

Anthropology against, of, and with data practices

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The past years have seen a surge in anthropological studies of data. For someone who is relatively new to the topic, Rachel Douglas-Jones, Antonia Walford and Nick Seaver's edited collection, *Towards an anthropology of data*, provided a most helpful sample of how inquiry into data can contribute to the discipline in original ways.

The introduction underscores how the study of data requires that we revisit classic anthropological concepts – e.g., kinship, value, and personhood – while productively challenging our ways of understanding them. The editors put this succinctly: “discourses, practices, and imaginaries of data are configuring and inflecting the familiar in unfamiliar or surprising ways” (10). Data, therefore, offers “a generative site of anthropological theory building” (10).

The tension between the old and the new is recurring. This contrast is also reflected in how data is sometimes spoken of emically: it is informed by ideologies of objectivity while simultaneously pointing at immense complexity; it draws on familiar modes of quantification whilst also harbouring revolutionary potentials. In the meantime, the uses that people make of data to re-apprehend themselves and their worlds turn data into a thoroughly relational and socially constituted phenomenon. Qualitative methods can indeed be seen as a counterpart to data and thus encourage a disposition against datafication. Yet, the nine essays that follow seek to treat data primarily as something that can provoke conceptual re-theorization, asking what it does not merely what is built into it.

The first essay by Vijayanka Nair examines India's *Aadhaar*, the world's largest biometric identification system. Through the processes whereby enrollees become data, *Aadhaar* re-stages a tension between individuality and dividuality; biometric technologies serve as "tools for a purifying ritual" (35) indifferent to collective identities, meanwhile becoming enmeshed with familiar sociality and yielding new modes of belonging. The next essay attends to spatializing techniques in analyses of cultural data. By drawing on fieldwork with developers of music recommender systems, Nick Seaver elicits data's "reality-producing effects" (45) irrespective of its representational accuracy. At stake here are representations of culture as mappable space, which limn "genre" and "taste" through their spatial location. An interlocutor's contention that "[e]verything lies in space" (58) becomes the basis for discussing Euclidean imaginaries among social theorists, for instance in notions such as fields of power and analogies between proximity and similarity.

The third case study on the datafication of nature at a natural history museum in Berlin centers on how data becomes enmeshed with temporalizing projects. Tahani Nadim demonstrates how attempts to speed up the process of taxonomic research in the face of rapid biodiversity loss brings into view not only various scales and (dis)connections, but likewise natural history's relation to imperial formations. The essay unveils "the sociocultural and historical specificities and contingencies within data" (73) by tapping into a number of tensions at stake in digital salvage taxonomy: between the big and the small, taxonomic and relational precision, and decontextualization and recontextualization, among others, showing how these often go hand-in-hand. A.R.E. Taylor's essay also deals with temporality, albeit by looking at Cold War, nuclear bunkers repurposed as data storage sites for cloud computing providers. Through a tour at a UK-based bunker, the author explores how "future-proofing" involves the construction of certain temporal imaginaries. For bunkered data storage to become meaningful for clients, companies need to dismantle visions of "data transcendence" (90) and instead enact the materiality and fragility of data by grounding the cloud. Along the way, companies conjure and concretize both a sense of resilience and future threat.

Next, Cori Hayden reflects on social media in connection to old and resurgent debates around crowd formations, emotional contagion, and social dissolution. Clouds crowd not only by virtue of the size, scope, or scale of data practices, but also modes of connection: "the forms of similarity and even 'susceptibility' through which data points, people, ideas, suggestions, are both generated and brought into contact with each other" (101). By critically examining

Gustave Le Bon's problematic anxiety over the power of crowds, Hayden interrogates classic distinctions between correlation and causation, message and medium, and input and environmental surround. Hannah Knox explores how "the hack" can serve as a model for doing anthropology. Drawing on fieldwork among citizens in Manchester who try to make sense of data produced by sensors and monitors, the essay moves beyond distinctions between data as "socially constructed representations" and "direct signs of an underlying reality" (109). The citizens' uses of data did "not so much reveal truths as reveal ambivalences" that generated new questions and social relations. Knox's is an anthropology *with* data practices -- an exercise in learning from data practitioners in seeing otherwise and forging new relations.

The following essay by Antonia Walford works with two sets of comparison to elicit how data is often defined by its potential, "valued as a form of social relation that has not happened yet" (128). A first comparison, between data processing among scientists in the Brazilian Amazon and ova donations in the United Kingdom, helps to challenge understandings of data as extraction, instead framing data processing as a form of reproductive labour. A second comparison, between big data infrastructures and genomics, serves to interrogate the idea of "openness" in open data. Together, these comparisons encourage a critical engagement not with the way data is reductive but with data as potential. Sarah Blacker's study explores Indigenous data compositions that can be policy-relevant without becoming subsumed by Western science. Through a "'three-track' methodology" (142), First Nation communities presented data about environmental contamination produced by the oil industry in Alberta, bringing their knowledge into conversation with dominant data paradigms by translating the former "*just enough* to enable recognition" (147). The essay demonstrates how one might develop methodologies that push beyond normative modes of data production.

The last essay by Rachel Douglas-Jones examines how bodies of data are thought of as a means to knowledge about physical bodies and bodies politic. Concerned with the exhortation "getting to know your data self," the essay draws out "often tacit assumptions about where data comes from, where it goes, how it is 'us' (or not us)," including how it "is thought to be or stand in for larger wholes" (160). In the examples, the data sought for self-knowledge differs; the use and movement of data provides it with new meanings. A short afterword by Bill Maurer makes use of the analogy between data and money to highlight data's transformative potential, from which its value often derives. Fittingly, *Towards an anthropology of data* concludes with the

suggestion that we “bring the data *forward*, switch figure and ground” (174), so as to, perhaps, “set in motion alternative values” (175).

The continuity of older methods of quantification suggest that data might not be so revolutionary after all. Even so, the essays variously demonstrate how new data practices transform what counts as data, which does indeed point at certain kinds of change. And while data practices do reproduce older forms of listing, specifying, and counting, it is difficult to tell, without situated ethnographic inquiry, what exact forms governance and power take in diverse settings. Anthropologists seeking generative approaches to data will find in this collection a broad and inspiring array of examples.

Chakad Ojani received his PhD in social anthropology from the University of Manchester. His doctoral research was an ethnographic study of fog capture in coastal Peru. Chakad is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, where he is undertaking a project on outer space infrastructures and imaginaries in Sweden.



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