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Making Masculinity: Craft, Gender and Material Production in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Crowd Management: the Novel and 'Biopolitical Imagination'

[*Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life*](#). Emily Steinlight. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018. 278 pp.

Reviewed by [Kellie D. Holzer](#), Virginia Wesleyan University

<1>*Populating the Novel* is a crowded monograph, full of theoretical lenses, sociological contexts, and textual interpretation. Emily Steinlight traces the development of the novel via the dual lens of population theories and Foucault's account of modern biopower, offering an alternate literary history and an alternative theory of the novel. She departs from the novel theories of critics like Ian Watt, Frederic Jameson, D. A. Miller, and Nancy Armstrong, which claim that the genre's function is to produce a self-regulating individual, instead arguing that the novel generates redundant populations that are constitutive to the form yet require ever changing forms of management. Steinlight contends that the 'Victorian novel's most elemental human material' is not the individual but 'a demographic surplus,' and 'this surplus, which fictional narratives aim (not always successfully) to manage at the level of biological life, exposes the inadequacy of existing political structures' (141). She terms this mode of aesthetic fertility the 'biopolitical imagination,' and she observes that it began to coalesce at a time when there was a 'Malthusian shift in British political thought' (37).

<2>The introductory chapters provide a thorough primer on theories of over-population, beginning with Thomas Malthus's 'Essay on the Principle of Population' and its controversial conclusion that reproduction grows exponentially in relation to agricultural sustenance, resulting in an excess of life that demands preventative check. The resulting attempts by the government to manage the demographic superfluity via policies and laws such as the decennial census and the 1834 Poor Law are well studied. Steinlight's intervention is to claim that surplus population is also an enabling condition for new forms of literary narrative. The chapters that follow identify 'a range of fictional strategies for dealing with a population calculated to exceed the resources allotted to it' (167). Specifically, she traces the evolution of the 'biopolitical imagination' through five sub-genres: 'Romantic confession, industrial realism, the city novel, sensation fiction, and the naturalist anti-bildungsroman,' offering fresh readings of canonical texts (28).

<3>Throughout these readings, Steinlight demonstrates how the line between individual and aggregate is blurred. In Romantic confession narratives, individual characters are shown to be aggregates: Frankenstein's creature is an 'amalgam of parts, literalizing the organic metaphor of the body politic' (49). Industrial realist novels attempt to make characters into class representatives, but John Barton, who is supposed to epitomize his class, is ejected from the workforce, remaindered from the proletariat. Another kind of class 'remainder' is Jo, the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House* (1852-3) whom Steinlight reads as 'less an individual subject than a walking synecdoche for the crowd' (121). At the same time, the epidemic plot in *Bleak House* blurs distinctions between the individual and the crowd, as seen in Esther's disfiguration via disease, which renders her 'nearly indistinguishable from the mass' (128). Identity seems to multiply in sensation novels; as evidence Steinlight exhibits Lady Audley's 'proliferation of personae' (147) and Isabel Vane's various incarnations. Naturalist novels deny their protagonists the benefits of the status of individual, explicitly rendering them expendable. Finally, as the novel became psychologized at the turn of the twentieth century, main characters like Dr. Jekyll and Kurtz are said to contain multitudes: Jekyll has internalized the behavior of the unruly masses, while Kurtz has internalized the Dark Continent itself.

<4>The shifting relationship between sexuality and reproduction is a current running through these chapters. Malthus posited that sexual desire and procreative sex are universal drives and therefore a threat to a species whose growth was projected to rapidly outpace the resources required to sustain it. In linking sexuality to reproduction, Malthus figured procreation as both necessary to continue the species and detrimental to it (44). Steinlight analyzes how this ambivalence toward reproduction is dramatized in *Frankenstein* (1818), and she characterizes this ambivalence as 'contraceptive futurism,' or the 'need to prevent the reproduction of bodies deemed antagonistic to society's vital interests' (46). (As might be evident here, Lee Edelman's polemic against reproductive futurity in *No Future* functions as a spectral interlocutor, both here and elsewhere in *Populating the Novel*). By mid-nineteenth century, the poor had become the target of Malthusian policies aimed at limiting birth rates. Steinlight describes the sanitary reform movement's preoccupation with the sexuality of the working

classes and 'the erotic dangers of domestic crowding' in slums (81). Condition of England novels took up similar themes, and Steinlight analyzes how industrial fictions underline the relevance of gender to arguments about population management. She observes that gender disrupts the internal coherence of the category of working class: 'the dyad of masters and men is destabilized by a third term: women' (97). *Mary Barton* (1848) showcases the contradictions that ensue. While Gaskell's novel 'makes the need to work into the condition of the heroine's emergence,' social science discourse of the period depicted women's wage labor in conflict with reproductive labor. Even Friedrich Engels was not immune to separate spheres ideology; in *The Condition of the Working Class* (1845), Engels warned 'The employment of the wife dissolves the family' (qtd in Steinlight 83). Women are deemed socially and biologically necessary to class reproduction; Steinlight notes that this class endogamy reflects the biopolitical 'concern to maintain the supply of useful life' (80). The contradictions inherent to the gendered division of labor become especially evident in the figure of Mary Barton's aunt Esther, a prostitute whose non-productive labor and non-reproductive vice locates her outside the proletariat proper.

<5>In the 1860s, sexuality and reproduction are effectively decoupled with the advent of sensation fiction combined with cultural anxieties produced by the identification of a surplus of unmarried women in the 1861 census. W. R. Greg's 1862 essay 'Why Are Women Redundant?' offered contentious solutions for ridding England of female remainders by shipping them off to English colonies where good wives and workers were needed. Steinlight observes that these concerns about unmarried women coincided with the emergence of sensation fiction, a sub-form of the novel based on 'the disclosure of a calamitous surplus at the heart of the domestic sphere' (139). Sensation novel plots are scaffolded on homes that are full of redundant women — spinster aunts, unmarried sisters, secret second wives, women living under false identities — all interlopers, non-procreative, undisciplined, and ungovernable. Steinlight then applies this interpretive framework to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), arguing that its plot adopts the conventions of sensation fiction, showing that 'any and all women's lives may become disposable' (152).

<6>Sensation fiction substantially altered English literature: Steinlight later claims, 'it was all but impossible to construct a workable marriage plot in the wake of Braddon's, Collins's, and Wood's overcrowding of domestic fiction' (166). In her readings of novels by Thomas Hardy and George Gissing, Steinlight returns to questions of 'futurity,' arguing that in their plots, social futurity 'demands to be imagined in nonreproductive terms' (167). For example, in *The Odd Women* (1893), Monica Madden does not survive marriage and procreation (167). Likewise, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Tess Durbeyfield's early sexual development 'proves detrimental' (180), and the deaths of Jude's progeny in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) signal their parents' failure to thrive (167). Steinlight notes, 'these texts disconfirm the established scientific view of human sexuality as a constant and necessarily reproductive impulse that takes its proper social form in marriage' (168). Whether sexuality and reproduction are yoked together, as in the early decades of the nineteenth-century biopolitical imagination, or whether

that connection is severed, as in the latter half of the century, crowd management remains the literary aim.

<7>*Populating the Novel* should prove to be highly generative of new readings of texts both inside and outside the canon of the novel. Its basic premise that the novel form animates and curtails mass life prompts new thinking about other bodies of nineteenth-century fiction beyond those that Steinlight focuses upon here. One can imagine biopolitical readings of detective fiction, imperial romance, children's literature, and more. Steinlight constructs a fruitful framework for our further examination of the status of populations deemed disposable and our interrogation of the parameters of human aggregation and potentialities of resistance therein.