

*Focus*

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**Demography for the Public: Literary Representations of Population Research and Policy****Alaka M. Basu**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the idea of what may be called Public Demography, wherein the practitioners and interpreters of the discipline of population studies inform (and sometimes inflame) the popular discourse on population-related matters. It looks at the representation of demographic research and policies in one form of public engagement, namely fiction — literature being an important way of transmitting the substance of a technical field of study to a lay public. Reviewing a sample of fictional writing that is clearly derived from a specialized knowledge of the subject of demography, the article finds it useful to classify this genre into two groups. The works in the first group tend to reproduce or reiterate the mainstream assumptions underlying the academic discipline, while those in the second group seem to take on board more recent criticisms of these assumptions, sometimes in unexpected ways. Readers, however, seem to react much more readily to those works that repeat some of the ‘bad’ habits of the discipline.

**INTRODUCTION**

In mid-2013, dissident Chinese writer Ma Jian’s *The Dark Road*,<sup>1</sup> first published in Chinese in 2012, became available in English. Set in China during the height of that country’s one-child policy, the novel follows the sometimes believable and sometimes fantastic fortunes of a young couple with

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I am extremely grateful to the referees and editors of *Development and Change* who pushed me to revise and tighten this article based on their very meticulous and engaged readings of it.

1. Summary: This book fictionalizes the ground realities of China’s population policy through the lives of a couple, Kongzi and Meili, who have one daughter, Nannan, but are desperate to have a son (at least Kongzi is desperate, so that his direct Confucian lineage does not come to a humiliating end). Meili’s second pregnancy occurs just as China’s one-child policy is unleashing another round of forced abortions and sterilizations in their village. So they do what they must and become one more set of ‘family planning fugitives’ by living on a battered raft sailing down a poisonously polluted Yangtze river and living off personally and environmentally hazardous menial jobs along its shores. By turns realistic and fantastical,

a daughter as they determine to have a son. At 375 pages, the author has time to develop several plots and sub-plots and to introduce much ambiguity into the narrative. The wife, Meili, begins with the urge to have a son but gradually evolves into being equally happy with the idea of ending up with a second daughter. Eventually she is convinced that her one child is actually good enough for her, given the other aspirations she had developed for herself that continued childbearing would get in the way of. The book is a page-turner as a story, but it is also an extremely useful primer on the official mechanics and the ground realities of Chinese population policy. It also offers insight into the research literature on some of the outcomes of this policy, including the unexpected finding that the one-child norm has now become internalized at least in large parts of the female population.

From such a perspective, *The Dark Road* can be classified as one kind of what Donaldson (2011) calls public demography, the transmission of some of the substantive findings of the academic discipline of demography to what may be called a *lay* public, the word *lay* implying (nothing more than) an audience that does not consist of professional practitioners of the academic discipline. Public demography can be seen as the analogue of what Burawoy (2005) calls public sociology, whereby sociologists take their ‘academic achievements back to the publics (they) study. Public sociology re-engages the world from which it originally hailed’ (ibid.: 1). Eriksen (2005) might have called this practice public anthropology, a return to a tradition in which anthropologists like Malinowski, Franz Boas and Evans-Pritchard were public intellectuals in the best sense of the word — informing the lay public, but also inspiring and engaging in debate with intellectuals from other disciplines and fields.<sup>2</sup>

The discipline of demography or population studies is particularly relevant to such public understanding and engagement because the subjects it covers — birth, death, marriage, immigration, overpopulation, underpopulation — are of great public interest, sometimes political, sometimes ideological, sometimes intellectual and sometimes prurient. They are also relevant because they are so frequently tied to a public policy objective.

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the story unveils an unrelenting saga of state and domestic patriarchy through graphic descriptions of some of the brutal manifestations of such patriarchal control over women’s lives and bodies, and imparts sly observations on the destructive nature of the Chinese economic miracle. The first three quarters of the book is merciless in piling on the horrors, but towards the end there are some surprising moments of tenderness and some unexpected demonstrations of female agency. But the overwhelming sense is one of a literary assault on any possibility of redemption of a system as corrupt and determined as the Chinese system appears to be through the lens of this novel.

2. See also the website on public anthropology ([www.publicanthropology.org/index.htm](http://www.publicanthropology.org/index.htm)) set up by Robert Borofsky of Hawaii Pacific University, and the University of California Press series on public anthropology that includes interesting titles such as ‘Why America’s Top Pundits are Wrong’ by Besteman and Gusterson (2005).

At the same time, the academic discipline itself has become increasingly technical and somewhat obscure. It is thus not surprising that the research findings of demography are routinely translated, interpreted and transmitted to the public sphere by demographers and other intermediaries through the use of several outlets, including mass media, trade books and literature.

Public pronouncements made by professionals can have both a positive and negative impact on the public. An example of the latter is the announcement of the results of the 2001 Census of India. A straightforward comparison between 1991 and 2001 threw up the politically inflammatory conclusion that, in that decade, the growth rate among Muslims had been substantially higher than among Hindus. This announcement of differential growth rates was made at a press conference called by the Registrar General of India and soon all hell broke loose. There were now some numbers to add spice to the public and political (especially under the then Hindu nationalist government) rabble-rousing which was threatening to get out of hand when the Registrar General's office stepped in. It was explained that a large part of the differential growth rate could be attributed to the fact that the census of 1991 had not included the states of Assam and Kashmir, both states with sizeable Muslim populations. Since these states were included in the 2001 census, the Muslim population growth rate depicted by the results was artificially high. Needless to say, by then the process had taken on a life of its own, with the clarification barely noticed (Basu, 1997, 2004).

More often than not there are several links in the chain between the academic or professional demographer and the public; often a series of middlemen are involved. These may be individuals merely responsible for directly reporting the specialist's research conclusions at press conferences. This is how the findings of the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences in the US reach the mass media. However, even this relatively direct channel of communication is not unproblematic, as Teitelbaum (2003) has demonstrated with respect to the NRC report on the costs and benefits of immigration and the United Nations Population Division's estimates of 'replacement migration'.

At other times, it is policy makers that reach the public domain, both through publicity and education activities and through policies that directly impact on people's behaviours. This form of public demography is often effective. Faria and Potter (1999), for example, have documented the probable impact of the state-funded telenovelas on fertility in Brazil. In a series of focus groups and individual interviews in rural Bangladesh, Amin and Basu (2004) were struck by the sophisticated understandings these villagers had, not merely of trends in infant and child mortality, but even of the causes of these trends of dramatically declining mortality in young children. One would think they had been reading Mosley and Chen (1984), United Nations (1973), or some recent report by the World Health Organization.

But of course, it was simpler than that. They were so well informed because of the very vocal government campaign to reduce child mortality through immunization campaigns, radio programmes on hygiene and nutrition, home visits by paramedical health workers, and something unique to Bangladesh called ‘miking’. The latter refers to public announcements that are made through loudspeakers on a variety of health matters by government and non-governmental agencies and stepped up when needed, for instance at the time of an outbreak of cholera.

Besides the specialist and the policy maker, there are also middle men who *interpret* the findings from demographic research for their publics, often with some larger agenda dictating the nature of this interpretation. Examples include groups like the Marriage Movement in the US and the Hindu nationalist BJP in India. Both these entities frequently spout demographic ‘facts’ to bolster their respective calls for greater conservatism in family policy in the US and greater pressure on Muslim fertility in India (Basu, 1997).

However, the dissemination of information and the exertion of influence through newspapers and television tend to be fleeting. A greater impact can potentially be achieved through popular books that take demography to the people. This outlet is alive and well, judging by books like *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich (1978), *The Case for Marriage* by Linda Waite and Dorothy Gallagher (2000), *The Birth Dearth* by Ben Wattenberg (1987), *Maybe One* by Bill McKibben (1998), *The Death of the West* by Patrick Buchanan (2002) and, most recently, *Countdown: Our Last, Best Hope for a Future on Earth?* by Alan Weisman (2013).

While all these forms of publicizing population research are effective to varying degrees, this article looks at a more unusual form of public demography that may be as important in the longer run — and perhaps more so given the size of its potential audience. This is the demographic knowledge and understanding transmitted through works of fiction that are clearly informed by academic demographic thinking.

Why fiction? Because fiction can sometimes do better social science than social science itself. According to Coser (1963: 3), it seems that ‘the trained sensibilities of a novelist or a poet may provide a richer source of social insight than, say, the impression of untrained informants on which so much of sociological research currently rests’. In addition, literature and art, by particularizing the general findings of social science, hold a more powerful mirror to understand these issues. In literature, knowing the ‘context’ is more than a matter of knowing a set of ‘facts’ about a community or place, it is about understanding worldviews and attitudes, what may be called the ‘spirit’ of a people, a subject that is better explored by the artistic imagination than by a survey questionnaire.

This article therefore looks at the uses fiction makes of findings from demography. Subsequently, it briefly speculates about how this literature in turn performs its public demography; that is, how it is received by the

public it seeks to engage. The latter is done by looking at one kind of public response, namely the impressions and reviews posted by lay readers (as opposed to professional critics) of books with a demographic slant. In particular, I consult reader reviews on the websites of Goodreads and Amazon.

## DEMOGRAPHY IN FICTION

All social sciences can claim to have inspired *some* literature in the sense that the piece of literature is patently using the findings of academic research from that social science. Indeed, one need only re-punctuate the already existent term ‘social science-fiction’ (which refers to science fiction with social themes) to ‘social-science fiction’ to acknowledge a growing genre. Sometimes this fiction is produced by outsiders to the discipline who have tried to ‘learn’ the subject, with all the accompanying questions of ‘translation’ that literary critics spend much time debating. At other times, this fictional writing is produced by a trained social scientist herself — in such cases the antecedents are usually clear. There are several examples of such moonlighting from anthropology as even cursory surveys by Firth (1984), and later Narayan (1999), note.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* (1993) is acknowledged to be based on his PhD research in Egypt; many of his other novels bear the stamp of a trained anthropologist. *Mating* by Norman Rush (1991) seems to be written by someone trained in formal anthropology (even if, informally, Rush was a Peace Corps official in Botswana), as is Mischa Berlinski’s *Fieldwork* (2007). Camilla Gibb, author of *Sweetness in the Belly* (2006), is an anthropologist from Oxford whose book is an educated and welcome antidote to contemporary representations of a monolithic and aggressive Islam.

There are of course several painstakingly researched historical novels that teach history through literature. There are also some examples from economics. For instance, Russell Roberts’ *The Invisible Heart* (2001), Marshall Jevons’ (the real names of the authors are Elzinga and Breit) *Murder at the Margin* (1978), *Fatal Equilibrium* (1985) and *A Deadly Indifference* (1995) all do an impressive job of using murder, mystery or plain storytelling to teach basic economic principles. As does Michael Klein’s *Something for Nothing* (2011), although demographers could well claim this book, given that the economics research it revolves around relates to high school sexual

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3. Firth’s list of fiction *about* anthropology and anthropologists includes Iris Murdoch’s *A Severed Head* (1961), Penelope Lively’s *The House in Norham Gardens* (1974) and Barbara Pym’s *Less than Angels* (1955). Narayan’s list of fiction *by* anthropologists in which their anthropology shows through includes Adolph Bandelier’s *The Delight Makers* (1890), Elsie Clews Parsons edited volume *American Indian Life* (1967), D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded* (1978) and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934).

abstinence programmes. *In Search of Klingsor* by Jorge Volpi (2002) explains many concepts in economics and physics and mathematics through an exciting thriller.<sup>4</sup>

It is hard to find such fiction written by professional demographers. The only one to come to mind is Vikram Seth, whose poems on doing fieldwork in rural China — see ‘Research in Jiangsu Province’ and ‘The Accountant’s House’ (1985), discussed below — must evoke nostalgic memories in any demographer who has personally collected data in the developing world. But this is not to say that the discipline has not informed any fiction. It is too provocative a subject not to have captured the imagination of at least some writers of popular fiction. This article therefore reads some of the works of literature informed by demography (as opposed to social science in general) to critically examine the demography that their authors are practising. This is important because it tells us how the discipline is communicating itself to a broader readership and also because the academic pronouncements of the discipline are often sufficiently potentially incendiary for their propagation through literature to have a greater real-world impact than do the more abstract ruminations of many of the other social sciences.

The collection I have put together is based on an admittedly somewhat disorganized search of my own, besides including some of the literature listed in a review by Shriver (2003). Being unable to conduct the kind of formal literature search that Firth (1984) had access to though *The Cumulative Fiction Index* while researching anthropology in fiction, my list is incomplete and a-scientific. It is unlikely to be over-selective, but it does have the major limitation of including only publications in the English language.

In addition (and this is important), unlike Shriver, I have chosen only contemporary fiction, for I am interested in fiction inspired by demography as a *modern academic discipline*, not fiction (such as by Victor Hugo or Aldous Huxley) that uses more everyday notions of concepts like fertility and population growth. To increase my focus, I have also restricted myself to fiction that concentrates on one set of core interests in demography — those related to fertility, mortality, family planning and sexuality and, as a consequence of the first in particular, also to immigration. The works I include in my master list here are listed in Appendix 1. In the following sections, I concentrate on half a dozen of these works to illustrate in more detail what my analysis of this genre of writing suggests. Appendix 1 lists other works of fiction cited in the course of the discussion.

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4. The recent global economic crisis has also spawned a rash of books, usually thrillers that use the backdrop of the crisis knowledgeably enough to be expounding economic principles while telling an exciting story.

### THE DEMOGRAPHIC 'ORIGINS' OF THESE WORKS OF FICTION

Except for Seth (who abandoned his graduate student status in economic demography a long time ago), none of the authors of my chosen works are demographers by profession or by training. But not only do demographic themes underlie their stories, they have clearly done some homework on the subject. That is, the direction of influence is clearly from professional demographic research and policy to fiction and not the other way around.<sup>5</sup>

This direction of influence is suggested in its most transparent form by the openly acknowledged sources of information in the book (often even with a bibliography, as in Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*). At other times, the input from professional demography can be inferred from the patently (semi-)professional or policy-level demographic knowledge scattered throughout the book. Discussions of and references to population growth rates, declining fertility, immigration rates, population projections, contraceptive use, family planning programmes, pepper most of these stories. Perhaps this public education in demography is provided most comprehensively and most seamlessly in Amin Maalouf's *The First Century After Beatrice*. In the course of its 192 pages, Maalouf manages to insert semi-academic discussions on numerous subjects of demographic interest — sex preference, sex-selective abortion, abortion, population growth rates, reproductive technology, North–South differences and immigration. Some of these discourses are as long as one or two pages. The book does not have a bibliography, but Maalouf lives in Paris and he sounds almost as if he tapped INED (the Institut national d'études démographiques) for material for this book. This suspicion is strengthened by the surprising reference to a longitudinal measles study in Senegal in the 1970s — there was indeed such a study and French demographers were actively involved in it.<sup>6</sup> Maalouf even engages the intelligent reader by explaining the numerical calculation to demonstrate that even in a Western country in which sex preferences are relatively rare and equally in favour of boys and girls, highly distorted sex ratios of births can result if a technology for guaranteeing male births exists (p. 106).

Sometimes, these books transmit their demographic information with the literary device of a professional demographer or policy expert or policy practitioner/implementer, or a knowledge-ferreting journalist, as a character through whose mouth and through whose doings this knowledge is

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5. One could take the not unreasonable stand that *all* (or at least most) fiction is inspired by demography because all (or most) fiction is inspired by *life*; but that tautology is not what motivates this section of the article. Here, I am concerned with finding works of fiction in which there is some evidence of inspiration from the subject of demography as an *intellectual discipline*.

6. Moreover, Maalouf describes this supposedly fictional study's actual finding that measles in pregnancy increases the sex ratio of births. This finding is remarkably close to the much-publicized hypothesis by Oster (2005) that the inordinately high masculine sex ratio of births in India and China today can be at least partly explained by Hepatitis B in women.

conveyed. Examples include the family planning worker Daisy in Narayan's *Painter of Signs*, the anthropologist Pierre in Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and Clarence the journalist and Andre Vallauris the lawyer who are interested in the legal aspects of reproductive technology in Maalouf's *Beatrice*. In Shriver's *Game Control*, several characters in Africa are trained demographers from named and well-known population research centres in the US. They work for organizations like USAID and Pathfinder, organizations that actually exist and, as one reviewer of this book (Cohen, 1996) said, the author has probably pored over descriptions of these organizations and also probably read several hundred pages of the journal *Population and Development Review*. The central characters in Grass's *Headbirths* (which was written shortly after Grass returned from a trip to China) are high-school geography teachers who teach classes on overpopulation in the third world, sub-replacement fertility in Europe and Chinese population policy.<sup>7</sup> *The Dark Road* by Ma Jian gives a human and more ambiguous (the former centrally and the latter more peripherally, and only towards the end) face to the demographer's 'objective' analysis of son preference in Asia. This is achieved through a description of the emotions that mediate much outwardly docile or demographically interesting behaviour (a determinant of behaviour that gets short shrift in the demographic literature, see Basu, 2006). It is also about the human, as opposed to the purely demographic, impact of China's one-child policy.

This device of creating a character who is an expert allows the demographic information imparted by these books to sound 'natural' and legitimate and, often without the reader realizing it, 'true'. But even when their books/stories do not include such an 'expert', these writers have clearly done their homework in the demography they convey. In Maalouf's case for example, as already mentioned, the book contains several pages of straightforward demographic information. In Mistry's *Fine Balance*, the visual and functional descriptions of the family planning 'camps' of the Emergency period in India are real, not an exercise in magical realism, however surreal they might appear. And there are two quotes in the book that sound as if they were taken from a demography journal from the 1980s: 'Is there sadness in your life because your neighbour has more children than you? Do you need more hands to help you with the endless work in the field, to carry water, to search for firewood? Are you worried about who will look after you in your helpless old age, because you have no sons?' (the medicinal quack at

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7. Incidentally, this literary device is employed even more in novels seeking to convey anthropological information. Anthropologists, generally being more colourful characters, also tend to get more central and more positive roles compared to the demographers who appear in the occasional book (except, perhaps, for *Game Control*). See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_fictional\\_anthropologists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fictional_anthropologists) and [library.jccc.edu/guides/literature/anthropologyfiction.html](http://library.jccc.edu/guides/literature/anthropologyfiction.html) for still-growing lists of such fictional anthropologists. Sociologists also make an appearance in some books, most notably Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) and Alison Lurie's *Imaginary Friends* (1967).

the village market, p. 515); and 'I'm not worried. I'm looking forward to it. Five children I already have, and my husband won't let me stop. This way he has no choice — government stops it' (a woman waiting to be forcibly sterilized, p. 522). Both these points have been made in several research papers in reputed population journals (see, among others, Cain, 1986; Datta and Nugent, 1984; Saavala, 1999).

## TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF DEMOGRAPHY

To organize the books in her list, Shriver classified her books according to the kinds of fears that they inspired in their readers. In this article, the classification of books is informed by an attempt to identify the major ways in which the discipline of formal demography has entered fiction.

What kind of demography do these works of literature impart? Obviously, it is not the primary duty of fiction to teach/inform and therefore there is no obligation for it to *faithfully* reproduce academic findings. However, when these works of fiction manifestly do use the academic literature of population studies, it is interesting to look at how they use these findings. In the present study, somewhat surprisingly, they all seem to do one of two things: either they reproduce what some critics of the discipline see as its *bad habits*, or they go a step further to do what may be called a more *critical demography*. The former implies that they absorb and replicate the absence of reflexivity of mainstream demography (for academic articulations of this criticism, see, among others, Greenhalgh, 1996; Hodgson, 1991; Ramsden, 2002; Riley and McCarthy, 2003; Watkins, 1993). The latter group is composed of those works that seem more deliberately conscious of the need for context and perspective and which are dissatisfied with the presumption that neutrality and objectivity underlie demographic research. Many of these literary works then add an interesting twist to these new criticisms of the old demography.

What are some of the bad habits of demography that the new Critical Demography has foregrounded? Five common practices come to mind:

1. The fundamental assumption of the discipline is that population growth is a problem; indeed, in much old-style demography, population growth is *the* problem. This criticism of the field must be modified to say that while population growth is a problem, it is not only *high* population growth that is problematic in the demographic perspective. Increasingly, attention is shifting to the problem of low fertility in the developed world. Indeed, increasingly it is this *combination* of high fertility in the developing world and low fertility in the developed world that seems to present the greatest intellectual challenges to practitioners of demography and to the academic literature that flows from these practitioners.

2. The fact that the discipline has traditionally been overwhelmingly reliant on quantitative methods of data collection and research and also on individuals as the unit of analysis. This emphasis on numbers in particular may explain much that is problematic with the demography that subsequently enters the public domain. For one thing, the use of 'technical', that is quantitative, analysis gives the field and, by extension, the lay reader a 'scientific' and frequently deceptive aura of impartiality; there is a feeling of 'numbers cannot lie'. The second issue with demographic numbers is that they are so big. Demographic talk is all about millions and billions. For that reason, the numbers are threatening and this makes it easier to use them in stories that seek to titillate or frighten.
3. This emphasis on measurement, quantitative techniques and parsimony means in turn that professional demography is often ahistorical and acultural. In particular, 'culture' is too often a residual category rather than a vibrant context for demographic behaviour (see, for example, Greenhalgh, 1996, Kertzer, 1997;). It has little 'tolerance for complexity' (Riley and McCarthy, 2003).
4. The cornerstone of demographic 'theory', the demographic transition theory, is a modified form of traditional 'modernization' theory. That is, it subscribes to the evolutionary view of social change, and it subscribes to all the notions of modernization theory — its conflation of modernization with Westernization, its assumptions of convergence, linearity and universality that are now treated as questionable to various degrees in the other social sciences (barring perhaps economics).
5. As an extension to 4 above, demographers are inveterate classifiers. While the proclivity to classification is not something invented by or exclusive to demography, classification has been elevated to a high art in quantitative demography. (If one social science is to take the credit for early excessive classification, then it must be colonial anthropology; a practice it picked up from the natural sciences but soon made uniquely its own.) The problem lies not so much in the act of categorization as in the categories that are now a standard part of demographic research. While age and sex are relatively benign staples in the classifying tendencies of demography, others are less innocuous, even if unintentionally so. In particular, there is the constant geographical classification and the nature of this geographical classification, as well as the terminology employed in this classification. Thus the countries of the world get divided into the 'developed' and the 'less developed' or the (supposedly kinder) 'developing' (both terms being obvious euphemisms for 'undeveloped'). It is true that 'development' here refers to 'economic' attributes, but the underlying trope is an equation of economic development with civilizational or cultural advancement, not just in the eye of the reader but also in the central story in demography — the story of the demographic transition.

My reading of the chosen texts concludes that sometimes these characteristics of mainstream demography are absorbed by fiction with an underlying demographic theme, and at other times, the fiction that emerges from population research contextualizes the findings of this research, but often in surprising ways. I expand on both these conclusions in the next two sections by looking in more detail at a few books in each kind of demographic fiction.

### Fiction as ‘Mainstream’ Demography

The books included in the first category (see Appendix 1A) are more openly ‘demographic’ and polemical than those in the second group. More pertinently, they seem to reproduce all the weaknesses of traditional demography — impatience with nuance, a search for meta-narratives with little interest in the history or culture, a tendency to classify by race and ‘civilization’, and a fixation with large numbers.

The book that fits most easily into this type of public demography is *The Camp of the Saints* by Jean Raspail.<sup>8</sup> It was published in French in France in 1973 and printed in the US in 1975 by Charles Scribner’s Sons. It sold well enough to go into several reprints.<sup>9</sup> That it is polemical is openly acknowledged by the author; in fact, in an afterword, he calls himself prophetic. What are the professional demography origins of this book? They are all over the place. And their presence in the book is confirmed by the preface and afterword to the 1985 edition, in which Raspail cites official population projections (without specifying whose projections these are) to support his case that his fiction is but thinly disguised future fact.

Even more so, the book is inspired by demography in the way it classifies and yet lumps together. The classification itself is very basic — the West against the rest. In turn, ‘the rest’ are an undistinguished and indistinguishable mass not worth the bother of separating out by region or culture or history. It is this tendency to classify and yet not to classify that accounts

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8. Summary: This is a novel about the inevitability of unchecked population growth in the developing world spilling its excesses into a foolishly welcoming developed world. Shiploads of the poor set sail from Calcutta to the French Riviera, which has long been abandoned by its original citizenry except for the army, a few altruistic civilians, and the retired professor who waits and watches and comments. This is but the harbinger of a mass movement of culturally alien peoples from the overpopulated Third World to take over the depopulated and generous First World, driven by the lust for the riches of the latter but determined not to emulate the latter’s civilizational values. So extreme and successful is the migration that soon the mayor of New York City must share Gracie Mansion with three families from Harlem (although it is not clear how these families can be regarded as recent immigrants to America’s shores), the Queen of England has to accept a Pakistani daughter-in-law, and one brave soldier faces the onslaught of hordes of Chinese visitors.

9. And according to Wikipedia ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp\\_of\\_the\\_Saints#Response](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_of_the_Saints#Response)), it has undergone a recent revival on the bestseller lists in France.

for the fact that in the book itself, the invaders are *Hindus* from the banks of the Ganges, but the cover photograph in the 1995 English edition is the famous picture of *Chinese* illegal immigrants washed ashore at the Rockaway peninsula beach in New York in 1993.<sup>10</sup> The barely concealed message (as well as the infamous afterword mentioned above) refers to the ‘human masses’ on the shores of the Mediterranean, to the 70 million inhabitants of *Nigeria* that will become ‘100 million at the dawn of the third millennium’.

Raspail uses the lazy excuse of the book being a parable and symbolic to explain this juxtaposition of races and images, but the fact remains that there is no attempt at character development where these outsiders are concerned (except for the lone Indian from Pondicherry who joins those whites who resist the invasion of the barbarians). Instead, all references are to collective attributes, the leprous stench, monster children and the feeling of ‘how could a good cause smell so bad’ among the do-good hippies and Christians who try to welcome the refugees. Any individuality that exists among the immigrants is pejorative, for example, the low-caste leader of the throngs is continuously referred to as ‘the turd eater’, based apparently on the belief that these lower castes eat faeces in times of famine (a new piece of anthropological exotica).

Aside from these deliberately offensive descriptions, what is striking is the way in which the book uses some of the stereotypes of old-style demography. Notable is the frightened reference to the ‘Asiatic masses’ that ‘will ultimately learn to forge the tools that will give them power’ (Kirk, 1944, cited in Riley and McCarthy, 2003). Also present is the still continuing tendency in demographic analysis (through its underlying allegiance to demographic transition theory) to conflate economic and cultural development and then to implicitly conflate cultural development with white (Western) civilization. This is a perspective that allows Raspail to assert that his book is not about race but about civilization.

In other words, while the classifications and comparisons so central to the demographic enterprise today — that is, in its politically correct forms — tend to be classifications and comparisons of ‘*them*’ vs. ‘*them*’ (for example, Africa vs. Latin America), this classificatory tendency gets translated into ‘*us*’ vs. ‘*them*’ (that is, the West vs. the Rest) in many of the books in my first category of fiction.

*The Camp of the Saints* is one kind of parable. There are others too in my list though they might not appear so on first sight. Both in Maalouf’s

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10. That picture and that event have been in the news more than once in their own capacity. First, when the woman who masterminded this particular piece of illegal immigration was finally sentenced, then in a *New York Times* article that followed up those passengers in the Golden Venture twelve years after the event. Most recently it was cited in a report on the death in prison of the ‘immigrant smuggler’ in *New York Times* 29 April 2014.

*The First Century After Beatrice*,<sup>11</sup> and Grass's *Headbirths*,<sup>12</sup> the main protagonists are well-developed Western characters. The other characters in these books, the Indians and the Chinese respectively, are once again depicted as incessantly multiplying hordes or callous daughter-killing monsters. In this characterization of non-Western mindlessness, as compared to the endless thought and planning that characterizes Western fertility decision making, it is an 'old' demography that these books are doing. Contemporary demography now looks for rationales for high fertility as well. Academic demography's interest in *rational* decision making is reserved for the Westerners in *Headbirths*. Indeed, it is precisely this that gives an edge, not just of eccentricity but also of coldness to the lead characters who endlessly discuss pension funds, opportunity costs and other sensible reasons to have or not have a child.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Summary: This novel is a poetic meditation on a rapidly approaching world in which a 'folk' remedy from the Middle East has been tested, developed and marketed to women who want to ensure that they will bear only sons. The narrator himself has only a daughter, Beatrice. His tender love for Beatrice, and her partner Clarence, stands in sharp contrast to the hordes in Asia who gobble up the successful son-guaranteeing pill, with some immediate and other logically anticipated consequences for themselves as well as for the rest of the world. As the narrator, an entomologist, reflects on the world awaiting his daughter, his research and his scientific background are employed to discuss many of the problems of contemporary society — overpopulation, gender relations, violence, food security — all in an elegant melding of scientific fact with emotional response. This attempt to integrate reason and emotion is severely tested towards the end through a series of events which would not be fair to reveal to potential readers.
  12. Summary: This book is difficult to summarize because it is not even clear to what genre it belongs. The back cover blurb describes it as a story about a German couple, Harm and Dorte Peters, who teach high-school geography, especially population geography of the world, and who continue their years-old intellectual conversation about whether or not to have a baby as they travel to India and Indonesia — both countries teeming with new-born babies apparently produced without any thought at all. While the book can be seen as a work of fiction that matches this description, it can equally legitimately be read as a story about a novelist recently back from China who is trying to write a screenplay about a couple called Harm and Dorte Peters and their intellectual indecisiveness about having a baby as they watch the populations of the third world explode. Better still, it can be read as a personal essay by a real writer, Gunter Grass, trying, on his return from a visit to China, to write a screenplay about such a couple and, in the process giving us his own, often funny, often damning, views on capitalism, communism, and everything in between, including the dangers of third world non-thinkism and what this means for the racial and cultural distribution of the world population: as the Indian and the Chinese populations explode, the Germans die out. Grass does not necessarily bemoan this real possibility; he merely points it out. These and other political and social asides make up much more of the book than the futile arguments the Peters engage in. And pegging the story to an ongoing screenplay project allows the author to allow the couple to never reach closure on the baby decision.
  13. Contrast this with the lyrical take on the same theme, childlessness, in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* (2005): 'He used to think it made sense: in an overpopulated world, childlessness was surely a virtue, like peaceableness, like forbearance. Now, on the contrary, childlessness looks to him like madness, a herd madness, even a sin. What greater good can there be than life, more souls? How will heaven be filled if the earth ceases to send its cargoes?' (p. 34).

Walker's book does give more form and substance to its faraway African characters; these are not cardboard 'others'. But I still put *Possessing the Secret of Joy*<sup>14</sup> in the first category because of the unremittingly polemical tone of its central message — all and any form of female genital cutting are horrifying enough to demand zero tolerance. There is simply no nuance here, and the book reflects the tendency of demography to universalize, but it also reflects the tendency of the post-Cairo<sup>15</sup> debate to make universal judgements in the specific context of matters like female 'circumcision'. While modern day demographers (or, more accurately, medical anthropologists and medical demographers) are beginning to be more complex in their characterization of the practice and the ideology of female genital cutting (by not referring to all versions of it as genital 'mutilation' for a start) and its many ramifications (see, for example, Shell-Duncan, 2001), Walker's book is not interested in these subtleties. It is 'demographic' in other ways too — there is the obligatory AIDS patient (p. 223), there are asides on the African AIDS profile (p. 246), on female pregnancy as a strategy for male domination (p. 228), on infant mortality (p. 225), use of that much overused word 'autonomy' (p. 216), and so on.

As a result, this kind of fiction is guilty of the universalization and simplification that the discipline of demography is accused of in the new reflexive critiques of the discipline. There is only one side to the debate, and there are too many generalizations about the behaviour of others. This absence of ambiguity is particularly problematic, whether in fiction or in traditional demographic research.

### **Fiction as 'Critical' Demography**

The books that can be placed in the second category do a somewhat different kind of public demography (see Appendix 1B). While they may be seen to be doing what the academic field of critical demography says should be

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14. Summary: This is the story of Tashi, an African woman from the fictional country of Olinga, and the physical and psychological traumas she suffers as a result of the death of an older sister from female circumcision when they were both children, and her own voluntary subjection to female circumcision as a young adult. These traumas are multiplied by the birth of her severely handicapped son Bennie, which she attributes to the damage caused by the circumcision. Little relief from the guilt, grief and rage that Tashi experiences is found through her murder of the old woman who did the operation on her and her sister, and they provide the blinding backdrop to the larger but loosely told story of the other characters in her life: her American missionary husband Adam, his mistress Lisette, and their son, the anthropologist Pierre who is the means to her coming to terms of some sort with the history and ideology of female genital mutilation (FGM), as the procedures are now always referred to in the international advocacy literature. Emotionally charged and polemical, the book is explicit in its unblinking commitment to making the reader share Tashi's pain and anger, and to the eventual eradication of this cruel practice.

15. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo.

done by the discipline, they sometimes turn this injunction on its head and in the process become a critique of critical demography itself. The works included here do what demography should be doing according to its critics — placing its findings in their larger historical, cultural and political context and grounding sweeping national or global issues in a local setting.

I will focus on R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* here,<sup>16</sup> with supporting reference to Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. For those who have not read this book, let me describe Narayan's central female protagonist, Daisy. It is not at all surprising that the hero Raman is besotted by her. Daisy is young, gutsy, single, sexually liberated (or so her lover thinks), and wholly committed to her work. She is also sweet and vulnerable, cries every now and then, thus frequently arousing the protective instincts of her somewhat bemused admirer. In other words, she is the epitome of the demographically promoted version of the autonomous South Asian woman that population policy must create and whose autonomy will then hasten the pace of fertility and mortality decline. Daisy comes across as a well-rounded flesh and blood creature, with strengths and weaknesses, and with a resilience that overcomes her hurt when the very people she is trying to help talk back to her.

Except for the nature of her work. Daisy is a government family planning worker. And she is firmly committed to the cause of family planning. From the standpoint of the Cairo paradigm, she represents all that is negative about national family planning programmes and is the conduit for inexcusable intrusions into the lives and bodies of men and women (especially women) who have no agency and who are merely numbers in the government's scheme of things. This is especially likely given that the book was written in 1977, soon after the Emergency in India, the period during which the family planning programme reached its pinnacle in coercion and ill treatment.

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16. Summary: R.K. Narayan's novel is set in his fictional town of Malgudi in South India and centres around three principal characters and three personality and ideological types: the God-fearing, tradition-obsessed aunt, her conventionally rational and conventionally proper nephew Raman who is a painter of signs, and the newcomer who barges into his life, the impatient, opinionated, 'modern' and strong-willed government family planning worker, Daisy. While the tensions between these three prototypes are played out with Narayan's signature lightness of touch, they do nevertheless also bring home to the reader the ways in which the outward passivity and insularity of small-town life are repeatedly jolted. Particular attention is paid to the role of supposedly controllable passions in these jolts as tradition confronts modernity and emotional meekness confronts desire. Published in 1977, the novel uses the recent Emergency in India and especially the aggressive population control programme of that period as backdrop as well as a metaphor for a new kind of modern, rational nationalism in which the collective good is conflated with individual welfare. For example, Daisy sees no contradiction between wanting to improve women's lives and wanting the country's population growth to slow down. Neither is she coyly troubled about being an Indian woman at the same time as she is a government employee whose work requires mixing with strange men and talking to women and families about intimate things like sex and reproduction. Unsurprisingly, Raman and Daisy's affair ends sadly.

But a reader of this novel who is also familiar with the Cairo rhetoric will have a hard time reconciling its perspective with the tone of the novel. Is R.K. Narayan misrepresenting the situation in the name of artistic freedom? I do not think so. I think he is instead taking an implicit lesson from critical demography's complaint that professional demography is lacking in nuance and context. Indeed, one could ask if the feminist and post-ICPD critique of demographic research (which echoes this complaint from critical demography) in fact falls prey to the very mistake it castigates mainstream demography for making, when it broad-brushes government vices in general and family planning programmes in particular.

R.K. Narayan, on the other hand, places Daisy and the family planning programme in the larger cultural and social context of the location of his novel. The action in this book takes place in a small town and its surrounding villages in South India (a region that did not actually face the kind of oppressive family planning campaign that the North did during the Emergency). Fertility has always been lower here than in the North and women have historically had more autonomy than in the North. (These are all facts that the demographic literature acknowledges and yet they do not enter the critique of national family planning programmes that Cairo and its predecessors and followers generated.) Just as individual behaviour is embedded in larger institutional structures, so is something institutional like a family planning programme embedded in its own institutional and social context. Narayan gets this point; many single-minded critics of national population policies do not. And that is why it is not unrealistic at all when the villagers Daisy is trying to 'help' talk back to her, drive her to tears, and yet offer her their hospitality too.<sup>17</sup> One could say that R.K. Narayan is engaging in a critique of politically correct critical demography.

Such contextualization is also evident in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*<sup>18</sup> and Rushdie's short story *The Free Radio*, in which the horrors of the family

17. In any case, Daisy believes in agency. She is no supporter of incentives for family planning (bangles in this case); 'They must understand what they are doing and not be enticed in this childish manner' (p. 143).

18. Summary: Set in the city of Mumbai during the 1977 Emergency in India, and with flashbacks to as long ago as 1947, this bleak novel describes the past histories of and current interdependencies between four characters thrown into a joint residence. They are a widow whose professional ambitions were thwarted for the usual gendered reasons and whose happy marriage was too brief to make up for these losses; her boarder who is a young student from the hills who has come to the city to study refrigeration technology to improve his job prospects at home; and her employees who are an uncle-nephew pair of tailors from a village in Central India seeking to escape the caste discrimination of home in the anonymity of the city. Individually and collectively this foursome is the tragic receptacle of all the ills — including the barbaric compulsory sterilization programme — of the intrusive Indian state during the Emergency. However, the horrors are described in deceptively gentle language (in contrast to the violent imagery in *The Dark Road*) that nevertheless succeeds (or perhaps it succeeds for that very reason) in vividly capturing the ruthlessness of that chapter in the country's history.

planning programme during the Emergency are set in unnamed but patently North Indian villages. Ma Jian does the same kind of contextualization in his story based on the one-child policy in China. In particular it underlines ambiguities that are ignored in demographic writings on son preference and daughter 'aversion' (Borooah and Iyer, 2004). As evident in the brief description earlier in this article, *The Dark Road* is particularly at pains to elaborate the negotiated, manipulated and often unexpected local fall-outs of distant policy, matters on which anthropologists like Greenhalgh (1994) have written. The novel also addresses the evolution of fertility preferences which has been demonstrated by statisticians like Hesketh et al. (2005).

Shriver's *Game Control*<sup>19</sup> is a thriller. But it is realistic in having both good guys and bad guys even in the population aid and population control fields. This book is a fictional critique of the motives and obsession of population studies in its mid-twentieth century heyday and the writer obviously knows enough about the population activities funding world to make the story more than half believable.

Vikram Seth's poems also evoke critical demography: they take on the methods of mainstream demographic research and give faces and emotions to the people who end up as identity-less numbers in our anonymous survey questionnaires. Again, something that critiques of professional demographers have been concerned with, albeit less poignantly. Seth's poem on child mortality in particular can be thought of as the literary counterpart of the anthropological book *Death Without Weeping* by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992).

Besides doing (their own brand of) critical demography, in all the works listed in Appendix 1B, the underlying demographic facts are less in-your-face than they are in the first set of books examined.

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19. Summary: Eleanor Merritt, a 38-year-old emotionally insecure but politically well-meaning American family planning worker in Kenya, is appalled by but cannot help falling in love with Calvin Piper, a disgraced former aid worker who has strong views on population growth in poor countries and the need to find more drastic ways to curb this. The AIDS epidemic is not drastic enough; moreover it kills off the young and productive, instead of the very young and the infirm. To this end, Piper is working on a secret plan to develop a drug for more effective population control, a plan that resonates negatively with Eleanor but not negatively enough to destroy her love for him and her consequent determination to save the world from him and to save him for herself. The third angle to the intensely academic arguments on the merits of population control versus reproductive health versus population growth is provided by Wallace Threadgill, who researches the positive side of increasing numbers of people, even in poor countries. This threesome dissects and debates the population question in ways that would be stupefying if they weren't also often darkly funny and if the improbable love story did not sustain our curiosity, which it does. The characters are not always entirely credible and certainly not very lovable, but the underlying idea of compassion fatigue rings very true.

## PUBLIC IMPACT OF FICTIONALIZED PUBLIC DEMOGRAPHY

At its best, fiction generates public discourses; at the very least, it evokes individual-level responses. To get a — admittedly limited — sense of the potential impact of fiction that uses ideas from demography, I consulted the reader reviews of the books on this list published on the readily accessible websites of Goodreads.com and Amazon.com. I am interested in how lay readers<sup>20</sup> on these reviewer-friendly websites respond to these books, and I am interested in their response to the demographic information in the books, not in their ratings of the literary merits of the books.

Reader responses of course do not give an unmediated account of the effect of a work of fiction. As the small but significant literature on the sociology of literature and the large literature on popular culture emphasize, readers are not passive recipients of what authors write (Griswold, 1993). They bring their own expectations and understandings to a book, expectations and understandings that are influenced by a variety of attributes, including gender, class, nationality, life experience and personal proclivities.<sup>21</sup> The significance of prior perspectives is best illustrated by the conflicting views evident in the reader responses to *The Dark Road* on goodreads.com. While many of the reviews decry the human rights abuses detailed in the book, just as many dwell on the undesirable alternative scenario of a China with a more benign population policy and a population twice as large as its present size.

Collapsing website reviews without references to the date of each review also limits my understanding of the differential impact of a book at different political and social moments in history: it is very likely that Rushdie's short story struck a very different chord immediately after the Indian Emergency compared to more unemotional readings two decades later. Ideally, one would have liked to include an archival search of reviews by professional critics as well as lay readers at the actual time of publication of a book, but such a project is beyond the scope of the present article. At the same time, the strong responses to *The Dark Road* (which only came out in 2013) and the fact that many of the responses to *The Camp of the Saints* are fairly recent, suggests that the third world 'population problem' is a subject of enduring interest. Indeed it might even be of greater interest these days with the very public post-Millennium Development Goals mantra of 'sustainable development' giving it an added impetus.

At the supply end too, the literature on the production of culture describes the ways in which cultural products (works of fiction in the present case)

20. From the content of their comments I assume that these are 'lay' readers, but I acknowledge that this might be an erroneous assumption.

21. Indeed these characteristics influence not just how a book is read and/or interpreted, but also the prior decision to read a particular book (or even to read anything at all) and then, having read it, the decision to post a review.

are created, promoted, targeted and explained to different publics, processes that are again affected by the producers' own expectations and understandings of the times and of reader preferences (Long, 1985). Given all these constraints, the following paragraphs offer only the beginnings of an analysis of the potential impact of the public demography transmitted through fiction.

The first conclusion from this rudimentary analysis is that books in the first category — the more openly provocative books — generate several times more reader reviews than those in the second group.<sup>22</sup> One can only speculate whether this means that these books attract more readers or merely that more readers are affected or incensed enough to post reviews. It cannot be that the books in Appendix 1A have a larger number of reviews because they are easier to read — *The Camp of the Saints* is not easier than *The Painter of Signs* by any definition of ease.

The second and more important finding is that those books that seem to use a story largely, and often merely, as a prop to do exactly what the detractors of mainstream demography accuse it of doing — construct a meta-narrative that is indifferent to the micro-level nuances of human experience — get a demographic message across much more easily than the books that can be situated within the tradition of Critical Demography. That is, it is the demography-related message of these books that readers have the strongest reaction to, which thus constitutes an influential branch of the public demography that this article is about. In fact, in an ironic twist to the notion of 'life' imitating 'art', Patrick Buchanan's *Death of the West* (2002) cites *The Camp of the Saints* to support his thesis — though he calls it 'history imitating art' — because to him the book's fiction has already become fact.<sup>23</sup>

Books in the second category receive reader reviews that are serious and thoughtful enough, but they nevertheless often seem to miss the demographic gestures that inform the books. Readers are less likely to 'get' the demographic underpinnings of these books than they are of the books in the first category. Paradoxically, this might be the result of a 'good' story diverting readers from the underlying lesson in demography; but it might also be that (1) the author is using the demography as a prop to tell a story; and (2) these books merely confirm the suspicion that a more nuanced public demography is difficult to do for any practitioner.

It is possible that one reason for this skewed reader response is related to writer intent: authors writing the first kind of book seem more likely, in my

22. There is one exception: Mistry's *A Fine Balance* has the largest number of reviews, running into several thousands. But that can perhaps be explained by the fact that the book was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for her Book Club.

23. Incidentally, the largely glowing reader reactions to *The Camp of the Saints* includes one person calling it the 'most important literary work this century', and another wanting it to be 'required reading in every high school'.

reading, to want to get a strong message across, thus more often than not the storyline is a prop. These are polemical books, and not overly eager to disguise the polemics. But there is the demand side as well. Perhaps there is a kernel of truth to the cynical ruminations of one of the characters in *Beatrice* on public opinion and how it is formed: ‘You must think of public opinion as some bulky individual lying asleep. From time to time, he wakes up with a start, and you must take advantage of this to whisper an idea in his ear, but only the simplest, most concise idea, for he’s already stretching himself, turning over, yawning, he’s going to fall asleep again and you won’t be able to keep him awake or awaken him again’ (p. 87).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

By their very nature, the social sciences deal with matters that are the staple of literature and so fiction can be an important source of intellectual inspiration or a way to provide some kind of triangulation of statistical or academic findings. While the use of literary quotes at the start of research articles is common, Coser’s (1963) assertion that introductory courses in sociology could benefit from incorporating pertinent examples from fiction into their syllabi has struck an audible chord only in the last couple of decades (see, for example, Cosbey, 1997; Eriksen, 2005; Hegtvedt, 1991; Hendershott and Wright, 1993). More recently, Lewis et al. (2008) and Bookman and Bookman (2009) have tried to make a case for development studies and for economics to turn to fiction for theoretical ideas and empirical insights to enrich the methods of traditional economics.

However, the focus of this article was on the *reverse* direction of influence between literature and social science. Every now and then, one reads a novel or short story that is clearly using knowledge or research generated by a formal social science discipline. In such a case, one might guess that while the reader of such fiction may or may not have an overt interest in the social science discipline thus being explicated, she must nevertheless come away with some good or bad social science knowledge, conscious or sub-conscious, after having read what is on the surface simply a good (or bad) story.

Such dissemination of social science knowledge through non-academic channels is especially important for the discipline of demography because demographic research and teaching can create significant *public* ripples. For one thing, demography cannot escape its social engineering origins or its continuation in contemporary times, although it may often proclaim its neutrality and its objectivity. Indeed, while the discipline does stress the neutrality and objectivity of its *methods* of research, it does not really claim neutrality in the choice of the ‘problems’ it seeks to analyse or the irrelevance of the findings of such analyses to real-world policy. If anything, the discipline and much of the funding and other support that drives it

makes it well-nigh impossible for demographers to do research for purely intellectual or pleasurable reasons. A section called ‘policy implications’ is mandatory for grant proposals in demography to virtually any agency and almost mandatory in articles submitted for publication in academic journals.

The academic literature on the impact of fiction on the popular imagination posits that fiction can, more effectively than a set of facts and figures, serve the function of *public education* — through improving the reader’s understanding of social reality — and bring about *social engineering* — through altering or even transforming one’s understanding of social reality and then inspiring personality or behavioural change to fit better with this new understanding (for theoretical and experimental support on this, see, for example, Djikic et al., 2009; Kulken et al., 2004). At a very basic level, both these effects occur because fiction induces the reader to put herself in the shoes of the character(s)/narrator in a story. To illustrate with a simple example relevant to the present article, reading a compelling story about the travails of a family with several children or one that lives in a country with high population density might make one more conscious of the ‘problem’ of population growth or large family size. In turn, this could also make one consider or decide to have just one child oneself and/or to support international family planning programmes more actively than one might otherwise have done.

The findings of this article on the academic demography to be learned from fiction are more ambiguous. It appears both from an analysis of the works of fiction that seem to be transmitting demographic knowledge and from the accessible reactions of readers of these works that when the message fulfils the criteria of what constitutes critical demography, the story may be effective but the message is lost. It seems that only when the fiction replicates all the sins of academic demography does the casual reader wake up, respond, and internalize the sound bites of population research fed to him.

I end this article with the book it began with, Ma Jian’s *The Dark Road*,<sup>24</sup> because it singly illustrates all that this article is about. As the section above indicated, the novel is about life under the one-child policy in China, but also about life in all its complexity. In the reviews of this book, however, readers are uniformly struck by just one end of its explication of population issues in China: the ferocity and brutality of the one-child policy<sup>25</sup> (beside, as mentioned above, a significant minority that is instead more worried about the rapid population growth that the absence of this policy might lead to). There is little or no response to the hugely complicated changes of direction and heart that occur as its characters resist this policy. While this could be partly due to the lurid descriptions in the opening chapters of the book, it is

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24. I have deliberately put *The Dark Road* in both my categories in Appendix 1, as different parts of this novel can legitimately be placed in different categories of my classification.

25. Indeed, many of these reviewers exhale a sigh of relief at not being born in China!

more likely a reflection of the proposition in this article that, even in fiction, dramatic and fearsome ‘facts’ are easier to relate to than more complicated and ambiguous renderings of individual life experiences.<sup>26</sup>

## APPENDIX I

### A: Fiction as Mainstream Demography

Gunter Grass (1982) *Headbirths or The Germans Are Dying Out*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Ma Jian (2013) *The Dark Road*, translated by Flora Drew. New York: Penguin.

Amin Maalouf (1995) *The First Century after Beatrice*. New York: G. Braziller.

Jean Raspail (1975) *The Camp of the Saints*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.

Alice Walker (1992) *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

### B: Fiction as Critical Demography

Ma Jian (2013) *The Dark Road*, translated by Flora Drew. New York: Penguin.

Rohinton Mistry (1996) *A Fine Balance*. New York: A.A. Knopf.

R.K. Narayan (1976) *The Painter of Signs*. New York: Viking Press.

Salman Rushdie (1994) ‘The Free Radio’, in *East West*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Vikram Seth (1985) ‘Research in Jiangsu Province’ in *The Humble Administrator’s Garden*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.

Vikram Seth (1985) ‘The Accountant’s House’ in *The Humble Administrator’s Garden*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.

Lionel Shriver (1994) *Game Control*. London: Faber and Faber.

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26. I end this paper with a footnote because it is so speculative: one wonders if there is a clue in my sense after reading these books that there is too little humour in the literature that could serve as public demography. There are exceptions of course (Shriver’s *Game Control* and Narayan’s *Painter of Signs* come to mind), but most of the other books are too earnest or too angry. There is too little poking of fun at demographers and demography; perhaps this absence of humour lies at the heart of the failure of these books more than their polemics or even their rare attempt at some kind of nuanced Critical Demography. There seems to be much more irreverence in economics novels and anthropology novels and in sociology novels as well (see Kramer, 1979).

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