

Book Review | *On Infertile Ground: Population Control and Women's Rights in the Era of Climate Change*, by Jade S. Sasser (New York University Press, 2018),
&
Gender before Birth: Sex Selection in a Transnational Context, by Rajani Bhatia (University of Washington Press, 2018)

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At first glance, Jade Sasser's *On Infertile Ground* and Rajani Bhatia's *Gender before Birth* seem to tackle distinct topics, but the rich analysis of each shows that they are in fact intertwined within a larger field of reproductive politics and science. That richness, I believe, comes from the mixture of methods and the reproductive justice analytic that each employs. With regard to their methods, both assemble and analyze an impressive archive of texts and ethnographic data to trace the emergence and scientific grounding of their topics from street-level practice to global political discourses and technologies. Centered on how women of color and women of the Global South are positioned within discourses and practices, their analyses illuminate the shifting registers and configurations of neoliberal populationism as it moves across geopolitical spaces, organizational locations, and technological regimes. Utilizing a reproductive justice framework, each

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analysis excavates and demonstrates the resilience of gender, racialized, colonial logics that continue to animate reproductive knowledges and practices. I want to highlight several aspects of each book that exemplify the value of transnational feminist science studies methods for understanding current reproductive knowledge-making through a reproductive justice frame. Then, drawing on their conclusions, I raise some thoughts about how we might move forward to continue to build robust analyses of transnational reproductive politics in these uncertain times.

In *On Infertile Ground*, Jade Sasser offers an expansive historical account of linkages between environmentalism and populationism, which, in turn, informs her ethnographic analysis of contemporary youth advocacy training programs sponsored primarily by the Sierra Club. Firmly situated in the reproductive justice frame, her historical narrative reminds readers that organizations like the Sierra Club have long hued to a populationist agenda. Her analysis of current advocacy illuminates ghosts that haunt recent efforts to link reproductive politics to climate change. The shift away from population control to a neoliberal focus on women's empowerment as a means of bringing population growth under human control may be new. But it is far from addressing the structural constraints on women's reproductive autonomy. Sasser demonstrates that this shift installs an individualistic requirement for women to be sexual stewards of their fertility and the environmental future. At the same time, this advocacy reinvigorates older narratives about the need for women of the Global North to act on behalf of women in the Global South, in this case, to remedy their unmet contraceptive needs. Moreover, her incisive account of workshop narratives and practices shows how those ghosts are avoided in gestures to "the dark times" of population control that are quickly displaced by the need to move on with the current concerns. In so doing, the workshops evade serious engagement with the legacies of structural racism and colonialism, and she concludes, they effectively displace feminist reproductive justice goals.

The focus on youth advocacy as the way to shape the environmental future raises an important issue of leadership training for aspiring activists, many of whom are our students. Sasser's account should move us to ask, at what point do such trainings stop being grassroots organizing and become a limited politics of "astro-turf cultivation"? The Sierra Club practices offer a particularly striking example in its "values clarification" exercises, which avoid in-depth discussion of the injustices of twentieth-century population control practices by shifting the focus to the renewed Malthusian anxiety about human numbers. In so doing, it centers

urgent action over reflection on the assumptions underlying the call to action. How might we better equip ourselves and our students to recognize and talk back to such practices? Following reproductive justice logic, as Sasser suggests, one signal of a politics of “astro-turf cultivation” might be a narrative of women’s empowerment disconnected from feminist analysis of the roots/histories/politics of their structural disempowerment.

One other aspect of the climate change-population advocacy that I want to highlight is the enduring relationship of science and controversy in this field. Sasser notes that among funders and advocates she spoke with, there is one common refrain: the need for more science to quell the controversies that population reduction programs provoke. Scientific data as a means to overcome controversies associated with reproductive politics is a longstanding shibboleth of populationism. Demographers perfected this rhetoric in the mid-twentieth century. It is a strategy that has been particularly derived from and supported by the transparent objectivity accorded to numbers. In the past, it was fertility rates; today, it is data linking population growth to greenhouse gas emissions. But as Sasser rightly notes, these data, which purport to single out the effect of human numbers, represent instead the tangle of social and biological factors that cannot be separated. And she notes the focus on numbers alone continues to distract attention from the destructive production processes of late-stage capitalism by pointing to problematic bodies elsewhere.

In *Gender before Birth*, Rajani Bhatia demonstrates how the imperative to reproduce frugally has shaped sex selective practices transnationally and how, in return, sex selective practices and resistance to them in the United States continue to rely on the racialized tropes of older population control narratives. Her analysis of lifestyle sex selection, a market-driven neoliberal set of practices of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) provides a vivid account of the development and marketing of technologies that sidestep the question of prenatal sex selection by acting before pregnancy is established, such as sorting sperm. She builds a detailed analysis of the interacting figures that populate sex-selection discourse: the family balancer, gender dreamer, abject anti-citizen, that situate the West as the best at gender equity, the Rest as bound by timeless culture, and singles out China and India as exemplars of sustained reproductive excess.

These figures once again situate white women in the US as modern rational reproducers and Asian women everywhere as irrational reproducers oppressed by

their cultures. She identifies one new figure in this landscape—the wealthy global bio-citizen, whose adherence to the small family ideal entitles them to purchase reproductive technologies to maximize their familial gender equity. Motivated by fairness or heartfelt desire, the family balancer and the global bio-citizen must use sex-selective technology within a family planning framework of frugal reproduction. Still, sex-selection providers rely on orientalist tropes in representing westerners as girl-wanting and Asians as boy-seeking. These orientalist tropes are crucial legitimating narratives, which posit lifestyle sex selection as a reasonable and moral practice in contrast to the sex-selection practices based on abortion in other nations; again, India and Asia are the exemplars. The narrative depends on the longstanding presumption that sex-selective abortion is an essential factor in “adverse sex ratios” in those nations. Since balanced gender is the goal of lifestyle sex selection, the practice is presented as one without a gender bias.

One of the key issues raised by Bhatia’s analysis concerns the regulatory inconsistencies that have made lifestyle sex selection possible and which have enabled its extension through global networks of clinics and laboratories. Bhatia’s study traces the history of the development of sperm sorting and preimplantation gender determination as grounded in agricultural practice and extension into human medical trials. In these practices, providers of the service have operated largely outside the purview of state agencies and, therefore, have set the terms of practice as well as the limits of our knowledge about them. When state agencies have acted, she shows, providers have been able to move the regulated practices to other locales through a global network of clinics and laboratories whose connections are actively—if discretely—cultivated. In addition, her insightful analysis of feminist anti-sex selection shows how feminists became supportive of provider autonomy in the face of efforts by legislative bans designed to curtail women’s access to abortion.

Both books expand our understanding of the texture of contests over and meanings of reproductive justice in the contemporary moment. They identify key instances in which the language of reproductive justice, health, and rights has been taken up and repurposed by a variety of mainstream actors and networks actors for their own uses. Some of those uses are knowingly mendacious, as Bhatia shows regarding anti-abortion sex-selection bans. Some of those uses, such as environmentalists, see themselves as acting in alliance, which Sasser effectively critiques. Bhatia’s analysis of the strategies and rhetoric of feminist sex selection activism in the US has been fundamentally shaped by powerful enemies.

Sasser, on the other hand, demonstrates that even with purported friends, who often have more resources, coalition work risks the return of older tropes that co-opt reproductive justice goals.

I also want to acknowledge the important work Bhatia and Sasser do to build out the concept of populationism. They borrow the term from environmentalists Ian Angus and Simon Butler (2011), who define it simply as the attribution of “social and ecological ills to human numbers” (xxi). On its own, I think, the concept is insufficient to support a robust reproductive justice approach because it masks the underlying logics by which social ills are attributed to numbers. As both books demonstrate, those logics coalesced in the threads of Malthus’s population concept. Sasser’s focus on the environmental populationism highlights the fundamental linkage of anxiety about the earth’s carrying capacity to Malthusian logic that population growth will always outstrip nature’s ability to accommodate it. Bhatia’s focus on ART’s bio-populationism demonstrates the Malthusian logic of frugal reproduction, in which sex is essentialized. It is man’s reproductive nature, realized through women’s bodies, that puts humanity at risk. Moreover, as both books demonstrate, orientalist racialization is central to populationist logic. Malthus’s argument for population statistics hinges on their value in ranking the inadequacies of nations and peoples in a racialized hierarchy. As Sasser and Bhatia demonstrate, an effective feminist conceptualization of populationism should foreground these intertwined logics.

To conclude I want to point to issues raised in the books’ conclusions that, to me, suggest fruitful avenues for further research. In her conclusion, Bhatia calls for a feminist approach to sex selection that “refuses to be captured” (p. 197) by reproductive binaries such as individual/population, (in)fertility/(over)population, and so on. Relatedly, one of Sasser’s concluding questions asks if “it is enough for feminists to insist on women’s bodily autonomy” (p. 149) or whether feminists need to “grapple with population growth,” in which she points to recent work by Donna Haraway and Kim TallBear.

First, when it comes to feminist agency to avoid capture and co-optation of our reproductive knowledge and frameworks, I want to suggest that we need to carefully assess the situated vulnerabilities of feminist organizations. Both books demonstrate the ease with which better financed (Sierra Club) and more powerful (anti-choice) social actors have usurped feminist language and frameworks for their own purposes. Both books provide examples of the fluidity of reproductive

politics that shape feminist organizing, whether it be the creation and cancellation of Sierra Club training program, or the shifting center of the anti-sex-selection campaign in the US. A robust reproductive justice approach should include careful assessment of situated vulnerabilities of feminist actors in this arena to provide better tools to understand how they may succumb to external influences and/or resist the usurpation of feminist justice goals. At a moment when Planned Parenthood—the largest provider of reproductive health care for low-income and women of color in the US—has lost 40% of its budget, the precarious economic and political position of feminist reproductive health, rights, justice organizations in these neoliberal times is particularly ripe for analysis. Feminist science studies is well equipped to build our understanding of the complex vulnerabilities of feminist reproductive organizations and principles to external forces, and the fault lines of gender, race, and class that have always defined them.

Second, responding to Sasser's question about grappling with population numbers, I suggest that feminist analyses also pay close attention to the configuration and effects of quantitative elements of reproductive narratives. Population statistics established the individual/aggregate reproductive binary and the fundamental features of its operation. Aggregation mediates between administrative ledgers, state policy, and popular discourse through accounting tools that detach life events from their social grounds to produce disembodied statistical figurations such as sex ratios and unmet need. Those figures in turn contour individual responsibility for managing life events. The continued slippage of aggregate and individual animates the numbers that define population problems and locates their solutions in individual action. Central to that slippage is the orientalist logic that requires right-minded liberal (read white) people to control their reproduction so that they, like overpopulated nations, will not suffer the consequences of too many to care for. In grappling with the numbers, feminists must attend to the historically situated mediation practices and the methodological processes underlying the configuration of demographic data. There are always gaps and contingencies in how and what the data represent that must be negotiated. A robust feminist reproductive justice approach would interrogate the resolution of those gaps and contingencies in the construction of numbers to illuminate how they are inflected by situations of their enactment. Bhatia's account of contestation of racialized sex selection numbers and Sasser's critique of overpopulation as a cause of greenhouse gases provide strong examples of what I am suggesting should become routine practice.

Reference

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