Review of Queer Data Studies

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*Queer Data Studies* is a critically important work examining the relationship between data and queer subjects. Published as part of the University of Washington Press’s Feminist Technosciences series, the volume grapples with the evolving role data plays in the lives of queer individuals, the friction caused by the binary categorization of data, and how ethical concerns related to topics such as privacy and consent materialize when analyzing queer data. Utilizing a generous definition of data, including “archival data, stories, intimacies, sounds, research data, medical data, police data, maps, and algorithmic modeling, to name only a few,” editor Patrick Keilty advocates for a nuanced and strategic approach to queer data studies (2). Acknowledging the queer community’s historic lack of bodily autonomy and subsequent lack of data sovereignty, and the increasing urgency surrounding contemporary data politics for queer individuals, *Queer Data Studies* highlights the often ambivalent, and at times hostile, relationship between queer individuals and data. In analyzing a variety of ways in which queer data can be harnessed by and for queer individuals, as well as its constant potential for reinvention, this volume encourages readers to rethink what constitutes queer data and how queer subjects choose to interact with a world where surveillance and datafication are increasingly regarded as the norm.

Containing ten chapters from eleven contributors, most of whom are emerging scholars, the book touches on a wide range of disciplines, including, but not limited to, cinema studies, anthropology, communications, history, gender studies, and media studies (6). The concerted inclusion of emerging scholars serves as a form of queerness itself, providing largely unheard voices a platform in which to present novel research. Each essay provides a distinct, multidisciplinary perspective through the lens of a case study. At times, the volume feels disjointed due to the various disciplines discussed, with limited similarities in methodology surfacing across case studies. However, this diversity also underscores the wide-reaching implications of queer data studies across fields within the applied sciences, humanities, and social sciences.

Originally published in 2016 in *Black Queer Studies*, chapter 1, “Black Data,” includes an added preface to account for Black and queer texts that have emerged since its original publication. In this chapter, Shaka McGlotten acknowledges the entrenched relationship between queer data studies and queer of color critique. Using examples of Black queer practices as forms of “black data,” the essay examines how these practices are “tied to opacity, defacement, and encryption” in reaction to the rise of big data (38). McGlotten concludes with an exploration of how Black queers interact with and challenge the exploitative operations of big data and considers how “black data” constitute forms of resistance against calls for increased surveillance and transparency.

Written by Nikita Shepard, chapter 2, “‘To Fight for an End to Intrusions into the Sex Lives of Americans’: Gay and Lesbian Resistance to Sexual Surveillance and Data Collection,” examines historic queer movement’s relationship to the politics of queer opacity and data. The essay traces a path from increased sexual surveillance in the post–World War II era to the homophile movement’s resistance to sexual surveillance to the 1970s and calls for an end to all data collection by government bodies (52–68). Shepard ultimately examines the contemporary acceptance of datafication in exchange for greater societal acceptance and visibility, and ponders if the desire for
queer opacity in the 1970s can be reclaimed and serve as a path for queer liberation from modern sexual surveillance and data collection.

In chapter 3, “Machine Learning and the Queer Technics of Opacity,” Gary Kafer places machine learning in conversation with the concepts of opacity and queer technics to understand their relationship to systems of power, specifically big data. Utilizing as a lens the k-nearest neighbor (k-NN) algorithm, a non-parametric-supervised machine-learning method used for classification and regression, Kafer considers how the conditions of opacity intersect with machine learning, ultimately arguing that “opacity reveals how the technical limits of machine learning are bracketed by the way sociopolitical difference is made legible within computation systems of classification” (99). The essay concludes by contemplating how opacity in machine learning can serve to disrupt and oppose transparency in the economy of big data.

Chapter 4, “Objectionable Nipples: Puritanical Data Politics and Sexual Agency in Social Media,” studies the content governance policies of Meta (formerly known as Facebook) in relation to the female nipple to understand a modern puritanical data politics that polices female bodies online and deems them as “sites of obscenity and risk” (122). Written by Susanna Faasonen and Jenny Sundén, the essay utilizes the Free the Nipple movement as a case study, exploring how the movement, while attempting to subvert prudish data politics, simultaneously reproduces them with its focus on desexualizing the female nipple. The chapter concludes with a call for transformative data politics, ideally ones based in “sex-positive, queer brands of feminism that embrace a wide variety of bodies, genders, sexual expressions, orientations, desires, and pleasures” (121).

In chapter 5, “HIV Data as Queer Data: Biomedical Sexualities, Treatment-as-Prevention, and the New Sex Hierarchy for People Living with HIV,” Stephen Molldrem theorizes HIV data as queer data. In this model, “data are queer when they come to bear on the sexual subjectivity of a data subject” (133). Through analysis of three U.S.-based HIV governance programs following the treatment-as-prevention strategy, he demonstrates how different classes of collected HIV care data are “central to the production of sexual subjectivities” and have subsequently created a new sex hierarchy for those living with HIV (143). He concludes the essay with an eye toward “HIV data justice,” where those living with and affected by HIV will have increased power over their data and how that information is used within the context of the healthcare system, and providing them greater access to services on their own terms.

Ryan Conrad examines data security issues associated with third-party platforms utilized by male sex workers in the commercial sex industry in chapter 6, “Generated Vulnerability: Male Sex Workers, Third Party Platforms, and Data Security”. In comparing third-party platforms, such as Rentboy.com and Rent.men, to sex worker–owned cooperatives such as Ottawa Independent Companions (OIC), Conrad underscores the importance of “mutualism, shared power, and collective care” in queer data practices, especially when it comes to the safety and security of sex workers (168).

Chapter 7, “Not Enough Meaningful Data? Lessons from Eastern Europe,” explores the potential for queer data extraction and documentation to serve as a method to document queer lives in places where they have been diluted or annihilated. Outcomes from this process function not only to document the history of hidden queer lives but also to undermine exploitative surveillance
practices and the subsequent misuse of queer data. Referencing author Lina Žigelytė’s personal experience creating a digital mapping project documenting queer history in their birthplace of Vilnius, Lithuania, this essay contains practical data lessons and can serve as a toolkit for other queer data practitioners and projects.

“Reciprocating Sexy Information: Reflections on Studying the Data of Gay Sex in Beirut,” chapter 8, considers the ethical questions surrounding “how to ethnographically engage with other people’s data” (207). Through the lens of author Matthew Gagné’s own experience conducting ethnographic research into the lives of queer men using dating and sex apps in Beirut, Lebanon, this essay investigates the ethics of reciprocity, visibility, and discretion, as well as the need for sexual reflexivity as a methodological practice when directly engaging with the information of others via digitally mediated networks. Gagné’s reflections serve as a practical exploration on how researchers can sensitively and ethically conduct ethnographic research in queer communities with fraught sociopolitical conditions.

Written by Harris Kornstein, chapter 9, “Homobiles: Queering Data through Ephemerality and Intimacy,” presents the app Homobiles, a ride-sharing app aimed at queer individuals, as “a case study of a low-tech service by and for queer and trans people that demonstrates strategies for queering popular technologies and their collection, storage, and use of data” (229). Through analysis of Homobiles history as a harm reduction service, and comparisons to other, corporate, data-driven services, such as Uber and Lyft, Kornstein demonstrates how a failure to scale and mimic the “traditional” data practices can in itself be a form of queerness, and looks toward a potential queer future where other companies mimic Homobiles approach to data.

The final chapter of this volume, “Situated Indications: Queer STS Experiments on Global Datafication,” questions the current call to fill the LGBTQI data gap, arguing such datafication upholds existing hegemonic structures. Author Suisui Wang calls for “expanding our toolbox when approaching data as a queer object” and suggests integrating feminist science and technology studies (STS) “to cultivate a non-innocent sensibility and an experimental mode of engagement” (254). Ultimately, Wang proposes the concept of “situated indices,” a series of “data and narrative practices that bounce between situations in an uneven topography to elevate positioned LGBTQI experiences and find common contexts of struggle” as a paradigm through which to practice datafication queerly, separate from hegemonic and “colonial logics of extraction” (272).

*Queer Data Studies* has a number of strengths and weaknesses. Its primary strength is its ability to function as a pioneering work on queer data studies; it is sure to function as a seminal text in this burgeoning field of study. Additional strengths include the text’s multidisciplinary approach, its dedication to promoting the research of emerging scholars, and each author’s comprehensive engagement with scholars from a wide array of fields. The volume’s primary weakness lies in its prevailing focus on North America, which the editor acknowledges in his introduction, and the lack of research on some queer identities, such as trans individuals. The majority of contributors are “English-speaking, mostly North American settler scholars” (12). Out of ten chapters, only chapters 7 and 8 include perspectives and/or data from outside North America. Furthermore, only four out of twelve contributors (including the editor) were born outside of North America, and only two contributors currently work outside of North America.
While some authors in the volume touch on the relationship between trans studies and queer theory at various points, the book does not include a thorough analysis of trans individuals’ relationships to data (7). Similarly, it lacks analysis of the relationship between nonbinary individuals and data, as well as asexual individuals and data. These groups in particular are often overlooked or marginalized, even within the queer community, and research into their relationships to data is especially important as a result. These gaps provide avenues for further scholarship and the opportunity to construct a more comprehensive perspective on queer data studies.

*Queer Data Studies* serves as catalyst for future research interrogating the role data plays in queer lives, the biopolitics of surveillance, and the methods by which queer data can either be harnessed or ignored by and for queer subjects. Although the volume does not provide a truly global perspective on queer data studies, it still serves as a rich introduction to a complex, rapidly evolving field of study. In the end, the volume does not put forward a definitive approach to queer data studies but rather explores a number of potential approaches to demonstrate the vast assortment of fields and methodologies to which queer data studies is applicable. While some may find it lacking due to the absence of concrete answers, those who acknowledge the sprawling potential of queer data studies will find the text compelling and thought-provoking.