

Population: Is It Time to Revisit This Term in Aging Research?

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It would be rare today to find a gerontological article, media report, or policy paper on aging whose opening riff was not the crashing chords of facts about *population* growth, size, risks, and costs. David Ekerdt calls this “lead-in”; “*the* paragraph [my emphasis]” (2), that makes content about aging appear more urgent than it is, while creating a quick attention-getter in a short space. But why must we always start with all these numbers to justify research on aging? And when did this *population* take on a threatening feral life of its own, assembled by fertility and mortality rates, dependency ratios, migration patterns, employment predictions, and life expectancies? How, indeed, did older people become part of such a thing in the first place?

Historically, the idea of *population*, including the aging *population*, began as a State project, born between Euro-Western frameworks of populationism and Malthusianism. Populationism, from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, was a political model of economic productivity and reproductivity based on national endorsements of large, growing, and vigorous populations. This is also the era of the rise of state policing to oversee the life of the social body in its living spaces, movements, capacities, diseases, births, and deaths. The state power of populationism rested on governmental statistics as illustrated, for example, in early seventeenth-century texts such as *Political Arithmetick* (1690) by Sir William Petty. In other writing (Katz), I have looked to Foucault’s work, such as his essay “Governmentality,” to argue how text-craft emboldened state-craft, or what was called the “art of government,” and its bureaucratic technologies of statistics, surveys, maps, and censuses and their various deployments. But then, as now, statistics were more than just numbers. Rather, they were numerical agents that collected, correlated, and folded the vagaries of human existence into numerically defined bio-political *populations*, evolving into what Kathleen Woodward today refers to as a culture of “statistical panic” that fuses public structure and personal feeling.

The idea of overpopulation, whilst marginal to populationist doctrines,

became predominant with the advent of Malthusianism and its somber theory of *populations* competing for limited resources. In his “An Essay on the Principle of Population,” first published anonymously in 1798, Thomas Malthus consolidated the dystopian themes circulating at the time about the unchecked growth and needs of working and dependent *populations* and their risk to moral and social orders. The popularity of Malthus’ work went beyond his initial arguments, however, and was used to rationalize early twentieth-century Social Darwinist and eugenicist formulations of poverty reform and demographic politics. As well, as Andrea Charise explains in *The Aesthetics of Senescence* (2020), the Malthusian focus on endangering rates of population growth influenced calculations of national prosperity and stability, a precursor to our current comparative economic ranking of countries according to their rates of population aging.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concerns about the aging *population* settled on “the elderly,” a figure combining a populationist, statistically governable group and a Malthusian problematization of overpopulation and social degeneration. Despite its relatively modest size by today’s standards, the *elderly* became wedged between modern contradictions of progress and tradition, productivity and decay. In *A History of Retirement* (1980), William Graebner notes that such contradictions created in America “the specter of an aging population, mired in its own demography” (10). This specter was the focal point of early *population* surveys, whose authors, while advocating for welfare and pension reform, further generated the problematic image of the *elderly population*. Examples are the British surveys of Charles Booth in the 1890s, and later American surveys by Lee Welling Squier (1912) and I. M. Rubinow (1939). Squier’s words about the urgency of a growing and unsupported aging *population* are unambiguous: “The American nation is face to face with a stupendous problem: Hundreds of thousands of working people already across the border into helpless and hopeless superannuation, tens and hundreds of thousands more now pressing the border line” (16). Later, gerontologist Nathan Shock, in his 1951 *Trends in Gerontology*, reviews research on aging and praises demographic survey work for providing answers to the questions: “Who are the old people? Where are they? What are they doing? What is their economic status?” (105).

While pension and social security programs expanded throughout the twentieth-century, in the latter part of the century and into the twenty-first

century, increasingly conservative anti-welfare governments reinvigorated the public imagery of the aging *population* as a threat to the viability of social security systems and, indeed, entire intergenerational economies. This victimizing scenario that gained momentum during the 1980s and was labeled by Ann Robertson as “apocalyptic demography” (1990) quickly became a controversial subject (Gee and Gutman). The caricature of the aging *population* as a burdensome behemoth, set to cannibalize the futures of shrinking younger generations, is one of the most disturbing developments of our time, all the more intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. While critics rightly argue that intergenerational cooperation counters the myth of intergenerational war, that dependency ratios are riven with racist and sexist biases, and medical cost increases are not simply a demographic issue, the image of the aging *population* as a unitary category remains. In his 2021 monograph *The Four Lenses of Population Aging*, Patrik Marier argues that, in the case of Canada the aging *population* is actually a refraction of the plural policy models through which it is filtered and administered. Indeed, the complexity of the historical interplay between such models has meant that “most issues related to population aging cannot be solved, only attenuated” (63).

The critique of how policies attenuate and fracture aging *populations* is revelatory; however, I wish to go further and suggest, given the constraints of its history, that we revisit the idea of the aging *population* itself, by which I mean the notion that older people’s lives are encapsulated within a *population*, weighted by its populationist and Malthusian bio-politics, rhetorics of magnitude, and homogenizing identities. I suggest that we seek, instead, alternative ways to understand and research real demographic change, for among older people and also in their relationships with other generations, environments, and non-human forms of life. I find feminist kin-making and Indigenous “elsewhere” arguments, discussed below, to be particularly relevant to this task.

Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway, in their 2018 collection *Making Kin Not Population*, propose a path away from normative *population* discourses: “we need to generate new kin inventions, new concepts and practices for making kith and kindred, as well as attending and attuning to how people and peoples *already* make and value other-than-biogenetic kin in non-imperialist ways” (2). Such inventions would include mutual belonging, multi-generational vulnerabilities, continuities between species and shared spaces of life, vital

relationships that have been abandoned by populational and reproductive politics, and the economizing of life itself. Making kin, rather than *population*, also means valorizing the care and fluidity that flows between age groups, absent from typically static demographic images such as age pyramids, (whose history, according to Tiago Moreira, began in America as a racist technology to distinguish “native” from “foreign” Americans (53)). Michelle Murphy further advocates a radical position against conventional notions of *population* that is “not about birth rates or numbers” but “about which kinships, supports, structures, and beings get to have a future and which are destroyed,” “it is about how life supports are replenished, cared for, and created,” and about a new social imaginary to “foster a multitude of ways of living in kinship differently that already exist all around us, as well as to continue to create speculative otherwise” (110–12).

The second critical idea of aging “elsewhere” is a theme Sandy Grande develops in her 2018 work on “Aging Precarity and the Struggle for Indigenous Elsewheres,” where she examines the corrosive effects for Indigenous peoples of Eurocentric concepts and crises of an aging population and their role in extending settler colonialism and capitalist dispossession. Older Indigenous people, in her case, are not problem populations tied to levels of (un)productivity or health needs but are fully engaged in relations of mutuality and reciprocity as valued elders whose importance is linked to their intergenerational, ecological, and spiritual skills. And rather than living within life-course narratives of Euro-Western diagnoses of dementia, elders with memory or functional loss are understood to experience a more culturally diverse and spiritually transcendental ‘elsewhere,’ which offers opportunities for care and kin inclusion rather than *population* isolation.

Kin-making and Indigenous aging elsewheres accord with recent posthumanist ideas about de-centering the exceptional status of the individual human within bio-populational hierarchies. For example, Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) and Elizabeth Povinelli’s *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (2016) document forms of existence beyond populational life that also makes up aging worlds. For Tsing, the making and reproduction of existence is not limited to human activity, but is “divergent, layered, and conjoined” such that we might think in terms of “assemblages” rather than *populations*, that are “open-ended gatherings” that can “show us potential histories in the making” (23). For Provinelli, these potential histories

also emerge from excluded *populations*, or de-populated peoples and environments, or from the remnants of implosion of the *population* imaginary itself due to Anthropogenic climate change and threats of extinction.

My questioning of the concept of *population* is not to doubt the importance of tracing the movements, patterns, and changes of age-based groups for policy, research, and advocacy. Rather, it is a critical inquiry into the conceptual limits of *population*, its discursive formations, and its political legacies of risk and social control. I think it is time to consider loosening and liberating aging from *population*, so we can acknowledge and envision the different ways in which older people make and are part of vital, kin-making, collective, and more-than-human worlds.

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