

Yardena Tankel

PhD Candidate (final 6 months)

School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences – The University of Melbourne

Extended Abstract

The Weight of Population: Myth-Making and Distributed Reproduction. Views from Settler Australia

Topic

This paper critically examines re-emerging spaces of distributed reproduction through the phenomenon of unchallenged (over)population myths attributed to anxieties surrounding Anthropogenic climate change. Grounded in Cindy Katz's (2011, 2017) theoretical framework of bodies of waste, I draw on an in-depth analysis of the narratives of participants from my PhD research to elucidate the pathologization of parenting and the normalization of risk for particular populations.

My analysis focuses on how the normalization of overpopulation discourse perpetuates colonial narratives of population control, as well as subsidiary myths that arise around the perceived need to reduce and avert births, along with their problematic implications. I examine how participants in my research have internalized the acceptance of birth aversion for the greater good to such an extent that they found it difficult to critically engage with its nuances or implications, perceiving it as an obvious and logical necessity.

Theoretical Focus

This paper draws heavily on Murphy's (2018) concept of distributed reproduction. Distributed reproduction akin to reproductive justice as a framework allows us to critically examine the conditions and histories that form our world and affect life chances, emphasizing that reproduction is not inherently good but a process that supports some things while neglecting others. As demonstrated in contrasting fertility concerns and approaches, distributed reproduction can be seen as a complex web of life and death, accumulation and abandonment, where many are involved but not equally. This concept suggests that reproduction involves geopolitically widespread, unevenly distributed relationships that shape life potentials in a world influenced by capital flows, racial geographies, environmental destruction, sexual violence, wars, and nation-states.

Re-theorizing distributed reproduction offers a way to understand the conditions and histories of reproduction, allowing to find new ways to connect and build solidarity across the inequalities of global capitalism and infrastructure that values or devalues life. The phenomenon of distributed reproduction extends beyond the context of North/South relations; it also manifests within nation-states, though this was often less recognized or acknowledged by participants in this work. Anti-Black and Anti-

Indigenous infrastructures in countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States and New Zealand, perpetuate violence, with such arrangements resulting in high mortality rates among Black and Indigenous populations.

This perspective reflects the study's participants, who, as mostly settler Australians, living largely within the margins of comfort, viewed distributed reproduction as an issue affecting distant others. People unlike like them. Despite recognizing the planetary and collective impact of excessive numbers, they relegated any feasible and material response to overpopulation as an 'othered' concern. The idea that controlling populations elsewhere could be justified was at times implicit in their silence in expanding their argument about needing to confront the issue of overpopulation and taken as self-evident.

While it is crucial to recognize how population thinking abstracts and erases these complexities, we must also remember that enumeration isn't the only method used for oppression. Current discourse on population often restricts population control to an historical context, and as argued by Bhatia et al., misses its persistent relevance (2020, p.344). Critical feminists, such as, Hendrixson and Hartmann (2019), Bhatia et al. (2020) and Sasser (2014, 2018, 2024) highlight how contemporary populationist strategies continue to perpetuate racialized, gendered, and class-based solutions to environmental and socioeconomic challenges, ultimately reinforcing neocolonial and neoliberal frameworks through environmental, economic, or territorial goals.

Feminist and anti-racists scholars argue that (over)population discourse often serves to mask the realities of inequality and privilege. Yet, as I argue, it is important to hold onto this concept as necessary, not just for critique, but as a material reality that reflects a broader ecological crisis. However, as feminist scholars such as Strathern (2019), Sasser (2018, 2019) and Murphy (2017, 2018, 2019) argue, population discourse can be weaponized to deepen racial, gender, and economic inequalities. This paper adds to a growing demand for a feminist engagement with population issues, rooted in justice for both human and nonhuman life.

Research Methods

The empirical data analysed for, and engaged with in this paper are from my PhD fieldwork conducted between 2021-2023. Over this period, I conducted 31 biographical interviews with women aged between 23 and 52 in Australia and New Zealand as well as conducting focus groups with social services providers.

I utilized storytelling methods to illicit more contextualized experiences which allowed participants to paint a broader picture of their lives. This method contributes to and is informed by longstanding traditions, particularly in feminist and anti-racist geographic scholarship of, valuing located, individual experiences. Biographical interviews were conducted to account for my understanding that 'reproduction' is more than a biological event. It also provided a way to look at multiple experiences that participants identified as having had experienced, beyond the current Anthropogenic/climate/COVID temporality of the moment in which they were interviewed. This openness generated some exceptionally rich and divergent encounters and demonstrates the situatedness of people's complex lives and contexts.

Findings

Discussions about overpopulation raised by participants, veered into implicit discussions about regulating the bodies of distant others. This notion of (over)population, I argue, reflects contemporary Anthropogenic fears through a pseudo-myth that persists as a distant problem. In this narrative, it is 'other' people who will bear the brunt of any interventions that uphold this myth. By framing the challenges of the Anthropocene as a population issue, the burden of resolving global crises are shifted onto the reproductive practices of marginalized communities with often restricted mobility. This is demonstrated through normalised conversations around policies such as the One Child Policy in China and The Girl Effect, which places responsibility for economic improvement on the shoulders of young, poor, brown and Black girls, thereby upholding the existing structures of neoliberal and neocolonial global governance. Based on the empirical analysis I concur with the arguments of Sasser (2019) and Murphy (2019) on the necessity of engaging with this conversation, not because the concept of population is inherently useful, but because the concept perpetuates racist practices and, as such, demands critical examination. When left unchallenged, population myths increasingly solidify as accepted truths, fostering dangerous narratives that legitimize population engineering as a rational solution to societal issues. The nonchalant way research participants uncritically invoked population control strategies underscores the danger inherent in allowing these myths to take root and persist within mainstream discourse, as they perpetuate neoliberal Western colonial agendas.

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