

Introduction to Pursuits of Population: An Antipodean Toolkit

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Population thinking surrounds us. The language of overpopulation today billows out from wealthy states, propelled along the way by discourses of environmental collapse; reproductive anxiety; algorithmic imaginaries of prediction and resilience; and fragile, feverish fantasies of white power and supremacy. Despite decades of troubling in both critical social theory and demography, dominant strains still resolutely assemble population as a question of differential quantity—static or falling fertility rates in the Global North, beset by the “uncontrollable fecundity” of the Global South and coming Black, brown, and yellow hordes (Murphy 2017, 136; Patterson 2023, 93). Sometimes referred to as the “demographic transition model,” this way of arranging (global) population as a closed-loop problem equation, with its undeniably racist civilizational undertones, has seen a resurgence in a time of anthropogenic climate change. In the face of forms of existential threat, old rhetorics keep looping.

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The compulsion to know and think with populations is still driven by the crude language of scarcity and control: not enough resources, energy, housing, land, jobs, vaccines, or healthy or desirable bodies, which in turn inflames a need for the instrumental management of borders, supply chains, energy grids, environments, data, microbiomes, and more. The anxiety to solve the “problem” of population manifests in a kind of shortsighted crisis talk, where all things are urgent, and interventions simply cannot wait (Roitman 2014). Everything, even time it feels, is running out. Yet as a Foucauldian frame illuminates, populations have long functioned as foundational constructs in the governance of life. As an aperture for assembling life into manageable units, population filters into many methodologies in scientific and technological practice (Foucault 2003). Its contemporary purchase ranges from uses in genomic sequencing, artificial intelligence (AI), and mathematical modeling (in realms from economic forecasting to disease modeling and climate futures) to policies in public health, reproduction, immigration, labor, and energy transitions (Vertommen et al. 2022). Populations, then, form a critical parameter to advancing technoscience and society today, and a normative optic through which collective futures are imagined in both quotidian and spectacular tenors.

In this Roundtable, which takes the form of a feminist toolkit, we trace the many routes the concept of populations is now taking us down. Population and population thinking are distinct here; we are attentive to both powerful intensifying rhetorics of populationism from populist states—driven by selective pronatalism and barely submerged hierarchies of lives worth nourishing vis-à-vis matter left to wither—alongside the many banal iterations of population as an epistemological frame for science. As key feminist technoscience interventions have emphasized, “population” is a deeply vexed conceptual apparatus. As a mode of envisaging life en masse, this framework is entangled with eugenic histories of colonial technoscience and “economized” approaches to development, a particular regime of value that renders life a problem of economic calculation, input and output (Hayden 2012; Murphy 2017). In many contemporary iterations, the concept of population reinforces deep hierarchies of race, class, gender, and geography, as the necropolitical throbs at the heart of a regime of value that presents stratified reproduction as the only conceivable response to scarcity (Bhatia et al. 2020; Clarke and Haraway 2018; Sasser 2018; Vertommen et al. 2022). As we traverse a cultural moment where hegemonic polities actively dismantle democratic infrastructures, justified by a searing rhetoric of populism and fragile populations whose privilege needs defending, a renewed reflection on populations and population thinking is warranted. This is not to reproduce the language of crisis by labeling this attempt as “urgent,” but to seek ways of attuning contemporary manifestations of thinking with populations to the existing genealogy in feminist STS.

The short reflections presented here emerge from a gathering of Australia-based scholars that took place on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation in February 2025. We discussed the histories and conceptual architectures that are enabling for thinking populations in our diverse scholarships and practices of feminist technoscience—in conversation with, and at times perhaps contra—the largely North American body of feminist STS literature on populationism and population thinking. In relation to this scholarship, we reflect and write from and into shared scientific problematics with small regard for nation, and resonant white settler-colonial histories, with their traditions of stolen land as a laboratory for population management through extermination and reproductive innovation. But in attending to how our thinking is situated in and of Australian contexts, we also surface divergent or contested formations—of terra nullius as a population practice and ongoing fantasy of Indigenous replacement; of British imperial flows within Asia and the rendering of Asia as peril and surplus, of antipodean anxieties of distance and inexorable postracial futures, and of our own tussle with populist discourse gripping other wealthy white nations (see also Ang 2020; Hage 2017; Lea 2020; Moreton-Robinson 2015; Povinelli 2006; Probyn 2015). As M. Murphy writes, “race is the grammar and ghost of population” (2017, 135); as such, attending to the specificity of race, its situated geographic and imperial formations and productive effects, is vital to making sense of any discourse of population.

What crystalized during our collective practice of thinking feminist STS from the southern continent were apertures for rendering the population “problem” spatio-temporally: intergenerational, molecular, scalar, and planetary. Populations were rendered as assets, resource, playful subversion, homophonic followings, sovereign biopolitics, landscape care, opportunity, inevitability, sustainability, desire, hallucination, proxy, replication, and artifice. As objects of scrutiny, populations traversed and bridged diverse scientific practices, methodologies, technologies, and genres of knowledge production. While one largely Foucauldian-inspired tradition of feminist STS has tracked the operation of population as a paramount mode of reproductive governance, laminated with individual choice and in aid of racist and colonial projects, we expand the focus to the other technoscientific sites and imaginaries, articulating the problematic differently and with generative results. In line with other recent feminist STS experiments that aim to explore concepts as they travel across the sciences, we wanted to bring together scholars working on reproduction and bioscience with those working on algorithmic practices and on environmental questions (see Cooper and Waldby 2014; Pedraza et al. 2023; Vertommen et al. 2022). Doing so is part of our ardent belief as feminist scholars in the worlding that is possible when we assemble with shared commitments, situated locales, and figurations as the focus, rather than specific technoscientific objects—that is, starting with feminist frames rather than scientific objects and the research questions and ontologies they naturalize.

Population has a stubborn persistence to it, and the restaging of the problem with only slight tweaks is a tactic of governance and often a way to avoid more systemic or difficult change. Following Berlant (2007), not rarely do such tactics lead to instances of slow death—necro or not—or to life optimized, once again, for those who have the means and resources. Our investigations also disclose how death can become life (geologically through the transformations of fossils into fuel) or how life necessitates death (population genetics or technics of conservation). At different scales (from the microbial to the planetary) and temporalities (deep time to “modern” time), the uses of populations accrue capacity to render life and non-life (self-)governable, for the common, and not so common good.

Rather than dwell at the level of diagnosis or critique, the eleven short pieces presented here aspire to create glitches, provocations, interventions. Feminist STS scholars have disagreed about whether the population concept has anything left for us that makes it worth the risk of remobilizing. While sympathetic to Murphy’s unequivocal conclusion that “a radical political imaginary for population can[not] be mobilized without amplifying existing infrastructures already being deployed towards more racist necropolitical ends” (2017, 131), we also find ourselves snagged on the dense circulations of the concept as our contributors trace it across such diverse sites of technoscientific and cultural practice. As such, we look to an innovation in genre—the short piece, the collage of voices—to effect moments of glitch or rupture, or to effect a proliferation that might give us creative tools for thinking deployments of population in our, and your, varied situated problematics. In the short essays that follow, population is often put to work to achieve and/or enrol recursivity, replication, reproduction, mimicry—not only in applied analysis, but also in how problems of population get defined. The authors assemble situated histories, resonant couplings, unlikely pairings, and rigorous tracings—a bestiary of concepts for thinking population in the present. In assembling this collection, we invited our interlocutors to generate a reflective piece in response to the following prompt: What do we need in our feminist toolkit to understand/interrogate/rethink “populations” in technoscience today? Participants could nominate one thing to add to the toolkit, including concepts, objects, case studies, genealogies, critical orientations, and so on.

Why a toolkit? In describing her own “tools for multispecies futures,” feminist STS luminary Donna Haraway makes the case for the need for such practical engagements (Haraway and Endy 2019). Feminism, she remarks, is “relentlessly committed to the body, to the practical, to the fleshly, to the earthly.” Feminist tools are the means by which we can tinker, fix, mend, and in other ways make practically better our fleshly and earthly worlds. For Haraway, to approach something abstract like a concept or an idea as a tool is to bring it back down to the earth, to place it into the muck of the living and in service of “making life good.” For the authors in this collection, the

concepts they have offered for our toolkit—Malthusian Discontents, Staying with the Sign, Refusing Colonial Legibility, Artifice, Replication and Recognition, Relational Presence, Fragility, Compromised Care, Articulating Agency, The Geological, Homophonic Followings—speak to the many trajectories of population and population thinking in the current moment. They create ruptures and provoke new modes of inquiry into populations that point at ways of not only making life governable, but making life good.

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