

The Birth of Population



COUNTING BODIES

Population in Colonial American Writing

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It seems fair to say that the idea of assembling individual human beings into a "population," through counting, feels natural. It so thoroughly structures our individual and collective lives that its origins and effects have become invisible to us. In the opening pages of her thoughtful and original book, Molly Farrell carefully de-naturalizes the concept of "population," making strange the idea of counting bodies as both a power of the state and an accepted and codified discourse. In a series of case studies, Farrell examines "moments around the colonial Atlantic world when writers explored the implications of enumerating people before censuses and birth registries shaped everyday life" (8). Although she does not neglect key moments and texts in the formation of population science, Farrell's interest here is explicitly in the "literary prehistory" of population, that is, the "imaginative, personal and narrative writings that performed the cultural work of normalizing the enumeration of colonial bodies" (2). Implicit in this statement are two of the book's central claims: first, that before the counting of bodies was consolidated into population science, literary texts not only reflected but helped to construct emergent notions of population; and, second, that colonial space and colonial bodies were not just incidental scenes or sources of data for a metropolitan project. Rather, the experience and the situation of colonialism itself encouraged the shift toward thinking of human communities in terms of numbers. Most strikingly, she suggests that the impulse toward thinking of bodies as discrete numbers continually ran up against the linkages and interdependencies between human subjects. What Farrell lays out is a fascinating spectacle, a colonial practice of counting bodies that is perpetually collapsing and producing odd, indeterminate results, even as it consolidates its conceptual hold as a way of thinking about human communities.

The first two chapters of the book address early documents of colonial experience in seventeenth-century America. The first chapter, "Poetics of the Ark Ashore," examines the Massachusetts colonist and poet Anne Bradstreet's engagement with early modern ideas about population and reproduction. In keeping with a broader theme in *Counting Bodies*, Farrell shows how Bradstreet's poetry connects cataclysm and death with reproduction and regeneration, a link she builds by contrasting the poems with William Bradford's record of colonial death and increase. The centrality of loss, and its relation to generation, will likely sound familiar to anyone who has read Bradstreet's famous elegies. Farrell, however, shows us how the act of remembering the dead in these poems undermines a dominant vision of colonial populations as a ceaselessly multiplying collection of interchangeable individuals. Likewise, she reads Bradstreet's less-studied epic poems as a complex response to triumphalist visions of colonial population increase. Building on her reading and revision of Guillaume Du Bartas, Bradstreet's poems imagine a fertile, teeming colonial world, but one that is absolutely tied to the complexity of reproduction. In Farrell's account, Bradstreet's poetry, in both its lyric and epic modes, "focuses on the unreliability and innumerability of humans' reproductive

capacity" (60). Farrell elegantly evokes these themes of unreliability and uncountability in the quite different setting of the second chapter, which focuses on Richard Ligon's *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657). Farrell sees Ligon doing the work of counting human bodies at the "intersection of aesthetic ideals and mathematical reckoning" (80). In his literary and numerical accounting of Barbados, Ligon tries to impose a degree of control on the human complexity of the plantation system. That ordering work, unstable throughout, fails most completely when it turns to the reproductive bodies of enslaved women. The problem, again, is bodies that cannot be counted: both their aesthetic status and their individual human value is distorted by a system in which bodies are goods and human reproduction is a central form of commodity production.

The second half of the book extends these lines of inquiry about counting and innumerability into later colonial moments. The third chapter considers the role of numeracy in Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*. Counting bodies, for Rowlandson, becomes a tactic for imposing order in moments of dissonance and conflict, but also for separating a quantifiable white colonial population from seemingly innumerable indigenous groups. Farrell suggests, however, that the most anxious and complicated counting work in Rowlandson's narrative happens around women and children, or as she puts it, "bodies that have the potential to alter the count" (132). These are bodies at once mutable (as when the adoption of a captive child could convert English to Indian) and persistently, stubbornly interconnected, even beyond death (as in Rowlandson's intimate connection with her deceased daughter, Sarah). The book's final chapter expands on the link between counting and death by focusing on colonial mortality bills. The dead body, Farrell points out, was a more easily countable unit than a living person. If the event of a birth in colonial America remained largely private and unreported, the numbers from the burial grounds could be (and increasingly were) added up and printed in the newspaper. Drawing on mortality bills printed in early eighteenth-century colonial newspapers, Farrell argues that it was the process of counting the dead (outside of crises like plague, war, and famine that had long been occasions for counting bodies) that helped to naturalize the idea of social enumeration. Her central example is Benjamin Franklin's fascination with vital statistics, beginning with his practice of publishing mortality bills in his newspapers. Farrell then traces how Franklin, in his 1750 *Poor Richard Improved*, used the changes in rates of death to extrapolate about living colonial inhabitants. Death, then, became the starting place for thinking about the growth, categorization, and demarcation of a population.

In drawing out some of the key themes, texts, and lines of inquiry above, I may risk obscuring one of the pleasures of reading Farrell's book, namely the range of her sources and the deftness with which she interweaves them. In each chapter, she moves skillfully between her central cases and broader discursive contexts, including Albrecht Durer's aesthetic theory, Thomas Malthus's population science, and Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics." This range might occasionally leave readers wishing she would pause for longer on some of

these supporting characters and questions. In my case, I would have been curious to hear more (and more directly) about the discourse of biopolitics, and Michel Foucault's work in particular. I saw the outlines of Farrell's engagement (both in opposition and agreement) with biopolitical ideas, but felt that she could have been more explicit about how she seeks to modify our sense of biopolitics as a dominant way of thinking about population.

I was continually excited by this book, and was especially struck by the way that Farrell's focus on the literary representation of population, and particularly on bodies that are difficult to count, might open up new possibilities for thinking about the complexity and variability of colonial American ideas of community. I'm persuaded, for example, that her book can help us think about colonial understandings of disability, another form of human categorization that was just beginning to emerge during this period. The idea of disability calls into question the degree to which individual members might "count" in a population. Certainly, then, scholars of disability representation will be interested in Farrell's demonstration of how colonial and early national counting practices explicitly devalued certain individuals, and disregarded crucial interdependencies between people. Just as important, however, is her careful attention to how writers in early America obstructed, disallowed, and resisted this kind of counting. Farrell's book is worth thinking with, and I'm eager to see how her methods and conclusions might further expand and enliven our understanding of what it meant to count and be counted in colonial communities.

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