection of objective reality. In their quest to

defend ‘real’ women’s humanity, anti-sex robot feminists position other bodies outside of the domain of subjectivity. Ironically, they are perpetuating the very sort of dehumanizing violence they claim to be campaigning against.

### **Beyond Real Womanhood**

In this chapter, I have examined the way discourses of womanhood are mobilized in feminist anti-sex robot arguments. I began with an overview of how these feminists define ‘real’ women in their arguments: as victims of patriarchy, biological females, and human persons. I then examined the implicit and explicit transphobia underpinning anti-sex robot arguments, linking the similar anxieties that surround both sex robots and trans women and exploring the fear that ‘real’ women are irrelevant and replaceable. I argued that sex robots and trans women are constructed in similar ways and villainized for similar reasons by anti-sex robot feminists. Lastly, I problematized the narrow notions of womanhood and personhood that anti-sex robot feminists defend, arguing that these categories are rooted in historical violence and are inherently exclusionary. To conclude, I want to discuss the efficacy of anti-sex robot feminists’ arguments, and articulate an importance difference between campaigns against sex robots and trans women.

When asked for her opinion on feminist debates that pit women’s rights against trans rights, Butler responds by questioning how “mainstream” these debates truly are:

My wager is that most feminists support trans rights and oppose all forms of transphobia... I think [trans-exclusionary radical feminism] is actually a fringe movement that is seeking to speak in the name of the mainstream, and that our responsibility is to refuse to let that happen. (Ferber, 2020)

I agree with Butler, and find it unlikely that anti-sex robot feminists will curry favour with the majority of feminists by attacking trans women. Not only are these transphobic arguments hateful and violent, they are not particularly useful for accomplishing any meaningful feminist political goals. Trying to liberate women by clinging to a narrow vision of womanhood is working *within* the parameters set by patriarchy, not subverting them. As Audre Lorde (1984) famously wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house... And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support” (p. 112). Why choose to further narrow the existing restrictions on how to live a proper gendered life, when we could reject them instead? Ahmed (2016) describes that womanhood is like a house we all share: we might find our designated rooms uncomfortable for different reasons, while some of us are locked out of the house entirely. Breaking down womanhood’s restrictive walls makes it a more comfortable and spacious home for everyone.

Similarly, anti-sex robot feminists’ attachment to humanism is an attempt to alleviate harm by appealing to an ideology that itself is implicated in harm. I agree that it is deeply wrong for some humans to be deemed ‘less human’ than others in order to justify violence and subjugation. However, challenging humanism does not mean denigrating the status of human beings or denying certain humans the rights and dignities afforded to others. Instead, it can mean acknowledging that humans and nonhumans are interdependent and there is much about the nonhuman world we cannot understand through an anthropocentric lens, and recognizing that drawing a strict line between human and nonhuman is *inherently exclusionary*. Personhood and the special rights we associate with it only have meaning if not every being has them; in the case of anti-sex



robot feminism, it is trans women who are ejected from personhood to ‘protect’ the humanity of cis women.

This highlights an important distinction between these feminists’ criticism of sex robots and their criticism of trans women: sex robots are non-sentient objects, and trans women are *people*. Encouraging or enabling violence against a sex robot might be argued to be problematic in a symbolic or representational way (see Sparrow, 2017), but it does not harm the robot. And while banning or eradicating sex robots could be harmful or stigmatizing to the small group of people who create and purchase them, the existence, embodiment, and personhood of sex robot buyers is not under attack. The same cannot be said for the attacks made against trans women. It is not the choices, sexual proclivities, or purchasing habits of a small number of trans women that are considered an affront to womanhood by anti-sex robot feminists. *It is that trans women dare to exist at all*. The very existence of an entire category of person is deemed inherently threatening, dangerous, and violent. Further, this transphobia does not need to be read into anti-sex robot feminist arguments as a subtext or implicit message – it is on the surface, out in the open, freely espoused. Returning to Ahmed (2016), these arguments can only be understood as an incitement to violence against trans women. None of this is to say that the subtext of anti-sex robot feminist arguments (such as the heterosexism and white supremacy I discuss in the next chapter) is insignificant. However, it is important to acknowledge just how blatantly and openly these feminists champion anti-trans violence, all in the name of protecting ‘real’ women, especially given that trans women already experience disproportionate victimization. This incitement to violence, even more so than the threat to ban sex robots, demands urgent action from feminists.

In her conference presentation attacking the so-called “trans affirmative empire,” Brunskell-Evans compares “transgenderism” to the fable of The Emperor’s New Clothes: Gender critical feminist women are daring to stand out from the collective fear...of being accused of transphobia and pointing out that the emperor of transgenderism in reality has no clothes on. And the more we point this out...like the small child in the fable, transgenderism will be exposed and institutions will be able to see it. (CASR, 2020b)

To borrow Brunskell-Evans’ analogy, I see its proponents’ blatant transphobia as the first sign that the emperor of anti-sex robot feminism has no clothes. It is the most obvious crack in its veneer of credibility. When I began researching this topic, it was the first thing that caught my attention about anti-sex robot feminism, one of the initial sparks that told me there was something worth uncovering here and in doing so inspired this thesis. Indeed, I suspect that the explicit transphobia of anti-sex robot feminist arguments is precisely what will prevent them from gaining any real mainstream traction, except from those already sympathetic to trans-exclusionary ideology. This leaves an important opening for alternative feminist and queer explorations of sex robots. What is needed now is a feminist response that does not squander the possibilities of complex, critical, and meaningful engagement with this new technology by clinging to exclusionary notions of womanhood and personhood.

## **Chapter Four – Sex Robots, Relationships, and the Politics of Love**

This chapter examines how intimate and sexual relationships figure into feminist opposition to the development, sale, and use of sex robots. I begin by giving an overview of anti-sex robot arguments that hinge on the negative impact of technological development on human relationships, intimacy, and empathy. Next, I examine how love is defined and understood in these arguments, focusing on CASR founder Kathleen Richardson's notion of a "politics of love" as a solution to the threats posed by sex robots: the oppression and subordination of women, widespread isolation and loneliness, the normalization of violent sexual acts, and the commodification of relationships (UNSW, 2018). I argue that obscured behind an appealing façade of empathy and relationality, these discourses of love are mobilized in deeply political and often hateful ways. Finally, I reflect on whether love might still provide useful ground for feminist politics, and explore some possibilities for feminist future-making in a world with sex robots.

### **Sex Robots, Technological Development, and the "Assault on Human Intimacy"**

A key argument raised against sex robots is that they contribute to a growing culture of isolation and loneliness, and encourage a decline in meaningful human relationships, empathy, and intimacy. The subtitle of Richardson's forthcoming book is illustrative of what anti-sex robot feminists fear will be the ultimate consequence – "the end of love" (O'Connor, 2018). Of course, fears that technological advances will disrupt or destroy normal life are nothing new (Bowman, 2016; Orben, 2020). Nor are anxieties about dangerous or deviant sexual acts and identities, and how they may corrupt the

innocent or irreparably harm the moral order (Herd, 2009; Rubin, 1984/2011). Sex robots are interesting because they sit at the intersection of sexual and technological anxieties, which, I will show, fuels arguments that they are particularly dangerous. In this section, I give a broad overview of the argument that sex robots threaten the ability to form meaningful human relationships, and detail some key themes from the data.

Feminist sex robot opponents contend that new technological developments, such as social media and online pornography, are leading people to become increasingly disconnected and alienated from one another.<sup>33</sup> Richardson (2018) calls this a “crisis of attachment,” in which a “turn-away from each-other towards an isolated existence” has led to “the abandonment of human relationships”. Sex robots are being marketed as a solution to this crisis. However, rather than remedying rampant isolation and loneliness, these feminists argue that sex robots will only worsen it by encouraging further disconnection and detachment from others. As Bartosch puts it, “trying to find a...technological fix to...the problem of alienation by creating an object that will make people even more alienated is bonkers” (Poulton, 2021). They insist that relationships with machines can never be true replacements for intimate human relationships, which are essential for both individual wellbeing and societal functioning. Further, anti-sex robot feminists argue that the combination of technology with sexual pleasure has warped normal human sexuality and eroded men’s capacity for empathy, leading to a rise in violent male fetishes that further impair the ability to form loving, meaningful

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<sup>33</sup>It is worth noting that the lockdowns and social distancing necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic are cited as worsening this trend of tech-induced isolation. Jo Bartosch, for example, calls lockdowns “a technologists’ wet dream. Deprived of intimacy and human contact, people have turned online” (CASR, 2020c). An in-depth discussion of the impacts of COVID-19 and how the pandemic relates to sex robots is beyond the scope of this project. Fears about the loss of human connection during the pandemic are multiple, and ought to be explored further in the future as more information becomes available.

relationships. Sex robots, as “fetish items...consumed by males who cannot or will not participate in mutual relationships with women,” will only contribute to this disturbing trend (CASR, 2020k). Without immediate intervention, the argument goes, humans will soon be unable and unwilling to have sex with or relate to each other at all. Commercial sex must be abolished, sex robots must be banned, and “the attribution of human-like status to...robots and AI” must be legally prohibited (O’Connor, 2018).

A recurring theme in the data is the argument that technological advancements do not just harm social relationships, they also negatively impact individual psychological development and brain structure. For instance, citing rates of depression and suicide among young people, Bartosch suggests that all individuals under the age of 26 have been “brain damaged by exposure to the digital world” (CASR, 2020c). Technology use is argued to fundamentally alter the structure of the human brain, creating new neural pathways that fuel behavior like dehumanizing women, feeling desensitized to abuse, and developing violent fetishes. In this way, an individual’s *physical capacity* for human connection becomes undermined or even destroyed. In particular, it is the masturbatory stimulus<sup>34</sup> of sex robots and pornography that is argued to make them more addictive and psychologically damaging than something like violent video games, another common

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<sup>34</sup> There is a long history of fears surrounding masturbation. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was thought that masturbation led to degeneracy, insanity, and even death, resulting in a moral panic that saw children “shackled and mistreated at the hands of parents, teachers, and doctors” (Herdt, 2009, p. 8; see also Hunt, 1998 and Lacquer, 2003). Alan Hunt (1998) explains that anti-masturbatory campaigns were driven in part by early feminists, who argued that men must be held to the same standard of “chastity, purity, and asexuality” as women (p. 581). The goal “was not the sexual liberation of women, but the imposition of sexual restraint on men” (Hunt, 1998, p. 609). There is a clear parallel between these nineteenth century feminists and today’s anti-sex robot feminists, whose focus is also on disciplining men’s sexuality. As Rubin (1984/2011) argues, the stigma against masturbation lives on today “in less potent, modified forms, such as the idea that solitary pleasures are inferior substitutes for partnered encounters” (p. 149). This, too, is echoed in feminist anti-sex robot arguments, which position coupled sex as superior to solo or robot sex.

target of moral panic (Poulton, 2021). The combination of sexual pleasure and technology is regarded as especially dangerous:

that neural kind of loop that gets established, whether you're either masturbating into a lump of silicone [a sex robot] or whether you're looking at pornography, that is really powerful and I think that's what then changes behavior and changes the way, physically...that the brain is constructed. (Bartosch in Poulton, 2021)<sup>35</sup>

Sex robots are described like illicit drugs: habit-forming, mind-altering, intensely pleasurable, and ultimately dangerous. Further, in keeping with this narrative of brain damage, those who do seek relationships with sex robots are described as “sick individuals” engaging in “Norman Bates style pseudo-relationships” (Poulton, 2021). Invoking the fictional killer Bates, who famously wore his mother’s clothes while murdering women he was sexually attracted to, dismisses sex robot users as mentally ill and the mentally ill as violent, while simultaneously conjuring transphobic fears of ‘men in dresses’ attacking women (see Chapter Three).

Another negative psychological condition supposedly exacerbated by sex robots is the mind-body split, in which individuals become detached from their own bodies. On one hand, this division allows the mind to be “monetized” and “mined” by social media giants for profit (CASR, 2020c). On the other, it provides a justification for the buying and selling of sex. If the mind and body are separate entities, it allows us to believe that “men could buy women’s bodies without buying their minds” and “that women could sell their vaginas without selling themselves” (CASR, 2020h). This tech-induced “[detachment] from our material existence” echoes the disconnection of womanhood

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<sup>35</sup> Block quotations have been edited for readability (e.g., removing “um” and other fillers).

from female bodies, as discussed in Chapter Three, that anti-sex robot feminists argue is an existential threat posed by sex robots and trans women (CASR, 2020c). Again, the materiality of women's bodies and experiences is deemed central to their humanity and viewed as under threat. Underlying these arguments is a critique of capitalism and how technological advancements have spurred the commodification of human relationships. For instance, part of the destruction of intimacy is attributed to the commercial sex industry, which blurs the line between women as persons and property by selling sex as a commodity. This allows men to see women as objects for purchase rather than as human persons. Buying a sex robot as an artificial companion – an object, a capitalist commodity – rather than engaging in a mutual, loving relationship with another person further enables the invasion of capitalism into human intimacy. Relationships, *especially sexual relationships*, ought to be a sacred space “off-limits to the market” (CASR, n.d.-a).<sup>36</sup>

Another interesting, recurring theme is the idea that ‘normal’ human sexuality is being warped by exposure to technologically-mediated sex. A common refrain among feminist sex robot opponents is that the decline in intimate relationships is linked to the normalization of harmful, violent sexual practices such as “choking, slapping, offensive

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<sup>36</sup> Ana Paula da Silva and Thaddeus Gregory Blanchette (2017) point out that the majority of reproductive labor – domestic work traditionally “done out of love” by women – has been transformed into wage labour without the criminalization or stigmatization attached to selling sex (p. 6). Why is sex work deemed exploitative and objectifying when other ‘reproductive’ professions such as childcare or housekeeping are not? One reason, they suggest, is that sex remains symbolically tied to reproduction; selling sex “alienates” it from the reproductive sphere where women’s labour is done “for love” (i.e., for free) (da Silva & Blanchette, 2017, p. 47). Thus, “the only culturally accepted way for women to exchange sex for livelihood and income remains in the context of a heterosexual and monogamous relationship” (da Silva & Blanchette, 2017, p. 47-48). Another explanation is that, as Rubin (1984/2011) argues, “sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance” (p. 149). Sex is attributed meaning far beyond other eccentricities of human behaviour, such that the wrong sort of sex is seen as a uniquely perilous threat to the social and moral order. Sex work is thus fixated on because of the over-signification of sex, not because sex work itself is uniquely dehumanizing and objectifying. One might say that under capitalism, we are all getting screwed. Indeed, da Silva and Blanchette (2017) find that sex workers typically (re)enter the profession because they find it much preferable to low-paying, exploitative jobs like retail and construction.

name calling, and other sadistic acts” (CASR, 2020j). Feminist sex robot opponents argue that the sex industry, in particular easily accessible online pornography, has led to a massive increase in “male fetishes,” which inhibit empathy, love, and connection (CASR, 2020a). Men then impose these violent fetishes on women, who find them upsetting and disturbing. In this way, pornography and other commercialized forms of sex have “poisoned intimate relationships between men and women” (Richardson, 2018). As Bartosch laments, “the ideal that sex should be private, about intimacy, and about shared pleasure is already becoming a quaint anachronism from a bygone age” (CASR, 2020c). Normal sex between men and women – loving, intimate, vanilla, and *feminist* – is being distorted beyond recognition by technologically-enabled access to sexual pleasure. Sex robots are a continuation of this trend, as technological fetish objects designed for men who cannot or will not form intimate relationships with real women.

Markedly, it is *men* who are identified as the driving force behind this problem. They are described as the primary consumers of pornography, the creators and consumers of sex robots, and the purchasers of illicit sex. While men’s loneliness is used to justify the existence of sex robots, their interest in pornographic and fetishistic sex is what prevents them from forming relationships with real women. As Richardson argues: “men aren’t satisfied because they want someone that they can torture like they see in the pornography” (O’Connor, 2018). Men’s loneliness is also a *societal* problem (“this is not good for women, men, adults, or children”) because “male isolation is occurring in tandem with a thriving commercial prostitution, porn and child sexual exploitation culture,” considered the driving forces of male dominance (Richardson, 2018). There is a negative feedback loop created here: men’s harmful sexual behaviour (watching porn,



buying sex) worsens their loneliness and isolation which further encourages harmful sexual behaviour, ultimately to the detriment of women, girls, and societal stability. Introducing sex robots into the mix, Richardson (2018) argues, will only “increase human isolation, and contribute to reduced empathy among males (particularly younger disenfranchised males) in wider society”. It is interesting to note that it is not just men in general but *disenfranchised* men who are flagged as particularly at risk, which fits into larger stereotypes about working class and racialized men as sexually dangerous.<sup>37</sup> I will return to the link between male empathy and intimate relationships in a later section. What is relevant now is that anti-sex robot feminists view men’s loneliness, lack of empathy, and violent sexual proclivities – all enabled and worsened by technology – as the root cause of women’s subordination and the worsening crisis of attachment.

A final theme worth noting is the pervasive thread of humanism running through these arguments. Indeed, Richardson explicitly identifies herself as a humanist, and CASR (2021a) lists “humanity” as one of its key values. Why are machines unable to replace or replicate human relationships? The underlying belief is that human connections are special, occupying a uniquely important role in maintaining both individual and societal wellbeing. Both the importance of human relationships and the false, inadequate, or pathological nature of relationships with machines are brought up repeatedly throughout the data. For instance, Richardson argues that human beings are inseparable from our relationships to other humans – “even our thinking, our feeling, our experiencing is in relationship with each other” (UNSW, 2018). To be in relationship with other humans is a quintessential part of human nature in what Richardson calls a

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<sup>37</sup> See Davis (1981) for a critique of how the work of earlier radical feminists relies on racist stereotypes of Black men as sexual predators.

“species-specific sociality” (UNSW, 2018). Other beings, including nonhuman animals, simply cannot replicate these necessary intimate relationships. These connections are so important that to even suggest robots could replace humans is to “[denigrate] human beings and our relationships with each” (O’Connor, 2018). The argument is not just that human relationships are threatened by sex robots, but that this means sex robots pose an *existential threat* to humanity itself – that is how important intimate relationships are. Ultimately, the key reason why sex robots are so dangerous to our relationships, and thus to the social order, is that while they may replicate the human form, they are *not human*. They are objects, not complex persons who can provide true relationality.

Overall, feminist sex robot opponents position sex robots as a serious threat to human empathy, intimacy, and connection. Sex robots are argued to harm our ability to form human relationships in multiple ways: they alter our brains to erode our capacity for empathy and connection, they warp ‘normal’ sexuality away from intimacy and mutuality and towards violence and dehumanization, and they devalue our unique importance as humans. In the next section, I examine anti-sex robot feminists’ proposed solution to this “assault on human intimacy”: love (CASR, 2018).

### **Discourses of Love: Empathy, Mutuality, and Relationality**

In response to the threat to human relationships posed by sex robots, CASR founder Kathleen Richardson proposes what she calls a “politics of love” (UNSW, 2019). It is, she describes, “a politics of each other, attachment [and] species-specific sociality...[It’s] something we can really use to change the world” (UNSW, 2019). This

is also referenced in CASR's guiding values, where love is cited as a key principle of their activism and advocacy:

we believe in the politics of love, a strong bond between people that helps us shape relationships and connections with compassion, tolerance and respect, and the rights of all human beings to flourish in a world free from sexual violence and coercion. (2021a)

In feminist anti-sex robot arguments, loving interpersonal relationships are positioned as the antithesis of the isolation, loneliness, and dehumanization of relationships with machines. The politics of love is mobilized not only against the development and use of sex robots, but also against other 'un-feminist' relationships, sexual acts, and identities such as sex work, pornography, and 'transgenderism'. In this section, I examine what discourses of love circulate in feminist anti-sex robot arguments, particularly in relation to sex and relationships between men and women.

What is love? References to intimacy, mutuality, reciprocity, and empathy are pervasive in the data. They are celebrated as ideals ("overwhelming evidence supports...a culture which values mutuality, co-experience and a shared humanity" [Richardson, 2018]) and mourned as damaged or destroyed (in a world with sex robots, "empathy is eroded, while the idea of reciprocity and respect is completely abandoned" [CASR, 2020j]). Love is understood as a central priority in our lives, and is the key to happiness and fulfillment. For instance, Davis argues that "it's time we started talking more about love and empathy" (CASR, 2020d). She contends that many people fear "never finding love," and therefore it is imperative that technological advances support, rather than undermine, the ability to "form and sustain loving and supportive relationships" (CASR,

2020d). Elsewhere, Richardson argues that love is essential for wellbeing: “it’s the worst thing you can do for human beings...to deprive them of mutuality, contact, love” (Object UK, 2020). Beyond happiness, love gives us our *humanity*. While machines cannot love or be loved, Richardson suggests that humans only exist through our meaningful relationships with other humans (UNSW, 2018). Intimate relationships between men and women are also, she explains, natural and essential for the continuation of the human species: “men and women coexist together...they need each other. I am the product of a relationship between a man and a woman, and...it’s so necessary for our existence to be in relationship with each other” (O’Connor, 2018). Notably, anti-sex robot feminists also acknowledge that love can be difficult and painful, because it requires vulnerability, the possibility of rejection, and the challenge of living and communicating with another human being (CASR, n.d.-b; O’Connor, 2018). This echoes the idea that women are challenging and messily human, as discussed in the previous chapter – like real women, real relationships are not easy. However, love’s risk is also its reward. While it is more difficult to have an intimate relationship with another person than with a sex robot, it is ultimately worth it for the irreplaceable experience of mutual, reciprocal love and care.

Love is also defined largely through what it is *not*. Selfishness, narcissism, masturbation (alone or with an object), fetishes, sex work, pornography, and violence are all cast in opposition to love. If love requires connection and intimacy, any sexual act or relationship where these are absent flies in the face of love. For instance, while Richardson emphasizes that CASR is not opposed to masturbation, she also expresses hesitation about whether vibrators can be considered feminist because they privatize and mechanize women’s sexual activity, “divorced from relationship or sensuality” (Fein,

2021). Other campaigners invoke masturbation to signify male selfishness and detachment: Uygarkizi suggests that sex robots exist because “men were demanding” to masturbate into robots (CASR, 2020h), and Williams describes “transgenderism” as a “masturbatory” male fantasy “all about me, me, me” (Object UK, 2020). So-called ‘male fetishes’ and pornography are perhaps the biggest affront to love because they are argued to dehumanize and violate women, while eroding men’s capacity for empathy. That a woman might consent to and enjoy fetishistic or pornographic sex is unthinkable.<sup>38</sup> Instead, it is presumed that women are forced or groomed by men to participate in these inherently violent and harmful acts – clearly the opposite of love’s mutuality and empathy.

Notably, love and sex are not necessarily opposed. That is, the *right* kind of sex is acknowledged to be an important part of loving, intimate relationships between men and women. Sex is understood by feminist sex robot opponents to be “part of a person, in their body, and...mediated between people inside relationships” (CASR, n.d.-a). It is considered an inalienable, internal property of the self that cannot be bought or sold, only shared in relationship or forcibly taken. Sex, explains Jeffreys, requires being “vulnerable and involve[s] intimacy” (CASR, 2020a). It must be “mutually enjoyed between people” (CASR, 2020d) and “should be private, about intimacy, [and] about shared pleasure” (CASR, 2020c). Good, feminist sex is not purchased from a sex worker or had with a sex

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<sup>38</sup> What counts as fetishistic and pornographic sex? It varies from the seemingly innocuous to the selectively outrageous. Jeffreys includes “somasochistic practices,” “being gagged,” “eating...shit off teaspoons,” “nappy [diaper] fetishism,” and “battered bun...a practice in which many men ejaculated into one woman’s vagina” as sexual acts men enjoy and women are forced to endure (CASR, 2020a). Naomi Miles describes “strangulation, heterosexual anal sex, and...all sorts of rough sex that [is] potentially very harmful to women” as dangerously normalized by pornography (CASR, 2020e). And a list of sex acts (“paying rapes and assaults”) available for purchase at a brothel, cited from an anti-sex work organization, includes “group sex,” “blowjob without rubber,” “ejaculating in the face,” “anal fist fucking,” and “man shits on woman” (CASR, n.d.-a).

robot. It does not center male fetishes or acts featured in pornography. It is not violent or sadomasochistic. Instead, it is always premised on loving, private, mutual, intimate relationships, and while it may occur between same-sex partners, it exists only in relationships that replicate heterosexual power structures. This idealized sex stands in contrast to the fetishistic, pornographic, commercial, and/or masturbatory acts described previously as outside of and an affront to love. It is situated firmly within what Rubin (1984/2011) calls “the charmed circle” of normative sex (p. 152). I am reminded of how Patrick Califia (1994), writing during the Sex Wars, mocked idealized ‘feminist’ sex: “after the wimmin’s revolution sex will consist of wimmin holding hands, taking off their shirts, and dancing in a circle. Then we will all fall asleep at exactly the same moment” (p. 159). Of course, unlike the lesbian feminists that Califia (1994) caricatures, anti-sex robot feminists are invested in disciplining men’s sexuality in order to *bolster* heterosexual relationality, rather than challenge it.

Underpinning these discourses of love is the assumption that there are innate sexual and emotional differences between men and women. Male sexuality is understood to be based on men’s dominance over and hatred of women. As Richardson argues, it is “completely hostile to relationship, hostile to intimacy, hostile to mutuality with women” (Fein, 2021). It is said to be increasingly warped by exposure to pornography, as evidenced by the growth of violent and disturbing fetishes. Most importantly, male sexuality is the very root of women’s subordination, and must be changed for women’s liberation. Men’s sexual lives are not characterized by love, intimacy, mutuality, or care; indeed, their emotional inadequacy is the very problem that is exacerbated by sex robots. Female sexuality, meanwhile, is ironically defined primarily in opposition to male

sexuality. Women are forced to participate in male fetishes and pornographic acts to their own detriment; they do not watch pornography or have fetishes of their own.<sup>39</sup> Women who work in pornography must be “broken,” because an empowered, self-possessed woman would never participate in such dehumanizing acts of “torture” (O’Connor, 2018). Even the pleasure women derive from sex toys, whether alone or with partners, is tainted by patriarchy because vibrators make “women more sexually available to men” (Fein, 2021). Outside of love, intimacy, and relationality, there is no discussion of what women want or need from the act of sex itself.

There is a clear masculine/feminine binary established here: pornographic, masturbatory, egocentric, commercialized, dehumanizing sex, coded as masculine, is staged in opposition to loving, relational, empathetic, respectful, intimate, and humanistic relationships, coded as feminine and *feminist*. This inevitably reproduces patriarchal gender norms, where sex is the domain of men and emotions are the domain of women. Men want sex and women want love; men are physical and women are emotional. It also traps women in the role of passive victims of male sex, regardless of their own choices and desires. Thus, a paradox emerges. On one hand, anti-sex robot feminists make sacred the relationship between men and women, and argue that sex robots are harmful because they disrupt this natural heterosexual intimacy. In this view, men are not inherently violent. For instance, Jeffreys argues that “men’s sexual behavior is a matter of choices they make, that they have responsibility for and must change,” implying that men *can* change (CASR, 2020a). On the other hand, anti-sex robot feminists describe men as if

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<sup>39</sup> This is stated outright, repeatedly. Jeffreys argues: “it’s simply not something women do for sexual excitement” (CASR, 2020a). Elsewhere, she explains: “usually women and girls are the objects of these practices... Women do not have perversions” (CASR, 2020a).

they are innately predisposed to be physically and sexually violent, and women as if they are predisposed to be emotional and nurturing, reinforcing exactly the sort of biological determinism that is used to excuse and naturalize women's subordination. This ultimately reflects a static, facile, and reductionist understanding of gendered power relations, in which male dominance is naturalized at the same time as it is ostensibly challenged. Overall, the simplistic masculine/feminine binary that emerges in these arguments reaffirms the idea of innate gender roles, even as anti-sex robot feminists contend that men's sexuality can and must be changed.

In sum, discourses of love are mobilized in feminist anti-sex robot arguments both to establish the values of a utopian, feminist future<sup>40</sup> and to demarcate what kind of sex and relationships must be *excluded* from such a future. In these arguments, love is defined just as much by its antithesis – selfishness, pornography, sex toys, 'male fetishes,' masturbation – as it is by the appealing feminist ideals of reciprocity, mutuality, and empathy. The next section further examines the political work done by these discourses of love.

### **Re-Politicizing the “Politics of Love”**

Love, to borrow a phrase from Lee Edelman (2004), is an “ideological Möbius strip”: an issue with only one side, a debate that allows only one defensible position (p. 2). Or, as Laura Kipnis (2003) puts it, “who would dream of being against love? No one” (p. 3). What reasonable feminist would take a stance opposing love, or would argue against empathy, relationality, and mutuality? Feminist or not, what reasonable person

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<sup>40</sup> For feminist work that articulates love's revolutionary, transformative potential in a way that is antithetical to how CASR conceptualizes love, see bell hooks (2000).



does not want to love and be loved? In feminist anti-sex robot arguments, love is positioned as both the opposite of and the solution to the violence and alienation (re)produced through capitalism and patriarchy. Love and intimacy between humans renders sex robots unnecessary, insufficient, and unthinkable. In this way, Richardson's politics of love is her challenge to the existential threat to human relationships that she argues is posed by sex robots.<sup>41</sup> In this section, I do not necessarily argue *against* love, but I do seek to problematize and *re-politicize* its revolutionary potential. I ask: What political work is done by discourses of love in anti-sex robot arguments? What might love disguise or obscure? And can love be implicated in harm or violence?

Romantic love in its normative sense – heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive, and marital – has been scrutinized by scholars for its role in maintaining unequal relations of power (Ingraham, 1999; Kipnis, 2003; Osterlund, 2009). As Katherine Osterlund (2009) explains, love is “articulated and mobilized within diffuse, shifting social relations of *power*,” operating as a form of governance that demarcates which relationships are acceptable and deserving of recognition and reward (i.e., the monogamous, caring, and devoted) and which are not (p. 96). Kipnis (2003) argues that despite the collective yearning to love and be loved, long-term romantic relationships are both hugely overrated (breeding bad sex, boredom, and resentment) and an insidious form of social control (p. 94). Despite this, the desire for love is so deeply normalized that the inability to find a partner is seen as a tragic “failure to achieve what is essentially human” (Kipnis, 2003, p.

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<sup>41</sup> On the subject of existential threats, do anti-sex robot feminists worry about the extinction of the human race? It is not a direct topic of discussion, but I suggest that their opposition to technologically-mediated reproduction like in vitro fertilization and surrogacy points towards no (Object UK, 2020). Like sex robots, technologically-mediated reproduction is seen by anti-sex robot feminists as part of a larger “breakdown in distinctions between people and property” by capitalism, in which women are dehumanized and female bodies are commodified (Object UK, 2020). Babies will still be made, just not as the result of loving, reciprocal relationships between men and women.

26). Importantly, to love and be loved is not only a sign of personal achievement and social normality, it also gives one access to care through romantic and familial relationships. Caleb Luna (2018) explains that the cultural emphasis on romantic love leads to the devaluing and deprioritizing of single people. They describe that individuals whose bodies do not fit norms of desirability (i.e., thin, white, able-bodied, and cisgender) tend to be left behind in a world that distributes love and care based on romantic relationships (Luna, 2018, para. 6). Under neoliberalism, as state funding to social programs is clawed back, access to this unpaid labor of care becomes even more essential to one's quality of life and happiness (Osterlund, 2009). And, as Osterlund (2009) points out, the *provision* of care in a romantic relationship can be “a site of burnout, self-annihilation, inequality and unending and often unrecognized labour” as much as a source of “mutuality and deep affective ties” (p. 95). The boundaries of who is deserving of love and care and who is not, and who provides care and who does not – mediated by sexism, racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, transphobia, fatphobia, ageism, and ableism – come to matter through romantic relationships.

Expanding the focus beyond romantic love, Ahmed (2014) examines how love as a feeling or affect works to (re)produce the boundaries between selves, objects, and Others. She argues that emotions are not internal characteristics of individuals or externally imposed by social norms, but instead circulate between bodies and objects in affective economies. Rather than objects evoking emotions in bodies, emotions themselves shape the boundaries of and orientations to bodies and objects, which they in turn are shaped by. In this way, emotions “are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to” objects (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8).

Ahmed argues that acting “*in the name of love*” is always political because love requires a turn toward certain bodies and a turn away from others (2014, p. 124). The ideal of “a world where we all love each other” is premised on there being those who fail to meet this ideal: “those who don’t love...become the source of injury and disturbance” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 140). Importantly, love and hate are not oppositional feelings. As Ahmed describes, hate also involves an investment in (or love for) certain bodies as much as a turning away from others. Hate is justified in response to an “imagined...threat to the object of love” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 43). The emotions of love and hate, then, work together to shape bodies as being loveable (as similar to the feeling subject) or hateable (as a perceived threat to who or what is loved).

In sum, while love is conventionally understood as an individual feeling that is at least, normal, and at best, “the pinnacle of human achievement...[and] the path to future happiness and fulfillment,” scholars have shown that love cannot be disentangled from power, ideology, and governance (Kipnis, 2003, p. 99). I argue that when feminist sex robot opponents make a claim to speak from love, they tap into what Osterlund (2009) calls love as “a technology of power” (p. 93). These arguments delineate between those who are deserving of love and those who are not, while justifying and obscuring this exclusionary logic ‘in the name of love’. There is a clear juxtaposition of love and hate in the data: feminist sex robot opponents call for love, mutuality, and empathy, while at the same time hateful and violent descriptions of trans women pervade their arguments (see Chapter Three).

Anti-sex robot feminists argue that trans women do not love (“it’s all about me, me, me, it’s not about forming relationships with other human beings”), nor do they see

them as deserving subjects of feminist love, empathy, and mutuality (Object UK, 2020). At face value, hateful transphobia flies in the face of love – how can the two coexist? As Ahmed (2014) argues, hate is mobilized as a response to a perceived attack on an object of love. If, as anti-sex robot feminists maintain, trans women are narcissistic and perverted agents of patriarchal violence, then they threaten a loving, empathetic feminist future. Transphobia thus becomes necessary to protect ‘real’ women, the true subjects of feminism. In this way, Richardson’s politics of love – her “humanist fantasy” of “a world where we all love each other” – presupposes and excludes those who are already understood to have failed its ideal (Ahmed, 2014, p. 140). Love becomes a vehicle of exclusion, demarcating the boundaries of who is ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ of relationality, empathy, and care. Love also serves as its own invisibility cloak; claiming to act in the name of love provides a cover of innocence and benevolence. Again, what reasonable person would argue against a world with more love?<sup>42</sup> Love’s affective appeal both motivates and obscures the contradictions and violence inherent to these feminist anti-sex robot arguments.

Beyond its work in (re)producing boundaries of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and its close affective ties with hate, love has also been problematized by scholars for its role in justifying and sustaining white supremacy. As described in Chapter Three, the scientific history of biological sex is rooted in racist and colonial figurations of European superiority (Markowitz, 2001). Angela Willey (2016) writes that historically, the study of monogamy similarly used scientific discourse to justify white superiority over the

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<sup>42</sup> Some queer scholars actually do reject the political utility of relationality and community in what is referred to the queer anti-relational or anti-social thesis (Caserio et al., 2006; see Bersani, 1995 and Edelman, 2004).

“savage races,” who were argued to be less capable of love and empathy (p. 37).

Romantic love thus became a mark of civilization and evolutionary advancement, with monogamy implicitly linked to whiteness (Willey, 2016). In settler colonial nations like Canada, the imposition of European marriage and family structures on Indigenous peoples was seen as vital to the ‘civilizing’ process and the stability of the nation (Carter, 2008). As Kim TallBear (2018) explains, it also facilitated the theft of Indigenous land and the undermining of women’s social and political power; the colonial state restricted property ownership to men and tied “land tenure rights to heterosexual, one-on-one lifelong marriages,” forcing women to depend economically on their husbands (p. 148). I argue that this notion of the civilizing role of (heterosexual) romantic love is echoed in feminist anti-sex robot arguments. However, before I examine love’s racial and colonial underpinnings in relation to these arguments, I must first discuss how feminist sex robot opponents take up racism and colonialism in their work.

Notably, discussions of racism and colonialism are largely absent from feminist anti-sex robot arguments.<sup>43</sup> For instance, as I discussed in the previous section, there is little discussion of the differences *between* women. Instead, they are presented as a single, unified social group who share universal traits and experiences. Gendered violence and oppression is presumed to be the central, defining feature of all women’s lives and identities. As Crenshaw (1991) has critiqued, this essentialism recenters white women as the subjects of feminism by universalizing their experiences to *all women*, erasing the complex interplay between gender oppression, white supremacy, and other relations of power in many women’s lives. Indeed, the majority of CASR-affiliated

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<sup>43</sup> As I describe in Chapter One, this is also reflected in the majority of academic scholarship on sex robots.

scholars and activists are white or white-passing women. Considering anti-sex robot feminists' focus on dehumanization and violence, their silence regarding white supremacy is striking. To oppose capitalism and gendered oppression without consideration of white supremacy is nonsensical. These systems cannot be separated – to invest in one is to invest in them all. As Butler (1993) explains, “these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation” (p. 18). Thus, the overwhelming whiteness of feminist anti-sex robot arguments not only overlooks how racism and colonialism are inseparably intertwined with the gendered politics of sex robots, it also serves to prop up white supremacy by rendering it invisible and irrelevant to feminists concerns.

The exception to this silence is when racism, enslavement, and colonialism are mobilized as analogies for women's contemporary experiences of oppression. Slavery in particular is a frequent point of comparison by feminist sex robot opponents, because they argue that sex robots contribute to the dehumanization of female persons as property (see Chapter Three). These comparisons directly equate sexism with racism and colonialism. As Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman (1991) explain, this comparison recenters whiteness and reinforces white supremacy, while appropriating or dismissing the pain of experiencing racism. In one instance, Richardson suggests that the fight against racism has been won while sexism still persists, as exemplified by the creation of female-bodied sex robots:

We always have to keep reminding people that women don't want to be dehumanized. But, when we talk about race, nobody's introducing like racist

robots they can objectify, because the race issue, we don't have to keep reminding people to...stop being racist and dehumanize people of color. (Fein, 2021)

Besides the blatantly incorrect assertion that racism is no longer a serious or relevant issue, this ignores the possibility of non-white sex robots and the thorny ethical issues that could arise from, say, a white person designing, purchasing, and/or owning a Black robot. Again, this omission is conspicuous considering CASR's intense focus on dehumanization as a precursor to violence. Elsewhere, Richardson argues that fostering respectful, equal relationships between men and women is essential to preventing violence: "in order to change society, just like we abolished slavery, just like we started respecting Aboriginal people...it's about creating relationships between people" (UNSW, 2018). Strikingly, these arguments locate racism and colonialism squarely *in the past*. While sexism persists, slavery has been abolished and Indigenous people are respected; thus, the battles against racist and colonial violence have been won, leaving behind blueprints for contemporary feminist struggle. This historicization obscures the ongoing effects and violence of systemic racism and colonialism. The use of "we" is also particularly interesting, marking the speaker as part of a liberation movement (*we* abolished slavery, *we* respect Aboriginal people) while absolving the white subject of responsibility for or investment in the system itself.

Although they relegate racism and colonialism to the past, I argue that feminist anti-sex robot arguments contain clear strands of white supremacy. First, there is a deep attachment to binary thinking (including the sex binary, as described in Chapter Three) and particularly to the opposition of natural/unnatural and human/nonhuman. On one hand, unnatural new technology is argued to lead humans astray from our natural

proclivity to human-human connection and warp our natural psychological and sexual development. On the other hand, the supremacy of humans over nonhumans, including nonhuman animals and the environment, is constantly reaffirmed. As Richardson argues in her critique of posthumanism, “a polar bear can’t help you have a political engagement with another human being” (UNSW, 2018).<sup>44</sup> This reflects more the assumptions and limitations of Western epistemologies than an ‘objective’ assessment of the world. Indigenous epistemologies, which predate the turn to posthumanism, have long “[engaged] with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and *all* relations,” human and nonhuman (Todd, 2016, p. 6). For instance, Anishinaabe/Ojibway scholar John Borrows (2010) writes that observations of the natural world play a key role in Indigenous legal frameworks: “law is read from the land” (p. 35). Richardson’s dismissal of the nonhuman through her focus on “species-specific sociality” (“a bee can no more...meet my needs as I could meet...a bee’s needs”) positions CASR solidly within an anthropocentric, colonial framework (UNSW, 2018).

Feminist anti-sex robot arguments also reveal an investment in the colonial state. A surprising theme in the data is the recurring references to the “civil” – civil relationships, civil society, civil rights. The civil is attached to women’s personhood and legal rights, which need to be celebrated and defended: “no person can be property and societies have protected people with civil rights, so that people can engage in civil relationships with each other” (CASR, n.d.-a). Returning to love, it also is used to signify

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<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, lawyer and legal scholar Patricia J. Williams (1991) uses the polar bear as a recurring symbol in her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, an autobiographical text that critically examines racism and the law. Following Williams, a polar bear *can* actually facilitate a meaningful political engagement about a human issue – in this case, systemic racism.



legal sex and relationships in opposition to the criminal realm of rape, sexual abuse, and coercion, where sex “stops being civil, it stops being what we understand by sex as a civil phenomenon” (O’Connor, 2018). Civil can be taken as a reference to citizenship and the state. The assumption underlying this is that the state is a legitimate arbiter of rights and protections, and that citizenship is intimately tied to women’s liberation. Therefore, women ought to appeal to the state to protect their personhood from threats, such as those posed by sex robots. Further, sexual relationships are understood as *rightly* mediated by law and regulation, made legitimate by the state, whose own legitimacy relies on past and present colonialism. The word civil also signifies how *civilized people* ought to act, i.e., with kindness and benevolence. This echoes the colonial idea that love is a civilized feeling. To love and be loved is reaffirmed as the domain of the civilized.

The link between love and civility is further established in how romantic relationships between men and women are centered as necessary for both personal and societal wellbeing. Loving, monogamous, romantic relationships – coded, as I previously argued, as *feminist* – are deemed important in particularly gendered ways. Men outside of romantic relationships are framed as unable to form meaningful, empathetic connections, and women are framed as victims of these unempathetic men. For instance, Richardson (2018) warns that “widespread pornography has decreased male empathy towards women and girls, and therefore objects [like sex robots] that further reinforce the idea that women are programmable property can only destabilise relationships in society further”. The argument that men require human connections – particularly romantic connections with *women* – to develop empathy and avoid violent or anti-social behaviours echoes racist and colonial figurations of heterosexual, monogamous, romantic love as civilizing

and superior.<sup>45</sup> Further, it is completely dismissive of men's emotional capabilities, and again relegates women to sexist stereotypes of femininity: in this case, as nurturing maternal figures who must teach men how to care for others.

Interestingly, along with (heterosexual) romantic relationships, the nuclear family is also argued to be under threat by sex robots. Richardson warns that “father, mother, sex doll...[and] children” could soon be a legitimate, legally recognized family structure (Fein, 2021). Note that it is a very specific type of romantic and familial relationship that is deemed both central to societal functioning and under threat by sex robots: the same Euro-Western relationship structures seen as vital to civilization and imposed through colonialism. Ironically, the nuclear family has hardly been a place of safety, equality, or freedom for women.<sup>46</sup> It is strange to see it mobilized here as a feminist ideal under threat. This is yet another example of how, in the name of women's rights, feminist sex robot opponents paradoxically cling to outmoded gender norms. And, as I argued previously, the subtle reproduction of racist and colonial discourses again secures whiteness as the invisible, unspoken centre of feminism and the sex robot debate.

Ultimately, the feminist future envisioned by the politics of love is really a desire for a return to an imagined past, before the technological advancements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century changed sex and relationships. It is a future without technologically-mediated

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<sup>45</sup> This is a truth claim that circulates in multiple discourses, including criminology and psychology. For example, Zoutewell-Terovan et al. (2014) suggest that men who are married and have children are less likely to commit serious criminal offenses, while women's offending patterns are unaffected by marriage and motherhood. Similarly, psychologist Grant (2013) writes that having daughters makes men more empathetic and caring, and more “responsible citizen[s]” (para. 7).

<sup>46</sup> This includes white women, who I have argued are the implied subjects of CASR's feminism. Consider Betty Friedan's 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, which critiqued the promise that women are fulfilled by lives of domesticity, child-rearing, and marital bliss. The predominantly white, middle-class, suburban women whom Friedan's ideas resonated with were one faction (among many others, including Black feminists) behind the rise of second wave feminism in the 1960s.

sex, where romantic and familial relations take the same old white, heterosexual, patriarchal shape but somehow operate outside of historical context and relations of power as vehicles of feminist love and care. As I have argued, love has a deeply rooted affective allure, but it is not a politically neutral or innocent concept. Despite its call for empathy, respect, and mutuality – all appealing, feminist values – Richardson’s politics of love bring us to what is hardly a radical or transformative conclusion. We can, I contend, imagine a different feminist future.

### **Building a Feminist Future: Or, Should Love be a Feminist Goal?**

In this chapter, I have argued that discourses of love are mobilized in political and often harmful ways within feminist anti-sex robot arguments. I began with an overview of feminist anti-sex robot arguments, which contend that the use of sex robots will lead to the destruction of human intimacy, and then explored how discourses of love are mobilized in these arguments. I then problematized the anti-sex robot politics of love, which I argue is premised on an exclusionary logic that positions some subjects as outside of love and reinforces racist and colonial notions of love. To conclude, I ask: where does this leave love? Does love still provide any useful ground for feminist thinking, organizing, and living? First, it is worth thinking about what a feminist future might look like in the wake of sex robots and other technological advancements.

Future-making itself is a topic of contention among scholars. Edelman (2004) argues that futurity is inseparable from an imagined future Child who will benefit or be harmed by today’s (in)action, oft invoked in the refrain to *think of the children*. This imagined future Child becomes the justification for maintaining the status quo in the

present. Edelman (2004) argues for a revolutionary queer politics that refuses this reproductive futurity by rejecting future-making entirely, instead embracing the concept of no future. Jose Esteban Muñoz (2019) points out that the imagined Child in Edelman's analysis is implicitly white; racialized and queer children are already excluded from the future. Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) similarly explain that settler colonialism is invested in a particular form of futurity centered on "the continued and complete eradication of the original inhabitants of contested land" (p. 80). However, they make a distinction between this settler futurity and an Indigenous futurity, which is not premised on the same violent erasure and extinction (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 80). As Muñoz (2019) argues, "it is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity" when there are other political possibilities (p. 95). Future-making can therefore be a revolutionary, transformative project when it rejects the logics that position some subjects as inheritors to the future while excluding others.

Following Haraway (1985/2006) and Kubes (2019), I suggest that feminists ought to meaningfully engage with new technological developments rather than unilaterally condemn them, and consider their productive possibilities in our projects of future-making. Even if these new technologies, like sex robots, are "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism," they have the potential to be "exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (Haraway, 1985/2006, p. 105). I do see some radical possibilities in a future with sex robots, which I will speculate about here, although I want to emphasize that this is an area that requires further research, analysis, and theorizing by scholars. To me, a feminist future in a world with sex robots first and foremost will challenge the *reproductive* part of reproductive futurism – the reproduction

of children, but also of anthropocentrism, of the settler colonial state, of normative relationships, of gender/sex essentialism. It might, as Adshade (2017) suggests, even uncouple reproduction and child-rearing from romantic relationships entirely. This future must include those who are unable or uninterested in being in romantic relationships as worthy of love and care. As Puig (2019) argues, the revolutionary potential of sex robots will be hindered unless their introduction accompanies a de-hierarchizing of love and relationships, where romantic love is no longer attributed the most meaning and value. Finally, this future must include the nonhuman entities that we share our lives with – sex robots are an obvious example, but also nonhuman animals and the environment – as worthy of care and consideration. Note that none of these possibilities involve the destruction of human intimacy and connections, but, vitally, they do require us to rethink the specialness and uniqueness of humans and our romantic ties.

Where does this leave the politics of love? I remain skeptical of love as a feminist political goal. As Ahmed (2014) writes, meaningful relationships with family, friends, and lovers “give life meaning and direction”, but this does not make love itself a solid footing for feminist politics (p. 139). Love, both Ahmed (2014, p. 141) and Richardson (UNSW, 2018) point out, is never unconditional. It sounds appealingly utopian but, as I have shown, cannot be easily untangled from its ideological and affective baggage. If, as Ahmed (2014) describes, hate groups can claim to work in the name of love, then its meaning is so broad and vague that it seems hardly useful as a driving principle behind feminist politics. However, I suggest that feminists do not need to reject love altogether. One meaningful project would be deprioritizing romantic and sexual attachments as the

only sort of love worth having, and denaturalizing maternal and familial love.<sup>47</sup> A useful politics of love cannot be built on heteronormative, monogamous, romantic relationships as the societal glue that holds everything together and allows us to lead liveable lives. What if romantic love was no longer necessary to access care, be financially stable, find affordable housing, or have a child? Outside of sex and romance, love might mean that we ought to be deeply invested in the wellbeing of others, including both human and nonhuman entities. Or it might mean recognizing and cultivating the interconnections with others – again, including the nonhuman and/or non-sentient – that we rely on to survive. As hooks (2000) argues, “love [is] an action rather than a feeling,” something we all have “accountability and responsibility” for (p. 13). Future research on sex robots and their potential impact on our lives and relationships ought to focus on challenging normative understandings of love, rather than romanticizing love’s current form as inseparable from our individual happiness and collective wellbeing.

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<sup>47</sup> See the work of Kim TallBear (2018) for a discussion on how rejecting the imposition of these settler colonial family structures and sexual mores is an important part of a collective project of decolonization.

### **Conclusion: On Anti-Sex Robot Feminism and the Future**

In this thesis, I have critically analyzed the work of anti-sex robot feminists, focusing on the Campaign Against Sex Robots, its founder Kathleen Richardson, and its affiliated scholars and activists. Using a feminist critical discourse analysis, I examined anti-sex robot feminist materials, including articles, blog posts, podcasts, interviews, and conference presentations, for their underlying ideological assumptions. Overall, this thesis contends that while anti-sex robot feminists purport to challenge gendered violence, a close examination of their arguments reveals a deep *investment* in violence in the name of protecting women.

My analysis focused on two different discursive threads that emerged from these materials. First, I examined how anti-sex robot feminists define, understand, and defend ‘real’ womanhood. As I demonstrated, these feminists define womanhood in a narrow, rigid way that excludes not only sex robots, the archetypal ‘artificial’ woman, but also trans women. Indeed, both explicit and implicit transphobia is a recurring theme throughout feminist anti-sex robot arguments. I argued that sex robots and trans women are perceived as similarly threatening because they challenge the boundaries of what anti-sex robot feminists argue are innate, natural categories: womanhood and personhood. Second, I traced discourses of love and relationships in feminist anti-sex robot arguments. Love is proposed as a solution to the destruction of human relationships that sex robots will allegedly cause. As I explained, love is framed by anti-sex robot feminists as inherently feminine, and defined primarily by its antithesis: it is *not* commercial, masturbatory, pornographic, or fetishistic sex, all of which are argued to be linked to male sexuality and violence against women. Further, I argued that by positioning their

work as motivated by love, anti-sex robot feminists obscure the often hateful and violent underpinnings of their arguments. Love is not a neutral or benevolent concept that precedes power relations; instead, as I have shown, it is deeply implicated in them.

A question that has lingered on my mind throughout this project is what underlying motivations animate the work of anti-sex robot feminists. It is safe to say that they feel strongly passionate about their work and care immensely about (cisgender) women who have experienced violence at the hands of men. But what is the subtext that underpins their work, especially the elements that I have argued in this thesis are harmful or violent? One speculation is that anti-sex robot feminism might be a backlash to the decentering of white, cisgender women's experiences as social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter have gone mainstream. During the writing of this thesis, for instance, the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked months of protests against systemic racism and anti-Blackness and forced many institutions to reckon (however meaningfully) with their past and present role in racial injustice. White women are no longer the center of mainstream movements against systemic violence; in fact, there is a growing recognition of how white women excuse, justify, or directly commit violence against others, often by positioning themselves as victims.<sup>48</sup> There is similarly an increasing acknowledgment of the discrimination and violence experienced by trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people. I suspect that the arguments made by anti-sex robot feminists that 'real' women are being erased, replaced, and/or made irrelevant echo these campaigners' own fears that they themselves *are* no longer relevant.

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<sup>48</sup> For instance, in May 2020 a white woman called the police on a Black bird watcher and claimed she was being threatened because he asked her to put her dog on a leash (Vera & Ly, 2020). Her justification was that because the incident took place while the two were "alone in a wooded area," she found it "absolutely terrifying" (Vera & Ly, 2020, para. 18).



I see anti-sex robot feminism as an attempt to revive women as a uniquely victimized – perhaps even *the most victimized* – social group that shares universal experiences. This universalization, as I explained previously, implicitly centers white women (and, I would add, cisgender women) by disavowing that women have different lives shaped by varied experiences. The sensationalized, single-issue approach to sex robots taken by anti-sex robot feminists elides any complex, critical examination of the issue at hand. It attempts to secure women's relevance through a claim to *victimhood*.

None of this is to suggest that white, cisgender women do not have valid experiences of gendered violence, or that gender inequality has ceased to exist. In fact, I suspect one of the reasons anti-sex robot feminism is appealing to some women is because the social issues it focuses on – sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, intimate partner violence – are real problems that cause harm and distress to real people. Gendered violence has been a long-standing topic of feminist scholarship, activism, and advocacy for a reason: women and children *are* disproportionately victimized. My own previous research has examined sexual assault law, and it is a topic I care deeply about. It is where anti-sex robot feminists lay the blame for these issues, and the solutions they propose, that I have argued in this thesis are misguided, ineffective, and often violent. Further, clinging to women's victimization as a form of social intelligibility is a risky and potentially counterproductive political strategy. As Halley (2006) writes:

What if, as well as describing and opposing...[gendered oppression], feminism helps to produce it? What if the politics of injury and of traumatized sensibility...are helping to authorize and enable women as sufferers? If indeed

feminism is a powerfully constitutive discourse, it might well have a shaping contribution to make to women's suffering. (p. 210)

In other words, a feminist politics premised on women's suffering risks reinscribing that women must always suffer, that womanhood *is* suffering. It also obscures how men might be harmed by women, or how pleasure and suffering can coexist or intermingle. To me, the more interesting, more promising feminist work offers a complex analysis of harm that is not solely premised on women's universal victimization and men's universal guilt. To paraphrase Halley (2006), there is space for a feminism that advocates for women without the presumption of perpetual injury at the hands of men (p. 215-216).

To conclude, I would like to propose some potential areas for future research on this topic. My goal is for this thesis to serve as a jumping off point for feminist and queer explorations of sex robots, outside of the existing frameworks of anti-sex robot feminism. First, while this thesis directly challenges arguments against sex robots, there is still room for critical engagement with the implications of this new technology. In particular, there is a need for research that critically examines sex robots in relation to whiteness, age, and/or disability, which are underexplored in the existing literature. Moving forward, it is also essential that feminist engagement with sex robots does not just counter or repudiate the arguments made by anti-sex robot feminism, but actively challenges its underlying ideological framework – for instance, by explicitly examining white supremacy, by centering queer analyses, especially the work of trans and non-binary scholars, and by rejecting humanism and a rigid gender/sex binary. Next, while the scope of this project excluded child sex dolls and robots, this is an important area of future research. The need to protect children from widespread pedophilia is a recurring theme in anti-sex robot

feminist arguments. Future research ought to examine not only the ethical implications of child sex robots, but also how discourses of children's victimization and sexual innocence are mobilized. I argue that this is particularly relevant now that this notion of 'saving' children from systemic sexual abuse has become attached to far-right discourses and conspiracy theories like QAnon. There is also a general need for more empirical, rather than speculative, work on sex robots now that they are available for purchase. How do sex robot users see their robots, themselves, and others? How do sex robots fit into the contours of their users' lives, including their other relationships? Does evidence suggest that sex robots prevent violence, or cause violence, or both, or neither?

Much of the existing work on sex robots could be understood as what Sedgwick (2003) calls a paranoid reading. Paranoid work dwells on negative affect, anticipating that it will uncover harm and then having those suspicions confirmed through its findings. Anti-sex robot feminism is a paranoid reading of sex robots that finds the violent dehumanization of women and the destruction of love and intimacy lurking around every corner. But, as Sedgwick (2003) points out, this is not the only way to read an object or text. She advocates that scholars also engage in a *different* kind of analysis: a reparative reading that does not reject the possibility of positive affect and allows the reader to be surprised in a *good* way, rather than always anticipating (and finding) the negative. As Matthew Ball (2016) describes, reparative readings may arise from a position of injury, but they seek to "*repair* that trauma in some way and reformulate an affective bond to the harmful object" (p. 65). They remain "open to...multiplicity, complexity, creativity, and love," even in the possibility or presence of harm (Ball, 2016, p. 66). Admittedly, my own work might also be cast as paranoid, because in this thesis I have focused on

critiquing anti-sex robot feminism, uncovering its negative aspects, and anticipating that I will find and expose harm. However, in revealing the flaws and violence underpinning anti-sex robot feminism, I aim to create space for future *reparative* readings of this new technology. To me, this is the most important work to be done by feminist scholars on sex robots. Reparative work need not disavow that sex robots might cause harm, or be complicit with systemic power relations, or be the product of heteropatriarchal norms of beauty, sexuality, and relationships – but at the same time, it also leaves us open to the positive, transformative possibilities of this new technology.

In closing, I want to think differently about the worst fear of anti-sex robot feminists: the annihilation of real womanhood and intimate human relationships. Could annihilation be a productive political opportunity, rather than an apocalyptic disaster? In Alex Garland's (2018) film *Annihilation*, a team of five women conduct a mission into the Shimmer, a portion of American wilderness trapped under the iridescent dome of a slowly expanding alien presence. The Shimmer, they discover, is a prism that refracts not only light but life itself, causing the organisms under its dome to evolve in strange, beautiful, and sometimes frightening ways. The women soon realize their own DNA has changed from their time in its presence. "It's destroying everything," says the expedition's leader, Dr. Ventress, to which protagonist Lena replies: "It's not destroying, it's making something new" (Garland, 2018). My point is that perhaps annihilation can be a politically generative space – not in the sense of physical violence or death but as a metaphorical predecessor to rebirth and rebuilding. The destruction of narrow categories of womanhood, personhood, and love opens up interesting possibilities. Instead of something to fear, annihilation might be an opportunity for transmutation, to shatter what

we know and refract and reformulate the pieces. Feminist engagements with sex robots that cling to the gender/sex binary, anthropocentrism, and normative relationships, and that can only conceptualize change as terrifying destruction, are abdicating this chance to *make something new*.

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### Appendix A – Complete List of Sources

Title	Author(s) (Year)	Type
<i>#133 Who's afraid of sex robots?</i>	Fein (2021)	Podcast
<i>#DMUresearch into sex robots</i>	De Montfort University (2019)	Video
<i>A letter to your MP/MEP/MSP against sex dolls and robots</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Blog post
<i>A message from the Campaign Against Sex Robots on International Women's Day</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2021)	Video
<i>An open letter on the dangers of normalizing sex dolls &amp; sex robots</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2018)	Blog post
<i>British TV show, This Morning, features pornography and sexually harasses Holly Willoughby on live TV</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Blog post
<i>Heather Brunskell-Evans "The colonisation of the female body"</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video
<i>Jo Bartosch "Mind: Your own business"</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video
<i>Kate Davis "Logging onto love: How digital technologies change interhuman relationships"</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video
<i>Kathleen Richardson: Sex robots, the end of love?</i>	University of New South Wales Sydney (2018)	Audio file
<i>Naomi Miles "How online pornography facilitates sexual exploitation"</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video
<i>On sex robots and personhood with Kathleen Richardson</i>	O'Connor (2018)	Podcast
<i>Policy report: Sex dolls and sex robots – A serious problem for women, men &amp; society</i>	Richardson (2018)	Blog post

<i>Pornography, sex robots and artificial intelligence</i>	Object UK (2020)	Video
<i>Prostitution and sex doll brothels: The failures of the 'sex work is work' model</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (n.d.)	Blog post
<i>Raquel Rosario Sánchez "Sex robots: Almost perfect women, according to patriarchy"</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video
<i>Robotic stalking: Sex robots made to order by obsessive stalkers</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (n.d.)	Blog post
<i>S3, Ep4: Jo Bartosch: Love in an electronic age</i>	Poulton (2021)	Video
<i>Sasha Rakoff 'MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN'</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video
<i>Sheila Jeffreys keynote lecture: Fetishism and the construction of male sexuality</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video
<i>The emergence of sex dolls in public spaces</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (n.d.)	Blog post
<i>Yagmur Uygarkizi "Prostitution and sex dolls brothels"</i>	Campaign Against Sex Robots (2020)	Video

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*Note.* Sources are listed alphabetically by title.

### Appendix B – Complete List of Codes and Subcodes

Codes and Subcodes	Frequency
Analogy or comparison with colonialism	5
Analogy or comparison with racism	6
Analogy or comparison with slavery	16
Blurring of boundaries	9
“Civil relationships”	9
Commodification of sex and relationships	31
Conspiracy theories	10
Egocentrism	4
Female sexuality	23
Sex workers as “damaged”	4
Humans as special and distinct	22
Humanism being undermined	25
Personhood	12
Importance of human relationships	30
“Politics of love”	13
Legal regulation of sex robots	17
Male dominance	26
Male sexuality	26
“Male fetishes”	44
As harmful to women	9
“Male sex right”	6
Men as the problem	16
“Mind-body split”	10
Relationships with machines	22
As false	3
“Sick individuals”	5
Sex as relational	15
Technological development	11
As capitalist	14
As patriarchal	18

Benefits of new technology	3
Lockdown accelerating use of technology	9
Negative impact(s) on human relationships	35
Bypassing rejection	2
Erosion of empathy	8
Isolation	9
Loneliness	12
Unable to form relationships	16
Negative psychological impact(s)	21
Non-consensual digital replication of women	4
CASR versus “penis pandering”	21
Queer theory as patriarchal	4
“The horrors that lie ahead”	13
Trans women	7
As comparable to sex robots	2
As criminal	2
As men	9
As narcissistic	2
As patriarchal threat	5
Warping of normal sexuality	25
Women as agentic	2
Women as biological females	9
“Denying women’s bodily reality”	3
“There are women and there are men”	5
Women as challenging	6
Speaking out against patriarchy	9
Women as hated	14
Women as male property	16
Women as objectified	48
Dehumanization	22
Sexualized, “pornified”	20
Women as silenced	11

“Cancel culture”	8
Women being replaced	25
“A culture of manufactured females”	3
Female annihilation	4
Sex robots as “perfect women”	11
Sex robots in public	10

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*Note.* Codes are listed alphabetically. Quotation marks signify *in vivo* codes.