

Book Review | *The Smart Wife: Why Siri, Alexa, and Other Smart Home Devices Need a Feminist Reboot*, by Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy (MIT Press, 2020)

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Consumer AI is hella sexist—it’s about time someone called it out. That’s what Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy’s book *The Smart Wife* does, from Alexa being modeled on the 1950s housewife to sex robots designed to frame sex in unconsensual ways. The argument builds around the titular theory of the “smart wife.” These devices, according to the authors, are actually designed to act as surrogate wives and to take on the domestic labor traditionally coded as wife work. With this design comes all the sexism embedded in the role of wife-as-domestic-servant, thereby remediating 1950s sexism for the digital age. Building on similar critiques such as Safiya Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) and Jennifer Rhee’s *The Robotic Imaginary* (2018), the authors’ aim is “to develop smart wives that promote gender equity and diversity” (209).

This feminist reading is an important step in the analysis of consumer AI, and the examples are insightful, thoroughly researched, and related with hilarious irony. Following the first introductory chapter, the next four chapters each take on a specific digital assistant as a case study to analyze domestic labor, robot gender, resource extraction, and sex, respectively. Chapter six turns towards humans to examine sexist behavior directed at feminized AI; while chapter seven continues this human focus to examine men and technology, particularly in terms of domestic abuse and surveillance. All these chapters are filled with a wealth of surprising examples, delivered in a humorous and compelling style. This impressive research makes the book worth reading, for anyone interested in critical analysis of AI.

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Beyond pointing out the sexism, though, the book struggles a bit in its argument and doesn't quite follow through on what could be its most compelling insights. Throughout, the authors seem hampered by some strange initial parameters developed in their introductory chapter. Here, they theorize that "smart wives" arise out of a real "need" (9); that is, they are a logical response to "the contemporary slump in available or willing wives" (6), or the "wife drought" (1), a term they take from Annabel Crabb. Given this scarcity of wives, "many people are understandably looking for a technological alternative" (8). Even "women...need (smart) wives" (9): someone needs to do the domestic labor! In suggesting that the social position of "wife" is a "need," the social relations themselves become somewhat unassailable, leaving the critique constricted.

From a feminist perspective, it's clear what they are trying to do with this argument: value domestic and care work as real, irreplaceable labor. At the same time, however, reading the figure of the wife through an economic logic of supply and demand naturalizes this social position. Within these parameters, the desire for domestic servants is a constant, the social relation fixed. With smart wives set up as a kind of necessity, it is difficult for the book to question this technology beyond its design flaws. Rather than address the social relations that set up domestic servitude as a necessity, the representation of the servants becomes the issue. In the end, the conclusions are not wholly satisfying, even for the authors. They frequently state a desire to take their argument further, but seem cramped by the idea that we can't really push back against a social organization that requires (smart) wives as such. Their conclusion: the best we can really hope for is less sexist representation in design.

That Amazon's dominance over the planet continues, regardless of how feminist Alexa becomes, is something the authors clearly want to address. And at moments they almost do. They come closest in the chapter on the environmental impacts of AI, which draws heavily on Kate Crawford and Vladen Joler's mapping of AI's extractive demands, as well as ecofeminist criticism from Vandana Shiva and others. Here, they acknowledge that there is actually no good or justified way of making destructive consumer products like Alexa. They shouldn't exist; social relations should change instead. Similarly, while they conclude the book with calls for gender-neutral AI voices, in chapter three they "reject the pretense of the gender-neutral robot" (76) as a bad-faith surface solution that codes sexism in other ways. These moments of more adventurous critique open up the argument in ways that future research should extend; it's another voice running through the book demanding more. In the end, the call to "develop smart wives that promote gender equity and diversity" (209) is fine, but doesn't seem to speak to many of the issues the authors themselves raise.

My sense is that the authors *do* in fact share more radical critiques of the social conditions that generate sexist AI. Indeed, they call heavily on Judy Wajcman's foundational text in feminist analysis of technology, *Feminism Confronts Technology*, in which Wajcman writes that "it is impossible to divorce the gender relations that are expressed in, and shape technologies from, the wider social structures that create and maintain them" (1991, 25). Gender relations, technological systems, and institutions need to change together.

Perhaps the book's narrow frame results from answering a compelling question too quickly: What is the relationship between the function of AI and its sexist gendering? The supply-demand answer of the "wife drought" closes an interesting field of analysis and traps the authors in a representational critique in which the need for the technology is itself beyond question.

A reading of technology not just as a tool but as a way of ordering the world could be helpful here. The patriarchal fantasies embedded in AI like Alexa seem not just to lie in its representation but also in the way it structures the world: mediated by Alexa, the environment itself becomes acquiescent, a servile female-coded nature that responds immediately to the barked commands of its programmer-master. At the micro level, this fulfills patriarchal fantasies of a fully controllable domestic sphere; at a macro level, the "need" for Alexas sets up Jeff Bezos as a kind of global programmer-master. The world these consumer products build seems itself highly questionable, and one which the sexist gendering of AI helps to enable. The book could benefit from addressing consumer AI at this level, too. Can a technology designed to make the environment servile ever really be feminist? Perhaps the place to begin answering this question is to confront AI's sexist representation as inseparable from fantasies of technopower.

References

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