

Book Review

# Property, Personhood, and the End of Love: A Review of *Sex Robots*

Kathleen Richardson, *Sex Robots: The End of Love* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2025)

Giorgia Caon<sup>1,2\*</sup>

- 1 Transcrime, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Largo Gemelli 1, 20123, Milan, Italy; [giorgia.caon@unicatt.it](mailto:giorgia.caon@unicatt.it)
  - 2 Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; [caon@essb.eur.nl](mailto:caon@essb.eur.nl)
- \* Correspondence: [giorgia.caon@unicatt.it](mailto:giorgia.caon@unicatt.it)

**Abstract:** This review examines *Sex Robots: The End of Love*, in which Kathleen Richardson presents a radical feminist critique of sex robots and the sexual-exploitation industries of pornography, prostitution, and child sexual abuse. Centred on the pronominal philosophies of the egocentric *I*, the undifferentiated *we*, and the *I-you* attachment, Richardson argues that these industries and the representational technologies that emerge from them are grounded in property relations, dissociation, and the erosion of mutuality. In assessing her analysis, this review outlines the conceptual foundations of the pronominal framework and evaluates its application across the three industries. Richardson's arguments against pornography, prostitution, and child-sexual abuse are powerful and ethically urgent as they reframe sex robots as technological amplifications of systems already built on domination. However, empirical research on feminist, queer, and LGBTQ+ uses of pornography, as well as human-rights-based perspectives on sex work, raises questions regarding the breadth of some of her universal claims. Despite this, Richardson's reframing of sex robots as extensions of exploitative sexual economies offers an important and timely intervention into contemporary discussions of intimacy and technology across AI ethics and feminist theory.

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In *Sex Robots: The End of Love*, Kathleen Richardson presents a forceful and wide-ranging critique of the ideologies that underpin the industries of pornography, prostitution, child sexual abuse, and the production of sex robots and related representational technologies. Framed around three pronominal philosophies- "the egocentric *I*, the undifferentiated *we*, and the relational *I-you* attachment" (pp. 14)- the book argues that sex robots are not neutral tools or harmless fantasies; they are extensions of property relations that commodify human beings and normalise systems of abuse. Drawing on radical feminist analysis, legal and philosophical history, psychology, and cultural case studies, the book contends that these technologies accelerate the erosion of authentic human relationships and signify "the end of love" (pp. 3). As an alternative, Richardson proposes a "politics of love" (pp. 20), rooted in embodied mutuality, ethical responsibility, and genuine interpersonal connection, while simultaneously rejecting representational substitutes and resisting the dissociative tendencies of a modern culture grounded in technology. In keeping with Richardson's own terminology, I use the form 'sex' robots to reflect her claim that these artefacts cannot engage in sex in its ethical, relational sense. When referring to the technology more broadly, I use the unmarked term *sex robots*.

Before turning to the substance of the review, it is helpful to outline Richardson's pronominal framework, which constitutes the conceptual basis for her critique of sexual-exploitation industries and the technologies that emerge from them. The egocentric *I* describes a worldview in which the distinction between persons and property is collapsed (pp. 14). This framework establishes domination, hierarchy, and dissociation as foundational principles which serve to legitimise the treatment of others as objects that exist for the use of a master. For Richardson, this property logic directly reinforces the industries of pornography, prostitution, and child sexual abuse. In contrast, the undifferentiated *we*, developed as a progressive critique of hierarchical and patriarchal systems, emphasises interconnectedness and rejects essentialism (pp. 16). However, Richardson argues that by dissolving distinctions between people, categories, and material realities, the philosophy of the undifferentiated *we* inadvertently erodes the boundaries that protect against exploitation. Specifically, its anti-essentialist rejection of sexed difference and its tendency to blur the human-machine divide create the conditions for reframing representational technologies as companions, friends, or even romantic partners. In this way, the undifferentiated *we* mirrors the egocentric *I* by detaching relationality from embodied human life. As an alternative, Richardson offers the *I-you* relation, referencing Martin Buber (pp. 135) and attachment theory (pp. 138), to conceptualise love as mutual recognition that is free of property relations. *I-you* attachment requires vulnerability, reciprocity and, most importantly, the refusal to turn the other into an *it*. Crucially, because 'sex' robots are built upon the dissociative logics that strip relationality from human experience, Richardson makes the argument that they can never participate in *I-you* relations. Thus, they signify the end of love.

### 1. Pornography

Richardson's analysis of pornography provides a strong foundation for understanding 'sex' robots as "3D porn" (pp. 35). Referencing the pronominal philosophy of the egocentric *I*, she argues that pornography is structured around domination and the treatment of women as property-like surfaces onto which male desire is inscribed. Along this line of thinking, the 'sex' robot becomes a literalised extension of pornography's visual logic: a three-dimensional object that materialises the pornographic script of female disposability and silence. Additionally, the almost complete absence of a commercial market for male 'sex' robots further supports Richardson's argument that pornography, and the technologies that grow from it, are grounded in gendered asymmetries. However, pornography's cultural stability is not explained by the egocentric *I* alone. Richardson also highlights the role of the undifferentiated *we*, a boundary-dissolving framework in which distinctions between people and representations are flattened. Within this pronominal logic, pornography is reframed as merely fantasy, removed from material relations of power, and its harms are obscured through the blending of the real and the representational. Erasing this difference is what enables pornographic images and technological artefacts to be treated as harmless stand-ins for human intimacy. It also creates the conceptual space in which 'sex' robots can be marketed as playful companions rather than as extensions of property relations. Finally, by conceptualising pornography through the roots of *pórnē* (meaning sex slave; pp. 35), Richardson situates the industry, historically and philosophically, as a continuation of patriarchal property relations.

Though this analysis is powerful, especially when applied to heterosexual mainstream pornography, it arguably overextends when treated as universally descriptive of all pornographic forms. An expanding body of empirical research complicates the claim that pornography is monolithic or uniformly organised around the subordination of women. For instance, studies on LGBTQ+ pornography use show that consumption patterns often reflect the search for identity-relevant information rather than the reproduction of patriarchal scripts. Indeed, Bóthe et al. (2019) found that LGBTQ+ adolescents frequently use

pornography to access sexual knowledge, that is often unavailable through conventional education, framing pornography use as a part of sexual identity development and not as a conduit for objectification. Similarly, research on feminist and women-centred pornography highlights alternative sexual scripts that centre agency and reciprocity. Fritz and Paul (2017) demonstrate that while mainstream and “for women” heterosexual pornography contains the highest levels of female sexual objectification, queer feminist pornography provides significantly higher levels of female sexual agency. These findings suggest that pornography may not be a singular system but a heterogenous one in which objectifying and empowering representations coexist.

These variations in contemporary pornographic culture raise questions about whether Richardson’s argument, which is rooted in a patriarchal framework, can fully account for pornography produced outside of that framework. Queer and feminist communities have developed genres that resist or subvert male-dominant scripts which suggests that pornography can, at least in some contexts, function as an avenue for sexual exploration or education and not necessarily solely as an extension of slavery-based property relations. That being said, these counterexamples do not undermine Richardson’s central claim about sex robots. As consumer technologies, ‘sex’ robots overwhelmingly replicate the pornographic scripts of mainstream heterosexual culture. Their design, marketing, and use remain oriented toward a model of femininity as compliant and silent. Thus, while pornography as a whole may be more diverse than Richardson allows, her writing is highly persuasive when applied to the specific lineage of mainstream pornography to contemporary ‘sex’ robot designs. The philosophical reframing she offers therefore remains valuable, even if the broader pornographic landscape is more varied than her account suggests.

## 2. Prostitution

In the following chapter on prostitution, Richardson argues that the industry exemplifies the pronominal logic of the egocentric *I* in that men purchase sexual access to women while denying them their subjectivity and emotionality. Additionally, Richardson proposes that the framing of prostitution as “sex work” is not a neutral linguistic shift but instead represents an expression of the undifferentiated *we*, embodying a philosophical stance that removes distinctions between consensual intimacy and commodified sexual access. This, it is argued, obscures the material conditions of coercion, racialised inequality, and economic vulnerability that shape the industry. Drawing on Marx’s critique of labour and its commodification (pp. 50), Richardson argues that reconceptualising prostitution as work only legitimises the treatment of women’s bodies as property and further facilitates the mechanisation of sexual access, demonstrated through the introduction of ‘sex’ robots. Moreover, the rebranding of prostitution as labour functions, in her view, as a politics of dissociation because it disguises the physical violence, psychological trauma, and high rates of femicide experienced by prostituted women, while sustaining the myth of mutuality that maintains the industry. Within this dual-pronominal framework, the arrival of ‘sex’ robots is not a progressive innovation, it is a revealing amplification of the industry’s existing logics. That technological artefacts can seamlessly substitute for prostituted women highlights how deeply prostitution is structured around property relations, where women become surfaces for men’s actions rather than participants in reciprocal human relationships.

However, Richardson’s abolitionist framing sits within a long-standing and deeply contested feminist debate. Global research on sex work emphasises that prostitution takes various forms, shaped by migration, poverty, gendered labour markets, and legal frameworks. Organisations such as Amnesty International (2016) argue that criminalisation of prostitution- whether it concerns buyers, sellers, or third parties- exposes sex workers to heightened violence, prevents them from accessing health care, and forces them to operate

covertly in ways that further endanger their safety. Their human-rights-based approach emphasises the need to dismantle structural inequalities that drive people into sex work, ensure safe working conditions, and protect the rights and agency of sex workers, including LGBTQ+, migrant, Indigenous women, and women of colour who disproportionately occupy the industry. From this perspective, the widespread abolition of prostitution could inadvertently reproduce the harms it seeks to remedy unless accompanied by massive economic, legal, and social restructuring. These considerations suggest that prostitution cannot be reduced solely to a philosophical structure of domination. Its lived realities are uneven and often shaped by coercive social conditions. Even so, Richardson's argument remains compelling in the case of sex robots. Whatever the diversity of human sexual labour, 'sex' robots do not and cannot model consensual labour or agency. They are built to simulate compliance and sexual access without resistance, thereby reinforcing the very dissociative and objectifying dynamics she critiques. While the global politics of sex work remain extremely complex, Richardson convincingly shows that 'sex' robots operate as an automation of the industry's most harmful features; they are not a mechanism for reducing harm or increasing safety.

### 3. Child Sexual Abuse

The final industry that Richardson addresses in her book is that of child sexual abuse (CSA). Her analysis of CSA technologies is the most ethically urgent and unambiguous part of the book. According to the egocentric *I* framework, she argues that child sex-abuse dolls, robots, and AI-generated imagery extend long-standing efforts to encode children as sexual property. At the same time, she demonstrates that the undifferentiated *we* also plays a role in enabling the proliferation of these technologies. By dissolving boundaries between imagination and action, it allows some commentators to reframe CSA representations as harmless expressions of desire or as therapeutic tools existing outside of moral relations. Richardson argues that the claim that such representational technologies might reduce offending by providing a safe outlet rests on the deeply dangerous assumption that sexual violence against children is an inevitable manifestation of male desire. In her view, this premise erases moral agency and fundamentally misrepresents the nature and dynamics of CSA.

Furthering her argument is the critique of dissociation between real and representational abuse. She notes that defenders of child sex-abuse dolls and robots often claim that no child is harmed because the artefact is not a moral agent. However, the question, as she emphasises, is why such artefacts are designed to resemble children at all, and why do they so often include penetrable orifices and explicitly sexualised features? These dolls and robots function as representational surfaces on which children are symbolically subordinated. Moreover, existing research provides little support for the therapeutic device hypothesis sometimes advanced in literature. While some scholars have speculated that dolls might serve as harm-reduction tools, the evidence base is slim. In contrast, Brown and Shelling (2019) caution that interactions with CSA dolls may desensitise users and potentially bridge the gap between fantasy and contact offending, while offering no demonstrated therapeutic benefit. In this context, Richardson's rejection of CSA dolls and related representational technologies is well-founded. Her argument that these technologies represent the continuation, and technological intensification, of child abuse is ethically and empirically compelling.

### 4. A Politics of Love

In the final chapter, Richardson develops the concept of the *I-you* attachment as the ethical and political contrast to both the egocentric *I* and the undifferentiated *we*. Drawing on relational philosophy, attachment theory, and cross-cultural understandings of love, she argues that genuine human connection is grounded in mutuality and an outright rejection

of property relations. The *I-you* framework positions attachment as the foundation of an ethical life that is reciprocal and rooted in responsibility. Within this schema, 'sex' robots, like pornography, prostitution, and CSA, cannot sustain *I-you* relations thus, their emergence signifies a deepening cultural shift toward dissociation and commodified intimacy. This articulation of what she refers to as the "politics of love" (pp. 20) is powerful in its insistence that technological substitutes cannot repair relational breakdown. Subsequently, her argument reframes contemporary sexual economies as symptoms of broader social failures to ethical attachment. At the same time, however, the universality of the *I-you* prescription invites questions about cultural variability and practical implications of grounding political ethics in a single relational model. While such questions do not undermine the force of her argument, they highlight the normative scope of Richardson's proposal. Nevertheless, as the conceptual centre of this book, the chapter provides an interpretive lens through which the harms associated with sex robots can be understood as part of a wider erosion of relational life.

## 5. Conclusion

At its core, *Sex Robots: The End of Love* firmly argues that sex robots do not represent a technological novelty; they only serve to intensify the dissociative characteristics that permeate the industries of pornography, prostitution, and child sexual abuse. Richardson illustrates how *I-you* attachment is eroded in all three industries and is replaced either by the domination of the egocentric *I* or the boundary-blurring of the undifferentiated *we*. This is a transformation which she argues creates the philosophical and material conditions necessary for representational technologies of the human to thrive. Her pronominal framework is original and insightful, and offers a conceptual language that traverses anthropology, psychology, feminist theory, and AI ethics. Overall, the book's interdisciplinary approach, together with its radical feminist focus on women's and children's vulnerability, grounds its arguments in a strong ethical framework. However, there are certain limitations which should be considered. Richardson's analyses can occasionally tend towards over-determinism. Her arguments treat pornography and prostitution as industries that are ideologically uniform, while existing evidence suggests far more variety in motivations, practices, and user communities. There is a possibility that this deterministic tendency arises from the fact that Richardson's pronominal framework is largely informed by Western perspectives of gender, property, and personhood which cannot fully capture the variability of alternative sexual systems. Additionally, there is less sustained engagement throughout the book with the complexities presented by contemporary sexual spaces, especially those that are primarily queer and women-centred. Moreover, while Richardson does briefly participate in debates surrounding harm-reduction and rights-based contexts, her abolitionist stance leaves points of contention between ethical aspiration and practical policy. Although these limitations do not negate the merit of the book's message, the arguments put forth should be understood as normative political perspectives rather than as absolute sociological interpretations. Ultimately, Richardson's work makes valuable and apt contributions to ongoing debates on AI-mediated intimacy and the ethics of human-machine relations. Notwithstanding the limitations raised, readers will find in this work a challenging and necessary perspective on what is at stake in the rise of sex robots.

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