REVIEW: Rebecca Lemov. *Database of Dreams: The Lost Quest to Catalog Humanity*

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REVIEWS

Rebecca Lemov. *Database of Dreams: The Lost Quest to Catalog Humanity*. 354pp. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Jennifer Fraser^{*}

2015 was a big year for “Big Data.” In February filming began on *Snowden*, a dramatized version of the life of the National Security Agency whistleblower who, in 2013, made a series of revelations about American domestic surveillance practices. In June, Angela Merkel argued that Germany should get on board with large-scale information collection or “risk being left behind in the global Big Data gold rush” (Marr 2015). Finally, November saw the world premiere of *Spectre*, the latest addition to the James Bond franchise. In this fast-paced spy flick, Bond battles a multinational data processing network called “Nine Eyes” that threatens to collect and analyze metadata about the electronic lives of the world’s population.

Aside from popular culture and politics, Big Data also became a topic of interest for many historians of science. The year 2015 saw the publication of many scholarly works that historicize the data sciences, one of the most prominent being Rebecca Lemov’s *Database of Dreams: The Lost Quest to Catalog Humanity*. Like Merkel, Snowden, and Bond, Lemov grapples with the emergence of data-driven modes of knowledge production. However, rather than examining the cultural and political consequences of collecting, processing, and storing large amounts of information, Lemov looks at the material culture of Big Data, focusing especially on the tools and technologies that comprised the “database of dreams.” This little-known effort to create and preserve sociological knowledge was carried out by the Harvard-trained social science researcher Bert Kaplan during the mid-twentieth century, and was one of the first attempts to capture and preserve the raw data of psychologists involved in the culture and personality movement. By examining the communities involved in building this behavioural science databank, and the lists, forms, filing systems, and storage facilities necessary to make this information legible, Lemov sheds light on how the dream of

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“total data management” came to be applied to the behavioural sciences during the late 1940s to 1960s.

In order to uncover this “lost history of data” (p. 1) Lemov divides her work into ten sections, with each portion describing a tool or technology that contributed to Bert Kaplan’s effort to create his dream repository. Starting with the paper technologies that made this kind of research possible, *Database of Dreams* charts the history of projective tests, dream analyses, and life history interviews (Section 1). Highlighting how these research methods not only provided social scientists with the means of capturing the inner lives of entire populations, but also large amounts of paperwork, Lemov demonstrates how sociological methods and materials converged to produce a new kind of data that was able to reveal the inner lives of diverse individuals (Section 2).

After chronicling how dream data came to be produced, *Database of Dreams* explores mid-twentieth century ideas about how these materials should be preserved. To do this, Lemov charts Bert Kaplan’s personal trajectory and describes how he became interested in the large-scale collection and conservation of dream data. She also discusses the history of micro-techniques, and other storage technologies that made the preservation of large amounts of personal information possible (Sections 3-5).

The second half of the book recounts how Kaplan’s vision for a dream databank was actualized through the combined efforts of administrators (Section 6), anthropologists (Section 7), research participants (Section 8), and library scientists (Section 9). After making it clear that Kaplan’s archive was the end result of a congeries of techniques, tools, technologies, and individuals, Lemov concludes her work by reflecting on the ephemeral nature of data, and considering what Kaplan’s experiment in data collection tells us about past and present dreams of “total information” (Section 10).

It is hard to argue with Jamie Cohen-Cole’s assertion, quoted on the back cover of *Database of Dreams*, that Lemov’s book is well-researched and impressively argued. It is also as entertaining as it is informative. From Hermann Goering’s Rorschach test results, to Sherlock Holmes’s cameo in her chapter on microphotography, *Database of Dreams* delights readers at every turn. One area that I wish Lemov would have engaged with a little more is the existing literature on biocolonialism. In recent years, historians like Joanna Radin, Emma Kowal (2015), Kim TallBear (2013), and Warwick Anderson (2008) have started to consider the medical and economic value afforded to Indigenous body parts during the mid-to-late twentieth century. Although these historians have tended to focus their attention on biospecimens, such as DNA, blood, brains, and other frozen tissue sections, Kaplan’s dream data can also be seen as biocapital, as the collection, preservation and exchange of this introspective information is a form of embodied work performed by social scientists’ Indigenous research subjects. It would have been nice to

hear more about the socio-political consequences that mid-twentieth century data-mining practices had on the populations from which a large amount of sociological information was extracted.

That being said, *Database of Dreams* is beautifully written, and is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of information management, or in the social or behavioural sciences more generally. It also fits in nicely with the growing trend of treating today's "data deluge" as a historical phenomenon, as exemplified by historians like Dan Bouk (2015), Dana Simmons (2015), and the members of the new Max Planck working group on "Historicizing Big Data."

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