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Size Matters to Lesbians Too: Queer Feminist Interventions into the Scale of Big Data [pre-print]

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ABSTRACT

How can we recognize those whose lives and data become attached to the far-from-groundbreaking framework of "small data"? Specifically, how can marginalized people who do not have the resources to produce, self-categorize, analyze, or store "big data" claim their place in the big data debates? I examine the place of lesbians and queer women in the big data debates through the Lesbian Herstory Archive's not "big" enough lgbtq organizing history dataset—perhaps the largest dataset known to exist on lgbtq activist history—as one such alternative. A contribution to critical data studies, I take a queer feminist approach to the scale of big data by reading for the imbricated scales and situated knowledge of data.

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Alice Pieszecki (Leisha Hailey) claims that Los Angeles lesbians, bisexuals, and queers form a closely-knit network through sexual encounters and relationships. She draws a diagram to prove this to her friend Dana Fairbanks (Erin Daniels), another lesbian, who is shocked by the interrelated intimacy.

> Dana: It's like this whole crazy, tiny, little world.

> Alice: Crazy, yes. [Pauses.] But not tiny.

The camera pans up to a larger 6' x 3' hand-drawn chart on Alice's wall with over 100 women's names connected by lines. ("The L Word," Season 1, "Pilot (Pt 2)," 2004)

Alice's obsession with rendering the "not tiny" world of L.A. lesbians in "The L Word" demonstrates the labor necessary for lesbians and queers to confront their invisibilization: a requirement to constantly produce accumulated evidence of their lives, experiences, and spaces. Yet even before the first and, still, only (premium cable) network show about lesbians premiered in 2004, "more data were accumulated in 2002 than all previous years of human history combined" (Bail 2014, 465). Can "not tiny"-but-big-for-its-context data ever qualify as big enough? In this paper I address how size (of data) matters to lesbians too. My joke and, in actuality, insight reveals how the objective and scientific claims of big data gain validity through the measuring stick of masculinist, racist, and heteronormative structural

oppressions. Society's obsession with big data further oppresses the marginalized by creating a false norm to which they are never able to "measure up." A contribution to critical data studies, I take a queer feminist approach to the scale of big data by reading for the fluidity and situated knowledge of datasets.

My interest in how scale plays a role in the production of big data emerged from my years of archival research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA or Archives). Most data collected about lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (lgbtq) people throughout history has been used to pathologize and stigmatize. Lgbtq people and women could and sometimes still can leave few if any records of their lives. The LHA, in Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York—founded in 1974 by, for, and about lesbians to record their own history—is the largest and oldest lesbian archive in the world. In a time when bigger data is better data, I take up my work with the largest or one of the largest existing lgbtq record collections in existence. New York City is a particular world hub of lgbtq organizing and the outcomes of these data and my analyses provide groundbreaking understandings into lgbtq history in the city and beyond, as I will show.

However, detailed notes on all 382 NYC-based organizations during my period of study amount to, in the eyes of big data, a *mere* 789KB worth of data. If lgbtq activists, historians, scholars, and leaders and other marginalized groups cannot claim their data to be "big data," are they disavowed from claiming the equally large arguments or understandings big data is said to provide with their "small data"? Instead of simply rejecting the politics of scale in data's big-ness, I refute the big-small data binary to show how lesbian-queer data works in interdependent scales.[1] I suggest instead that big data must be sized up through its mythos, measurements, and the pace of its accumulation.

I apply a queer feminist approach to critical data studies, as it requires an acknowledgement of the absences in data as well as dimensions of power of who can form and define data. Rather than submit to the suggestion that the LHA organization collection data is "small data" and by extension less in measure and import than "big data," I offer ways to recognize the already marginalized and less studied lives, experiences, spaces, and histories of the oppressed in the moment of big data, including the poor, people of color, colonized, disabled, and lgbtq people. Instead, I suggest that new insights can be gained by accounting for multiple, nested, and imbricated scales of data.

Queer Feminist Critical Data Studies: On Scale & Big-Small Data

Drawing upon a queer feminist and critical geographic perspective, I argue that the scale of data must be read within the context and time in which it is and can be produced. Queer feminism affords me a way to intervene on behalf those who are invisibilized by hegemonic practices of data collection, analysis, and visualization.[2] Instead there exist a wide range of imbricated scales of data which upend the big-small data binary.

Manifold definitions of "big data" abound. I provide a framework for big data through the work of Rob Kitchin and danah boyd and Kate Crawford. Taking a primarily technical approach to the definition, Kitchin (2014) identifies seven features of big data: huge in volume, high in velocity, diverse in variety, exhaustive in scope, fine-grained in resolution, relational in nature, and flexible in both its extensionality and scalability. Kitchin absorbs boyd & Crawford's (2012) take on big data as a socio-technical phenomenon into his own schema. However, boyd and Crawford also point to big data's mythos, its least often addressed trait. The mythos, they suggest, is that "large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with

the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy" (boyd and Crawford 2012, 663). The mythos

characteristic remains underexplored by Kitchin and is the lynchpin to my arguments here.

"Small data" are then defined as an antithetical complement to big data. Small data

are "characterized by their generally limited volume, non-continuous collection, narrow

variety, and are usually generated to answer specific questions" (Kitchin and Lauriault

2015, 1). While small data are "popular and valuable" in "their utility in answering targeted

queries," Kitchin and Lauriault state that small data cannot contend with the infrastructures

or related/afforded analytics of real-time, indexical, and relational data (2015, 1). This

binary conceptualization fails to address the meaning and mythos within by relying purely on

literal technicalities to define big data.

Just as space is given meaning and power in the production of various scales of

space from the global to the intimate, so is data from big to small. Politics, positionality, and

power of data and spaces alike can be exposed by through the geographic concept of scale

(see Marston 2000). Scale is socially constructed through political and economic processes

that contribute to the processes of geographical uneven development. Geographer

Geraldine Pratt and literary theorist Victoria Rosner (2012) reimagined scale through an

interdisciplinary feminist lens to show how scales permeate and are nested within one

another. The authors refuse the local-global binary and its parallel feminine-masculine

pairing, and instead call for an examination of "the global and the intimate." Intimate

relations are simultaneously global and local, just as the global is experienced in and

through the intimate and all the scales in between.

Pratt and Rosner's contribution to the scale literature is also, I suggest, a queer

feminist approach. Unlike local-global or small-big dyads, the global and the intimate respect

feminist situated knowledges while being held in a queer tension that refutes binaries and

accounts for antinormativity and fluidity. The imbrication of the global and the intimate

reveal the ways that geographic scales infuse one another rather than replicate hierarchies

of injustice. A queer feminist approach therefore aims to reveal the obstruction of the

standpoints of those individuals within a dataset that afford deep understanding based on

who—or what algorithm—is reading data.

Relatedly, critical data studies (CDS) calls for an ethical consideration of data

collection and analysis practices.[3] Through the lens of CDS, data are "never simply neutral,

objective, independent, raw representations of the world, but are situated, contingent,

relational, contextual, and do active work in the world" (Kitchin and Lauriault 2014, 5).

Furthermore, Craig Dalton and Jim Thatcher (2014) stipulate that "data has always been

big" and "big isn't everything" as big data cannot answer all research questions, just as

studies of the global cannot alone define everyday intimacies and vice versa. CDS is

appealing as a queer feminist entry point for data studies because it exposes and intervenes

in injustice.

A deeper feminist intervention into data studies requires the recognition of the

embodied and affective in the production and analysis of big data with particular attention

how gender produces and is produced by data (see Kwan 2002; Pavlovskaya 2006;

Schuurman 2008; Leszczynski and Elwood 2015). I also apply a feminist intervention to

data studies in that data is both political and personal. A queer analytic adds to this

approach by refusing a wholly antinormative position to all binaries by showing the multiples

and ranges of everyday life that are imbricated and can be read as in tension rather than

opposition. Queer theory and activism come head-to-head with GIS technologies which rely

on frameworks of "positivism, realism, pragmatism, and Cartesian rationality" that also feed

into its data, algorithms, hardware, and software, as well as the interpretations of maps

(Brown and Knopp 2008, 48). Instead, the facts that define the maps of lgbtq history are contingent and perhaps never fully known (Brown and Knopp 2008). Admitting the unknown, partial histories and knowledge is a difficult admittance for data studies but a crucial act.

A queer feminist approach to data studies exists interdependently with other subjectivities such as race, class, gender, age, and ability. Examining art, politics, and performance as related to the lives of black queers, communications studies scholar Shaka McGlotten defines "black data" as the "historical and contemporary ways black people are interpolated by big data" (2016, 1). He reveals the political economies of big data: the practices by states and corporations "to capture, predict, and control political and consumer behavior" for "race is not merely an effect of capitalism's objectifying systems; rather, race is itself a co-constituting technology that made such forms of accounting possible in the first place" (2016, 3, 4). McGlotten argues that state statutes and policies that reproduce race and racism through the collection, control, and uneven analysis of this data. In step with this critique and also a contribution to critical data studies, states and corporations also reproduce heteronormative, sexist, able-ist, and ageist policies of surveillance and regulation through the assembly and examination of data (see Leszczynski 2015).

Recounting Lesbian-Queer History in the Lesbian Herstory Archives

Like queer theorist Christopher Nealon, I seek to piece together the "history of mutually isolated individuals, dreaming similar dreams" (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 179). My larger study addresses the shifts in lesbians' and queer women's spaces, economies, and cultures in New York City from 1983 to 2008. In other words, from the AIDS epidemic to the rise of internationally syndicated television drama "The L Word," how did lesbians' and queers'

experiences of justice and oppression shift over time? I use both "lesbians and queer

women" and "lesbian-queer" to encompass my participants' own identifications as well as

the women whose stories comprise my archival research.[4]

Along with years of research in the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York,

my project included group interviews with 47 self-identified lesbians and queer women who

came out during this period. This two-pronged approach of collecting primary and secondary

research provides for a vivid political and socioeconomic backdrop for the group

conversations. I foremost draw on the process of data acquisition and analysis of the

archival materials in this chapter, using group interview conversations as a lens through

which to map the shifts in these women's everyday lives, spaces, and economies.

Encompassing over a dozen types of records and various ephemera, the collections

include anything any self-identified lesbian, dyke, gay, bisexual, homosexual, Sapphic sistah,

and/or queer woman from anywhere in the world and from any time has ever touched,

owned, or produced. The LHA now resides in a historic brownstone townhome in Park Slope,

Brooklyn, purchased and paid off primarily through donations. The Archives is completely

volunteer-run and organized by "coordinators" who collect, save, and store these documents

and ephemera.

Scholars, archivists, and other proponents of the digital humanities work tirelessly

toward the digitization of archives, almost always facing severe issues with funding and

labor (see De Meo 2014). The LHA data shows, as Trevor Barnes writes, that big data "is

presented as if it were disconnected from the past, removed from issues or problems that

went before" (Barnes 2013, 297). Yet archives reveal that we have always collected big data

about the past. While the LHA is hard at work on their own digitization (McKinney 2014), in

this paper I am particularly interested in subsets or collections of data that have a stake in but are unaddressed in the big data conversations.

As I already mentioned, most historical data about lgbtq people has only been used to stigmatize and pathologize so that this group left comparably few records behind or did so with great courage. My period of study from 1983 to 2008 covers very extreme differences in lgbtq lives, spaces, and cultures in the US. The 1980s represent one of the most severe periods of legal, religious, political, economic, and social persecution during the first years of AIDS epidemic. Then there is a small shift into the rise of radical queer theory alongside more mainstream gay and lesbian market in the 1990s. Finally, the 2000s indicates a period of increased tolerance if not acceptance with increased media portrayals and slow legislative and political changes. Regardless, throughout this period and even today, everyday microaggressions against and other structural oppressions upon lgbtq people continue. As such, my dataset must be read within these shifting and constant injustices.

Analyzing LGBTQ Organizational History

Here I relay the detailed process and amount of time and labor required to make this "big" dataset make the jump from manila file folders to a well-ordered database. I do not suggest that all data need be "big data." I do seek to reveal how the binary of big-small data reproduces heteronormative, patriarchal, and racist oppressions in who it leaves out or puts down.

I have written about the difficult project of acquisition of lgbtq archival materials that primarily focus on women and trans* people (see Gieseking 2015).[5] I turned to the only two LHA collections (of 17) with dates and locations with consistently recorded locations and dates in order to ground them to my period and place of study. Only the organization and

publications collections fit my location-date requirements, and I found these documents enormously insightful regarding lesbian-queer political economies; and I focus on the organizational records alone in this paper. My research began from a qualitative approach but my detailed recording and sorting of these materials made way for quantitative analysis.

The 2,300-plus organizational records include materials regarding social, political, or cultural organizations and groups. From my research experience in lgbtq archives across the US and Europe, I believe the LHA holds one of the largest lgbtq organizational history collections in existence. The collection sits in filing cabinets in the corner of the second bedroom on the second floor of the Archives, and in boxes along the walls, in closets, and on shelves. I was, therefore, blissfully surrounded in data from which to read and take in the most in-depth set of primary materials on lesbian-queer life in the city. Yet to turn this data into information and knowledge, it was necessary to transfer what I estimate to be about 30 linear feet of materials into a format that I could search, sort, collate, and piece together to read the everyday landscape of lesbian-queer New York City.

By first selecting only those records of organizations with groups in New York City, a total of 725, I then identified all organizations that began in or after 1983, a total of 382 records. A few dozen organizations took up a number of boxes each, a dozen or so had two or three thick folders, but the majority were merely a sheaf of pages in one manila folder. The records ranged from meeting minutes to photos of events, and most organizations included at least a few fliers for meetings or newsletters. Organizations included groups with a few members to a few thousand members, but lists of names were rarely kept for fear of persecution.

In the process of data acquisition, I began my early analysis. I summarized the contents of each folder after reading its contents with detailed notes on a year-by-year basis

of each group. I sought out the key social, political, and economic events of the groups that

allowed me to tap into the events, spaces, and people that defined each year of my study.

Focusing on major organizational and historic events in the city, I recorded brief notes per

year regarding the groups' agendas; major events the organization dealt with; use of space

(where they met and why); finances (e.g., whether volunteer, private, or city-sponsored); and

quotations I found compelling. Some of the metadata of these organizations exists in a

spreadsheet that the LHA shared with me—sometimes listed year founded and listing

perhaps 80% of the records I found—and I added to this document extensively. My own

spreadsheet-timeline listed all 382 organizations and each of their events by year. I often

left years blank because of the large absences in the materials collected. I also recorded

whether each group owned their meeting place or place of business, identified as a feminist

group, mission statement, the year they opened and closed, and, eventually, any addresses

given for meetings, events, activisms, or mailing locations. The slow work of mapping these

nearly 700 addresses requires my own knowledge of the data in order to determine which

type of address is which when unstated.

Scanning these documents with OCR would prove useless because of their quality

and variation in layout, content, and organization. Organizational interests were equally

varied, from the renowned Lesbian Avengers, Queer Nation, and ACT-UP to small

organizations the likes of Orthodykes of New York for Orthodox Jewish lesbians (1999-

present); the Star Trek fanclub U.S.S. Northstar NCC-10462 (1991-1999); sex party

organizers Lesbian Sex Mafia (1981-present), the transgender and cross-dressing social and

political organization Imperial Kings and Queens of New York (1968-present); Hykin' Dykes

renamed as Women About (1988-present); and STP, aka Swing the Pussy, an anti-violence

and information-sharing broadsheet newsletter (1998-2002). Reading and categorizing the

materials into 17 types of organizations afforded me comprehensive insights through the lens of participants' stories in their group interviews that the "distant reading" of text analysis could not have bestowed. In total, the 382 organizations were open for a period of over 3,108 years of experience, thereby producing at least 3,108 distinct organizational events over the years and likely in the hundreds of thousands.

The brunt of the work was completed in multiple trips per week in just over a year, followed by multiple return trips over the following five years as well as the employing of research assistants. Recording and sorting these organizations and their related records—fliers, newsletters, lists of members, photos from activist interventions, meeting minutes, banners from marches, and even a few balance sheets—required a great deal of labor, on a scale only possible with the help of various grants and fellowships. Collecting, organizing, and maintaining these materials required further labor, as well as the significant funds necessary to maintain an archive. Then there are the researchers who must sort and make sense of these materials as I did. The amount of labor and money necessary to keep the Lesbian Herstory Archives both alive and widely heard surely surpasses the energy required to run a Python data scraping script from social media outlets.

I have saved the best for last: while New York City is a particular world hub of lgbtq organizing, detailed notes on all 382 NYC-based organizations during my period of study amount to a mere 789KB worth of data in .csv format. This amount of data could fit, although barely, on a 3 ½" floppy disk, a form of storage available since 1986. The 700 addresses of these data, when mapped, are not quite large enough and much to spread out for most statistical measures and require thoughtful re-grouping and analysis. If this is the *largest* amount of archival material on the history of lgbtq organizing in the *global city* of New York City, is lgbtq history really big? Yet would anyone ever suggest this dataset is small

data? The tension between big data and small data needs to be unpacked, particularly as it is the latter which most often accounts for the marginalized in their own voices.

Discussion: Interrupting the Mythos of Big-Small Data

"Big data" claims its authority in its largess and seeming totality. Such a positionality stands in direct antithesis to a queer feminist approach because it denies the situated knowledges of other datasets and the context of their oppression in collection and organization and the economy of digitization. The uneven development of the production of space parallels an uneven production of and regard for data. Ryan Burns and Jim Thatcher write that "rather than seeing Big Data as the deterministic culmination of unerring technological progress," data must be situated "in their contingent social and historical contexts" (2014, 446). Issues of "context" in data generation are largely related to the privacy concerns, particularly around issues of data geolocation (Crawford and Finn 2014). Different activist and community groups make their own data from the ground up to lay their claim in big data (see Taylor et al. 2014; Dalton 2017). Context, then, becomes a contingent issue relative to all research rather than an issue related to certain research populations.

The queer feminist intervention in scale recalls Pratt & Rosner's imbrication of the global and the intimate that upends the masculinist global versus feminist local dyad. What if the largest lesbian-queer records collection does not fit simply by measure of scale into one of the greatest revolutions of our time? Critical data studies necessitates a queer feminist recognition of both the flux and situated knowledges of "big data," as well as the fluidity and flux of data's production and analysis.

Returning to the work of queer feminist critical geography that informed my analysis, the contextual geography of data is key to recognize. My own project of deep archival

research on the lesbian-queer contemporary historical geography is partially made possible

because of its focus on New York City. As a hub of lgbtq culture, politics, and economies, as

well as the LHA itself, I could amass enough data from a range of sources about a people

invisibilized and victimized and who sought often sought invisibility as protection; in lgbtq

historical work and geographies, this is rarely the case for smaller towns.

In "Selling My Queer Soul or Queerying Quantitative Research?," Kate Browne (2008)

wrestles with her work with the UK census to account for lgbtq identities. She writes that

there were (and are) no simple solutions to categorizing and counting a fluid people.

Similarly, it is difficult for me to place queers' and women's experience within big data

because "big data" does not really exist as an objective object accounting for all people as

we are. McGlotten (2016) argues that the historic portrayals of blacks in data are not

overcome by the era of the internet, particularly black queers who are still highly sexualized

or invisibilized. To assume that lgbtq people are recognized and even heralded in their full

complexity and difference by big data at that time—across races, classes, and genders by

the corporations, governments, and universities no less—who once pathologized them is a

simple notion at best. Instead, hegemonic powers have moved from the statistics of the

census to big data as the supreme form of neoliberal governmentality. Further, we must

take up quantitative data analytic models that work beyond absolute, Cartesian models of

space that fix identities as such (O'Sulliivan, Bergmann, and Thatcher 2017). A queer

feminist mediation into quantitative research, statistical analyses, and big data calls out the

voices of the marginalized and refuses to be made small ever again.

Conclusion: Big Enough Lesbian-Queer Data

Returning to the hand-drawn social network analysis of lesbian-queer relationships of "The L

Word" that I began this paper with, Alice later exclaims about the chart: "So the point is that

we're all connected, see! All of us...in our isolation...we reach out from the darkness, from

the alienation of modern life...to form these connections" (Troche 2004).[6] I begin and end

with "The L Word" because it continues to be the only internationally syndicated show about

lesbians that has made into lesbian lives, homes, and imaginaries across generations, even

by reputation. A decade since the first episode and centuries of absence, non-recognition,

and disregard for lesbian-queer lives and data later, the desire for the production, analysis,

and visualization of big data now rages. In this debate and all others, size matters to

lesbians too. They, and the other oppressed alongside them, are ready to be heard and

recognized—in their own words, images, and data.

A contribution to critical data studies, I take a deeper queer feminist approach to the

scale of big data by reading for the fluidity and situated knowledge of datasets. The Lesbian

Herstory Archives and its organizational record collection represent an alternative to that

false binary. I suggest that society's obsession with big data further oppresses the

marginalized by creating a false norm to which they are never able to measure up.

Future work in critical data studies must address how the objectification and mythos

of "big data" not only the production of data but also the collecting, cleaning, coding,

algorithms, outputs, and effects of big data. A queer feminist reading of big data and small

data is only the beginning. To be truly critical in the project of data studies requires both the

recognition of the unique standpoints of feminist, queer, critical race, postcolonial, and crip

theory and the groups they speak alongside (see Cupples 2015). Only when all of the

interpretations of data are heard and incorporated—not once but in multiple voices and

layers—can there be a true critical data studies approach. The stories and the data of the

marginalized remain "small data" in their number, respect, and meaning without fair

representation, both technological and mythological. We must restructure the politics of

scale in the big-small data divide to address how the experiences and places of marginalized

groups in these data.

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[1] The work on sizeism in fat studies and body studies is a complementary approach for this project (see Meleo-Erwin 2012).

[2] While my own work has been working at the intersection of feminist and queer theories for some time, I draw upon Lynne Huffer's (2013) notion of queer feminism.

[3] For a discussion of the evolution of Critical Data Studies (CDS), see Dalton, Taylor, and Thatcher's forthcoming work, "Critical Data Studies: A Dialog on Data and Space" (2016).

[4] Queer theorist Ann Pellegrini (2004) suggests that "lesbian" is used by older women more closely identified with second-wave feminism, while "queer" tends to apply to younger, third-wave individuals; however, this is not always the case as these identities may be complicated by personal and/or political factors. I use "lesbians and queer women" to reference my participants' own naming of their identities, and "lesbian-queer" to describe the experiences of this group of women.

[5] Elsewhere, I have suggested a state of queer feminist useful in/stability that the LHA evokes: always fluid in its partial collections, while fixed in high-end property with paid-off mortgage. Useful in/stability reveals how lesbian-queer life is a project of navigating and upending tensions rather than a total project of refusal and antinormativity (Gieseking 2015). Such instability was also evident in finding these materials. I first reviewed the following collections of the New York Public Library Gay and Lesbian Collection (NYPGLC; however, the NYPLCLG materials did not focus on lesbians' and queer women's lives, and the only materials from the one lesbian in the collection that described lesbian life (Doris Grumbach) came out before my study period. I also

read through parts of multiple collections at the LGBT Community Center Archives as well. Almost all of the Center Archives' materials focus on the lives of gay and queer men, as the collection was founded by, for, and about men who were dying from AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Downtown Collection of New York University has many materials that touch on the lives of lesbians and queer women but, again, I sought those materials that explicitly focused on lesbian-queer life throughout the entire city and I did not want to privilege one area over the other. The independently run Black Gay and Lesbian Archives in Harlem was gifted to the Schomburg Center after I finished my research; sadly those records specific to the lives of lesbians and queer women do not record detailed years of these women's lives let alone year of coming out so that it will take some time to work through what is available and include them in future research. All of the collections offered significantly fewer sources on lesbian-queer experiences than the Lesbian Herstory Archives so I decided to focus my attention there.

[6] In a 2006 episode, Alice asks another character to create a website for what she dubs "Our Chart," which launched simultaneously as ourchart.com. Even with thousands of profiles, there was little to draw them together and no money to continue to produce content, so that the site closed three years later, shortly after the show's last episode in 2009. The content of the site was never turned over to a lgbtq archive and remains the property of Showtime Networks.