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Artifice

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Thinking population in the present quickly finds the lockstep of white nation fantasies and their selective pronatalism. While the openly white supremacist populism of Trump 2.0 offers a graphic form, resonant discourses materialize in Australia in intersecting "crises" over migration and fertility. These sites are long-standing bedfellows in a Foucauldian tale of population as a paradigm-shifting eighteenth-century innovation, governing people as an economized mass via the management of sex (Foucault 1978, 25–26). Here I suggest that thinking with the artificial is an enabling tool for tracing how population operates in the present through new technologies and technics of racialized colonial governance.

One vivid recent iteration of population thinking in Australia is the construction of international student migration as a problem. The (Chinese) international student is the latest sacrificial figure in a long Australian tradition of yellow peril, a displaced response to contemporary housing and social welfare scarcity. As in many white nation imaginaries, this fear—and the carceral, closed border response for which Australia is world renowned—emerges adjacent a hum of concern about falling birth rates, and the imminent "population collapse" of wealthy countries in Europe, Asia, and North America. As articulated in op-eds and research dissemination by journalists, demographers, statisticians, economists, and others, this population anxiety is often accompanied, in both liberal and populist framings, by concern about subsequent economic decline, growing geopolitical vulnerability, and the demise of The Family as the unit of social reproduction for an aging population (see, e.g., Davies 2024; Morris-Grant and Yussuf 2024; Wright 2024). The language of crisis folds familiar rhetorics of

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stock and species, heteronormative belonging, and stratified reproduction into the affective present.

These anxieties about population futures are often paired with two speculative technofixes of interest to feminist STS: artificial intelligence, to bridge local labor shortages and free "us" from tedious or degraded work (Atanasoski and Vora 2019);[1] and fertility interventions, which promise to enhance procreative capacity amid later childbearing and the infertility effects of environmental change. We can draw these scenes together via the anachronistic term *artificial* reproduction, to consider how artifice is an important conceptual frame through which social relations are organized and reshaped today.

Artifice is an enabling tool for feminist pursuits of population in (at least) two ways. First, it can foreground how a heteronormative model of genealogy that throbs within histories of population anxiety is increasingly joined by a logic of replication. In her essay on generic drugs in Mexico, Cori Hayden (2012) adapts a Foucauldian logic of population by refracting it through empirical research on biosimilars, pharmaceuticals that are highly similar but non-identical versions of original reference drugs. Here, population anxieties take non-conceptive and non-genealogical forms, instead following logics of copy and imitation. While fertility interventions have been a paradigmatic site for feminist critiques of genealogy, which highlight long tendrils of eugenics, reproductive injustice, and pronatalism, reproductive biomedicine is also a field of replication. Doubles, synthetics, and replicas proliferate: the embryo in glass, the synthetic gamete of in vitro gametogenesis, the artificial womb, the sperm donor chart that materializes the fiction of race.[2] Thinking with artifice might allow us to work across the genealogical and the replicative, the reproductive and the informatic, in making sense of how population thinking increasingly unfolds through the twinned management of reproductive governance and binaries of good and bad replicas—synthetic copies, biosimilars, good mimics of intelligence and gestation, fabricated embryos that are too similar to the originating model to legally persist.

Second, we can approach artifice as a technic of racialization. Who has been rendered an artificial, robotic, or subhuman population so that others may flourish in their full humanity? How is technoscience "innovating" and deepening these historical distinctions, while obscuring histories through the hype of the new (Benjamin 2016)? In artificial reproduction, the "artificial" dislocates reproduction from kinship. As feminist scholars have argued since the 1980s, reproductive technology splits reproduction into different components that may produce multiple forms of parenthood (e.g., social, genetic, gestational). But centering race and coloniality foregrounds a longer arc of enslavement and dispossession as the precondition for imagining gestation as distinct from motherhood, or, of Black women as ungendered flesh—a grammar that reverberates today in the "slave episteme" of contemporary reproductive economies (Spillers 1987; Weinbaum

2019). While vital to my thinking, these theorizations don't always fully grasp racial/reproductive capitalism as it manifests in the southern hemisphere, and in Australia's ambivalent place within Asia. In my Australian-based work on surrogacy and donor conception, Asianness emerges constantly, as reproductive worker (e.g., the Indian or Thai surrogate), as advanced yet underregulated destination for medical travel, or as desired capital (the beautiful Eurasian child) (Keaney 2023). These narratives are inextricable from a history of Asianness as constituted through imperial discourses of artifice, synthetic, or surplus. As Anne Anlin Cheng argues, Asian femininity is neither ungendered flesh nor mere thing, but "a human ontology indebted to commodity, artifice, and objectness" (2018, 415–16)—inseparable from situated imperial histories.[3] Thinking with artificiality from the southern hemisphere highlights how Australian population anxieties take shape through regional inter-Asia formations that racialize some reproductive and laboring subjects through the prism of subhuman artifice. Artifice is thus a modality of population governance, of envisaging stratified life across time, and perhaps also a tool for feminist efforts to part with the organic and the "natural" in assembling our responses.

Notes

[1] This technoliberalist discourse circulates long-standing racial capitalist logics, in a dynamic that Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora (2019) theorize as the "surrogate human effect."

[2] As a technology of knowing and accounting, the chart has a long racialized history, such as in slave ledgers, skin color classification charts, and census data collection on ancestry. This history is a condition of possibility for the sperm donor chart and the racial categories it naturalizes. On the chart, see Blass et al. 2025, 3n8. On racial capitalism and racial-genetic thinking in the fertility industry, see Keaney 2023; Weinbaum 2019.

[3] See also Ari Larissa Heinrich's work on Chinese biopolitics and surplus, which mobilizes the concept of mimesis as a conceptual fulcrum (2018, 10–14).

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