

Conclusion: Reclaiming the *Dames de Voyage*—The Feminist Potential of a Fictional Past

After this long road of investigating, debunking, and interrogating the story of the sailors' dolls—after all of the sources that crumble under closer inspection, all of the sexual histories left untold, all of the discriminatory implications of contemporary narratives about the origins of sexual technologies—it's hard to imagine sticking up for the *dames de voyage*. Indeed, at the center of this book has been the claim that the *dames de voyage* are not in fact the origin point of today's sexual technologies, as they are commonly envisioned, and that understanding the history of sex tech in ways that are both more accurate and more socially just requires deconstructing this tale, confronting its meaning and the kinds of cultural work it performs, and finding new origin stories. To put this point in the simplest terms, we might say that this project has been all about what is wrong with the *dames de voyage* and what that wrongness reveals. Clearly, it would seem, it is time to jettison the tale of *dames de voyage*, casting it overboard from the ship of both scholarly and popular histories of sexual technologies.

And yet, how I want to end is actually by making a case that might appear to run counter to (almost) everything that has come before—a case for reclaiming the *dames de voyage*. Yes, the tale of the *dames de voyage* is a false history that has emerged through problematic scholarly practices and the codification of fantasy into fact; yes, the tale of the *dames de voyage* presents a version of history that overwrites marginalized people and obscures actual histories, including histories of violence and oppression. Despite all this, there remains a glimmer of radical potential in the story of the sailors' dolls itself, a potential for an intersectional feminist reclamation inspired in part by the Afrofuturist work discussed in chapter 6, which

uses speculative thinking about technology to remake both the past and the future. Throughout much of this book, I have argued for destabilizing dominant narratives about history (or those that serve the purposes of dominant groups) and going “spelunking” through the archives and genealogies of the past in order to institute counternarratives. However, as I demonstrate here in this conclusion, these counternarratives need not only be found by discarding the stories we are already being told. The tale of the *dames de voyage* shows us that we can also remake history from the inside. Like the ship lured toward the sirens’ call, or like the teleological lineage of technology’s history once it comes under feminist critique, the hegemonic cultural politics of the tale of the *dames de voyage* can be steered off course. The figure of the sailors’ doll herself can be reimagined, rendered into a powerful symbol of subversive desire, if we put aside the work of figuring out what is “real” or “imaginary” and instead think about what is possible.

In what follows, I explore these possibilities through a work that is itself feminist and explicitly fictional: Anaïs Nin’s erotic short story “Mathilde.”¹ First published in 1977 but written during the 1940s, “Mathilde” includes an anecdote about a rubber woman used for sex and passed between sailors. Nin’s story sparks a new way of seeing the tale of the *dames de voyage*, one in which the daydreams of women blur the divide between sexual subjects and sexual objects. For the protagonist of “Mathilde,” who both luxuriates in the idea of being a rubber woman and laughs at the men who would use her, speculation transforms a sexist tale into an intimate daydream about being passed from bed to bed on a long voyage at sea. Although Nin’s story, which has its own problematic racial and colonialist overtones, itself merits critique, it also serves as an invitation to reconsider the history of sexual technologies by inhabiting rather than dismissing fantasy. It prompts us to imagine what erotic appeal stories like the tale of the *dames de voyage* might have for those other than straight, white, cisgender men who idealize the prospect of sex with machines. “Mathilde” also brings new queer valences to the story of the sailors’ dolls, challenging us to consider whether our technologies might have interior sexual lives all their own. Reclaiming the tale of the *dames de voyage* specifically for those whom this origin story and others like it have marginalized is a way to orient ourselves differently toward history, turning historical imaginaries into fodder for feminist imagination.

Feminist Fantasies: Becoming the *Dame de Voyage*

As I have mentioned, much has been written about appearances of women dolls and robots, typically created to serve as sexual or romantic companions for men, in literature and film. Less has been written about how women themselves—along with transgender, nonbinary, and queer people—have used narratives about so-called gynoid robots and dolls to explore issues of gender, sexuality, identity, and power. Examples of such texts, while largely absent from existing narratives about the history of the sex doll, are nonetheless important. For instance, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be seen as a gender-swapped and perhaps even gender-queered version of stories like the myth of Pygmalion or the tale of the dames de voyage.² In Shelley's book, a male inventor (himself the creation of a female author) builds a creature in the shape of a man and brings him to life. Later in the text, Victor Frankenstein also builds a bride for his monster, but destroys her before handing her over to his original creature. We might read this violent, desperate act as a kind of feminist refusal on Shelley's part to turn her narrative into yet another tale about a man making a woman for the pleasure of a man. Relatedly, Bliss Cua Lim describes how director Vera Chytilová, in her 1966 film *Daisies*, uses representations of women as dolls in the mode of a feminist allegory, caricaturing an "overtly patriarchal ideal of femininity" while highlighting in the figure of the doll a childlike "unmanageability [that] is accompanied by a disposition to resist."³ A spark of this "disposition to resist" can in fact be found in various stories of the sex doll, if they are similarly read as feminist allegories, including the tale of the dames de voyage.

Julie Wosk, writing in her book *My Fair Ladies*, describes numerous works that illustrate what she refers to as "the woman artist as Pygmalion."⁴ These range from *Frankenstein* to the far more contemporary work of artist Cindy Sherman, in which Sherman constructs and reconstructs herself through careful portraits—a mix of disparate, performative identities intentionally cobbled together, not unlike the mismatched body parts of Frankenstein's monster.⁵ Wosk also provides examples of women installation artists, photographers, and filmmakers whose work challenges both earlier representations of dolls created by men, such as the work of midcentury surrealists and Dadaists, and more recent work by roboticists whose research has come to

fuel the contemporary “scientific” push for the development of sex robots. One such artist is Heidi Kumao, whose 2005 installation *Misbehaving: Media Machines Act Out* Wosk describes in this way: “While male engineers in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century were constructing new compliant females—pretty, lifelike women robots that embodied their fantasies and desires—Kumao in her *Misbehaving* series used sets of mechanized, engineered female legs to create witty female ‘robotic performers’ that were rebellious and defiant.”⁶ Exemplified by Kumao’s series is the fact that women have not only been the subjects of writing about robots and dolls; they have also been the creators of work that, in many instances, simultaneously explores and critiques the cultural alignment between the female body and its technological constructions.

Nin’s short story “Mathilde” too can be interpreted as part of this constellation of feminist work. “Mathilde” is one among many pieces of erotic short fiction that Nin authored during her literary career, many of which were written for commission and later anthologized and published in the volumes *Delta of Venus* (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979).⁷ While Nin herself remained ambivalent about her erotica, biographers and scholars of her work have since interpreted these short stories as examples of feminist pornography, combining explicit sexuality with an emphasis on the perspectives of women characters, many of them queer.⁸ Using a narrative structure that is common in Nin’s erotica, as well as in literary pornography more generally, “Mathilde” follows one particular character as she winds through various sexual encounters. Unlike the artworks described by Wosk, Nin’s story does not reimagine a woman as the new Pygmalion. Rather, in “Mathilde,” the woman is one and the same as the doll herself. “Mathilde” situates the doll in the realm of sexual fantasy rather than couching it within considerations of artistry or technological innovation, but the story has implications for the way we envision technology nonetheless. It wrests visions of the sex doll, and by extension all of the sexual technologies inextricably bound up with it, from the hands of straight men and repurposes it as a languid vision of indulgent female pleasure.

When Nin’s story begins, Mathilde is a twenty-year-old hat maker working in a locale that has cropped up time and again throughout this book: Paris. Cultured, adventurous, charming, and quick to laugh, Mathilde is eager to explore the romantic opportunities the world has to offer. After hearing that Parisian women are “highly prized” in South America for their

“expertness in matters of love,” Mathilde decides to travel to Peru.⁹ Despite bemoaning the fact that her voluptuous figure has always drawn crude attention from men (such as a gray-haired writer who seemed to be a poetic romantic until he proclaimed that the sight of Mathilde made him “stiff in [his] pants”), Mathilde quickly takes up sex work once she arrives in Lima.¹⁰ She turns her new hat shop into a boudoir and hosts dreamy, opium-fueled orgies for Peruvian aristocrats and their friends. Nin gives long, voluptuous descriptions of Mathilde’s group sexual encounters. “Mathilde would lie naked on the floor,” Nin writes. “All the movements were slow. The three or four men lay back among the pillows. Lazily one finger would seek her sex, enter it, lie there between the lips of the vulva. . . . Another hand would seek it out too. . . . Then, for hours, they might lie still, dreaming.”¹¹

Mathilde is not a sex doll, but she has many doll-like qualities. She plays dress up with herself as one might with a doll. Writes Nin, “Mathilde developed a formula for acting life as a series of roles—that is, by saying to herself in the morning while brushing her blond hair, ‘Today I want to become this or that person,’ and then proceeding to be that person.”¹² The role she plays in the orgies that take place in her Peruvian boudoir is similarly doll-like. Nin describes Mathilde being touched, kissed, pleased, and penetrated for two or three days on end. Martinez, one of her regular customers, regards Mathilde’s body and dreams of a grotesque, fleshy figure like a collection of mismatched doll parts and a “sex [that] was also mobile, moving like rubber, as if invisible hands stretched it”—recalling the rubber of the *femmes en caoutchouc*.¹³ In the story’s dramatic final sequence, Mathilde agrees to go to the private room of a participant in one of her orgies, Antonio, who forces her to take cocaine, rendering her into a kind of living sex doll. “They lay on the floor and she was taken with an overpowering numbness,” Nin writes. “Antonio said to her, ‘You feel dead, don’t you?’ . . . Antonio took [a] penknife and bent over Mathilde. She felt his penis inside of her.”¹⁴

These scenes reflect the ambivalence of Mathilde’s experiences in her role as doll. When she is passed around among the men who visit her boudoir, she describes feeling immense pleasure and satisfaction. Yet in this culminating sequence, we see what happens when doll-like-ness is forced upon her. She is rendered into a doll without her consent, and as a result ecstasy is transformed into powerlessness. Taken as a whole, “Mathilde” is far less a fantasy about what it would be like to *use* a woman as a sex doll and far more a fantasy about what it would be like to be a woman being

used as a sex doll. Yet this fantasy is also inextricable from the nagging concerns of reality. Under the guise of erotica, “Mathilde” becomes a reflection on the irreconcilable tension between the sexual desire to be treated like an object and the understanding that when men sexually objectify women, it is rarely on women’s own terms.

At the very heart of “Mathilde,” presented as a reprieve among scenes of orgies and ejaculation, is a story within a story—one that will, by now, sound strikingly familiar. This is the story of a rubber woman, made and used by a group of sailors on a long sea voyage. After one of her escapades of group sex, while still under the effects of opium, Mathilde decides to masturbate in front of a mirror. Following a “wild orgasm” brought on by using her fingers to penetrate herself both vaginally and anally, “as she sometimes felt Martinez and a friend when they both caressed her at once,” Mathilde muses in this way:¹⁵

After seeing her movements in the mirror [Mathilde] understood the story told to her by a sailor—how the sailors on his ship had made a rubber woman for themselves to while away the time and satisfy the desires they felt during their six or seven months at sea. The woman had been beautifully made and gave them the perfect illusion. The sailors loved her. They took her to bed with them. She was made so that each aperture could satisfy them. . . . The sailors found her untiring and yielding—truly a marvelous companion. There were no jealousies, no fights between them, no possessiveness. The rubber woman was very much loved. But in spite of her innocence, her pliant good nature, her generosity, her silence, in spite of her faithfulness to her sailors, she gave them all syphilis.

Mathilde laughed as she remembered the young Peruvian sailor who had told her this story, how he had described lying on her as if she were an air mattress, and how she made him bounce off of her sometimes by sheer resilience. Mathilde felt exactly like this rubber woman when she took opium. How pleasurable was the feeling of utter abandon! Her only occupation was to count the money that her friends had left her.¹⁶

Thus, in the midst of Nin’s story, the narrative of “Mathilde” pauses so that we can learn the tale of a sex doll passed around between men on a sailing ship. Diegetically, the tale stands in for Mathilde’s own daydreams in the wake of her orgasm. Yet the story also serves as a metaphor for Mathilde’s experiences more broadly. She identifies with the rubber woman, but also she *is* the rubber woman: on a long voyage far from home, shared between men, “untiring and yielding.” Elsewhere in the story, Nin suggests ties between Mathilde’s body and the ocean itself. When she begins to

masturbate in front of the mirror, she sees “the odorous moisture like the moisture of the sea shells” and declares, “So was Venus born of the sea.”¹⁷ To the extent that Mathilde can be read as a sex doll, she is one whose story is inextricably linked to the sea.

The Sex Doll Bounces Back

Despite all of the problems with the tale of the *dames de voyage*, I continue to feel much as I did when I started this research: the figure of the sex doll at sea intrigues me. This story within a story that Nin has written into “Mathilde,” this tiny work of erotica about the rubber woman and her use among sailors, perfectly captures what I find so alluring about the tale of the *dames de voyage*, no matter how imaginary it might be. Reading Nin’s “Mathilde” was one of my first encounters with the image of sailors’ sex dolls. Long before I read example after example of twenty-first-century historical texts claiming that the origins of today’s sexual technologies could be traced to the sexual frustrations of men on long sea voyages, I read “Mathilde.” Therefore, always in the back of my mind, even as I have aimed to stringently critique the tale of the *dames de voyage*, has been the tickle of a reclamatory erotic potential suggested, succinctly yet richly, by Mathilde’s fantasy of becoming the rubber woman. What draws me to Nin’s version of the story of the sailors’ sex dolls is its intimacy, its warmth, its strangeness. In the space of a few short paragraphs, it opens up so many possibilities for reenvisioning the sex doll and its role in the stories we tell about sexuality and technology.

Unlike the tale of the *dames de voyage*, which has formed around the fantasies and cultural agendas of straight men, this is a story about women and women’s distinctly non-normative pleasures. Mathilde reflects on the tale in the luscious moments after her own orgasm, while she still sits “[watching] herself in the mirror . . . the honey shining, the whole sex and ass shining wet between [her] legs.”¹⁸ She is clear that she identifies with the rubber woman and that the idea of being a sex doll excites her: “How pleasurable was the feeling of utter abandon!”¹⁹ The rubber doll in question, we are told, was designed so that all of her “apertures” could satisfy the sailors—a statement that echoes Mathilde’s own double manual penetration of her vagina and anus. In this fantasy, then, Mathilde is both sex doll and sailor; all pleasure belongs to her. It is also important that the

story ends with Mathilde celebrating her own occupation as a sex worker. In contrast to the many ways that sex workers have been erased from the history of sexual technologies, Nin's story within a story concludes with Mathilde reflecting happily that her only responsibilities were to have sex and "count the money that her friends had left her."²⁰

In ways that we might not expect in an anecdote about a sex doll, the tale of the rubber woman contained within "Mathilde" is also a story about women's agency. The rubber woman is an object, but she is also an object with power over the sailors who made her. Although she may have been created merely to "while away the time and satisfy the [sailors'] desires," she commands real, deep feeling, inspiring love as well as a litany of accolades—which pepper this vignette like the tittering praises of enamored paramours who find her "beautiful," "perfect," "good-natured," "generous," and "faithful." For all her charming qualities and sexual pliancy, the rubber woman is far from simply sweet and obedient, however. Her gift to the love-struck sailors is syphilis. We could read this comment as a kind of a punchline: a bawdy joke about sexually transmitted diseases at the doll's expense. But it isn't really the rubber woman who is being laughed at here. Immediately after we learn that the doll gave the sailors syphilis, Mathilde lets out a chuckle, thinking about the Peruvian sailor who told her about the doll. The sailors romanticized their carefully crafted rubber woman, imagining her as innocent and faithful (somehow to all of them at once). In return, the doll mocks the absurdity of this fantasy by giving them not love but disease. Mathilde's own story ends on a sobering note that is far from funny. Yet in the rubber woman's story, women get the last laugh.

The way that men and masculinity are represented in this story of the rubber woman also differs strikingly from their role in the contemporary tale of the *dames de voyage*. While many of these recent, supposedly historical accounts explain the creation of the earliest sex dolls as the result of raw heterosexual desire and masculine ingenuity, here we see a tale that is much more tender, even feminizing. In "Mathilde," the sailors who create the rubber woman do beautiful work, creating the "perfect illusion." They feel warmly toward the doll and, what's more, their individual relationships with her actually foster among them a collaborative, mutually supportive community of men. The men on the ship in Nin's story seem to pass their rubber companion from bed to bed with magnanimity and kindness: "There were no jealousies, no fights between them, no possessiveness."²¹

Rather than using the figure of the sailors' doll to disavow queerness, as we see in the tale of the dames de voyage, the rubber doll in Nin's story expressly creates intimacy between men, becoming a vector of queer erotic relationality. The sailors in Nin's story are connected not only because they share the same lover, but also because their collective desire for the rubber woman allows them to share through mutual feelings. They may have sex with the rubber woman individually, but they love her together.

Nin's story of the rubber woman also compellingly scrambles the relationship between object and subject. In one sense, it is a story about women's pleasure, but it also decenters the human, shifting subjectivity and pleasure into the doll herself while insisting on her status as an object. Seen in this way, Nin's rubber woman takes on a queer, nonhuman animacy, bringing an explicitly sexual valence to visions of the nonhuman and posthuman theorized by scholars like Mel Chen, Anna Tsing, and Donna Haraway.²² For at least two centuries, accounts of sex dolls (or what are functionally sex dolls) written by male authors and scholars have all shared a fascination with the idea that the sex doll might one day become so elaborate that it seems to be alive. We see this in contemporary efforts to make sex robots so realistic that they can pass for human women. It also manifests across the history of sexual technologies presented in this book—for example, in the recurring fascination with the idea that early rubber sex dolls might have been able to secrete replica vaginal fluids, coming to life, so to speak, through the sexual mechanisms of the body. By contrast, the rubber woman in Nin's "Mathilde" makes no attempt to come to life. She is not mechanized. She has no pneumatic tubes. No one tries to make her his wife. In fact, as her story progresses, Nin's rubber woman becomes increasingly less human. She begins as the "perfect illusion" but ends as a bouncy rubber mattress.

I talked at length in chapter 4 about the importance of rubber and its place within the material histories of sexual technologies. Here too, in "Mathilde," is it crucial that the doll that sails along with this lustful, loving crew is made of rubber. Yet rather than tying sexual technologies to issues of commercial production, as the real-life femmes en caoutchouc do, what makes the material qualities of the sex doll in Mathilde's fantasy so remarkable is its capacity to bounce. In this scene, rubber becomes a symbol of resistance. Nin writes of the Peruvian sailor who tells Mathilde about the rubber woman, "He had described lying on her as if she were an air

mattress, and how she made him bounce off of her sometimes by sheer resilience.”²³ This image draws out the physicality of the rubber woman, playing up both her object-like qualities and her unlikely agency. Whereas technologies of bounce have elsewhere been used to attempt to replicate and capture the movements of women’s bodies, such as in the case of digital rendering software developed to create video games with supposedly realistic “breasts physics,” in this tale it is the rubber doll’s bounciness that makes her strong.²⁴ It allows her to bounce back both literally and figuratively. Pliant, she bends, only to snap back—using her capacity to bounce to send the would-be lover flying. Thus, she bounces back in the way that one fights back, simultaneously receiving lovers and fending them off, which she does with all the confidence of a nonhuman object who needs harbor no concern for men’s fragile feelings. At the same time, the rubber woman also fucks back. She is not simply a sex toy or even a proto teledildonic device. Like Mathilde, the woman who dreams of being her, she is a sexual agent.

All of these qualities found within Nin’s story also exist within the tale of the *dames de voyage*, if we know to look for them. The vision of the sailors’ dolls cobbled together and shared at sea has emerged out of a long history of discriminatory thinking, and it has been put to many deleterious purposes. Yet it too contains possibilities for being reimaged as an intersectional feminist fantasy. For example, longing for the rudimentary sailors’ doll—or even longing to be the sailors’ doll—might offer an opportunity to resist the technoutopian and supposedly postracial fantasies that dominate current conversations about sexual technologies. It offers us an opportunity to undermine the fetishization of high tech, epitomized by sex robots, by directing our desires to low tech. For queer and transgender folks such as myself, the *dames de voyage* might also offer a point of nonheteronormative identification that draws from yet seeks to undermine dominant narratives about sex tech. The gendered valences of the sailors’ dolls, like so many sex dolls, underscores the fundamental constructedness of gender itself. We might say that the sailors’ doll is a cyborg figure, part human and part technology, but, inspired by work like Susan Stryker’s, we might well also say that she is a trans figure.²⁵ She is a “woman” who has been made, not born. What she gives birth to, in this imagined origin story, is technology itself. These are just some possibilities for finding new meaning, and new pleasures, in the tale of the *dames de voyage*.

In some ways, it matters immensely that the true origins of sexual technologies, to the extent that they can be located anywhere at all, do not lie in the fictional account of the sailors' sex dolls. And yet in other ways, it does not matter at all. What matters is to recognize that when it comes to sexuality and technology, the line between history and fantasy has always been an illusion. Once we know that, the sexual technologies of the past and the sexual technologies of the future become ours to reclaim through the radical force of our own desires.

Sex Dolls at Sea

In the spirit of the long journey into a vast, watery expanse, I want to conclude by gesturing outward to an element of the tale of the *dames de voyage* that has floated in the background of this book but has not yet come to the fore: the sea itself. If the story of the sailors' dolls is a work of fiction that has been told and retold, in one form or another, for roughly the past 170 years, then the sea is a major character in this fiction. The sea is the setting for the supposed invention of sexual technologies: the vast yet vague (fittingly calling to mind the French *vague*, meaning "wave") locale, simultaneously geographic and mythical, where the first sex doll is envisioned as being born. In this vision, the sea is simultaneously a space of desire, of frustration, and of creation. As we saw in the first chapter of this book, various authors have fleshed out their accounts of the *dames de voyage* by adding colorful details about the dolls' construction or use. We could similarly expand on the tale by envisioning how the great, endless blue of the ocean might have stretched out before these sailors on their seemingly equally endless voyages, sparkling and undulating, inspiring an impossible longing for what lay beyond.

It is far from incidental that the tale of the *dames de voyage* places the origins of sexual technologies at sea. Despite the fact that this vision of sailors and their homemade sex dolls is meant to make today's sex tech seem more "natural," springing from a time and place unrelated to the computational technologies of the twenty-first century, the reality is that the ocean plays a major role in the infrastructures that maintain our contemporary digital world. We see this evidenced in work like Nicole Starosielski's research on the fiber-optic cables that cross the earth's oceans or Miriam Posner's research on the global supply chains that produce our electronic

devices, which involve intricately interlocking systems of production and labor both “overseas” and across seas.²⁶ The ocean (and water more generally) is also one of our key structuring metaphors for making sense of technology and the flow of information, bringing us the growing prominence of terms like *streaming*.²⁷ Increasingly, with the rise of the “blue humanities,” the ocean is becoming the realm of new scholarly inquiry, sparking calls to “think with water.”²⁸ Turning to face the ocean is one of many ways to change our perspectives on technology and its history. Whether we are talking about cultural imaginaries or material realities, the ocean has never been a world apart from technology.

Positioning the origins of sex tech at sea, as the tale of the *dames de voyage* does, also has the potential to shift how we imagine technology’s history in relation to gender. Contemporary histories of sex tech use the story of the sailors’ dolls as part of a larger attempt to make the history of sexual technologies masculine, as I explained in chapter 5. Yet the sea brings with it feminine associations. The ocean has long been bound up with visions of sirens and mermaids, beautiful yet deadly. It is often seen as an enchanting but unforgiving expanse, at once maternal and capricious, as volatile in weather as women are imagined to be mercurial in mood.²⁹ Accounts of the tale tend to emphasize the sailing ship as a world populated entirely by men, with the sailors’ doll seemingly the only “woman” for miles beyond measure. Yet around these men, in this imagined vision, lies the actual ocean, stretching out as far as the eye can see. The *dame de voyage* may be alone among sailors, in this scenario, but the sailors are themselves equally alone among the buffeting push and pull of the waves.

The sea also serves as a provocative space of possibility, a place for thinking differently about both history and media. “It offers a viable and transformative space of history,” as Sowande’ M. Mustakeem writes, a place from which to see the world in new, more fluid ways, from vantage points perhaps unavailable to us on solid ground.³⁰ Melody Jue, writing in *Wild Blue Media*, proposes an understanding of the ocean as a medium unto itself.³¹ For Jue, seawater becomes a substance with the potential to defamiliarize “our terrestrial orientations.”³² Writes Jue, “The ocean is an environment for thought . . . a horizon of possibility, just beyond our experience but nonetheless part of the fabric and flesh of the world . . . unruly, testing the limitations of a human point of view.”³³ The ocean then is the perfect place

from which to reimagine the history of sexual technologies and our place within them.

Throughout this book, I have referred to the idea of sex dolls at sea. To be *at sea* is to be on the ocean, but it is also to be unmoored, adrift. Writing in the introduction to their special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* titled "At Sea," Terri Gordon-Zolov and Amy Sodaro explain that "the sea embodies dystopian despair, violence, and degradation, but also hope, coexistence, and possibility."³⁴ The notion of being at sea itself encapsulates these dichotomies, suggesting both what is lost and what might be found. For me, over the four years I have spent researching and writing this book, the sense that I am locating the history of sexual technologies at sea has taken on many meanings. There is the literal, of course: the tale of the *dames de voyage*, in its most common version, is a story about sex dolls made aboard ships. Yet in attempting first to track down and later to make sense of (what turned out to be) a false history, I myself have often felt at sea: drifting on a seemingly endless ocean of obfuscated sources, obscure archives, and disparate yet deeply interconnected areas of history and scholarship. Along the way, the material histories that undergird this project have served as a kind of life raft for me: a plank of wood to grab hold of amid the waves. And as the arguments and interventions of this book have come into focus, I have found that it is no longer me but instead the history of sexual technologies that is now at sea. Through this work, history has become unmoored. Hegemonic understandings of sexuality and technology are set adrift. This is as it should be. The tale of the *dames de voyage* now floats freely, carried off to new worlds of possibility by the waves.

