

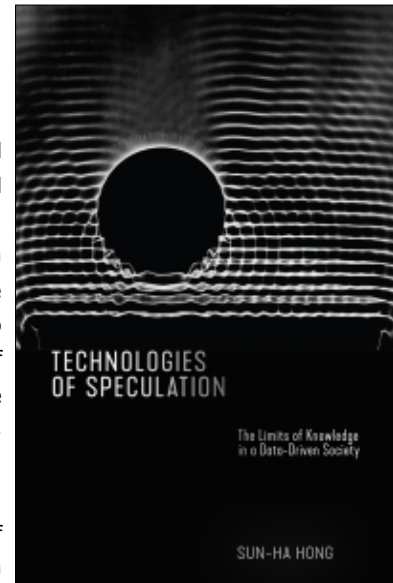
Sun-ha Hong, **Technologies of Speculation: The Limits of Knowledge in a Data-Driven Society**, New York: New York University Press, 2020, 287 pp. \$89.00 (hardcover).

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“Know thyself,” they say. Irony: We do not know who first said it. At worst we can idly speculate; at best we can draw out a likelihood from a host of assumptions and the information we have on hand. These cloudy origins don’t cause any problems unless you’re a particularly persnickety classicist. Its meaning comes across all the same—a decree to reflect upon the self to discover the path to enlightenment. But it was not always this way. In Plato’s retelling of the aphorism’s supposed origin, Socrates’ adversaries mistake the wise injunction for a demand of God, a call for prostration to a higher, all-knowing power.

This displacement of the process—some would say duty—of self-knowledge is the central question that Sun-ha Hong takes up in his book, **Technologies of Speculation: The Limits of Knowledge in a Data-Driven Society**. Hong’s argument is that contemporary processes of datafication lead us to question our own role as knowing beings. Crossing disciplinary boundaries of computer-mediated communication, critical data studies, and surveillance studies, the author asks how the life-affirming nature of our phenomenal experience becomes sidelined by machinic knowledge. This question of how “data knows” places the author’s work in conversation with major contemporary work in critical data studies, especially Halpern’s (2014) *Beautiful Data* and Koopman’s (2019) *How We Became Our Data*. But while Halpern and Koopman focus on how we come to view ourselves as data, Hong’s concern is the ways in which data views us: how it shapes not only what we see, but how we see what we do. Thus, questions in surveillance studies are also brought to the fore, as Zuboff’s (2019) “surveillance capitalism” (p. 7) not only sinks its talons into the gaps of our everyday behavior, but sells itself as a device that can see the future more effectively than the wildest dreams of human cognition. The book’s central claim is that this process of “data’s knowing”—and its antecedent techniques of reading, claiming, and fabricating—extends Enlightenment rationality’s dream of an objective, sensibly-ordered world (p. 16). Yet as the process underlying the book’s titular “technologies of speculation,” datafication does not confirm the future, but instead makes us question the present. In sheep’s clothing of rationality, automation, and technosystemic knowledge, we are seduced by data into trusting its visions of the future beyond what its contingent, assumptive, and groundless knowledge is capable of providing. This leaves us only with the knowledge of what we do not know.

Hong begins the book by interrogating the epistemological questions raised by data as a resource, commodity, and mode of constructing both the future and the present. Data appears as the fragments of a logically-ordered world, perpetually presenting a “proximate future” (p. 20) and dragging “impossible



functions and nonexistent relations into the realm of the sayable and thinkable" (p. 20). This leads to what Hong calls a "honeymoon objectivity" (p. 9): The correlations that underlie data's way of knowing can only ever present a way that the future might be. In the failure of this future to ever arrive, data does not "know" so much as it speculates, constantly displacing this idealized moment of pure information and remaining contingent on the technosystems that shape it.

Chapter 2 extends this empty signifier of the speculative future through an examination of what the form and shape of data-knowledge impresses upon public modes of knowing. Through the voluminous archive leaked by former National Security Association staffer Edward Snowden that revealed widespread domestic surveillance practices in the United States, Hong explores the tension between the ideal of pure information and the sheer unknowability of what is contained within archives that are only truly "readable" through computing processes. The release of the Snowden archive, rumored to contain anywhere from 50,000 to 200,000 documents, does not create the informed, rational, and deliberating public that it assumes, but actually obscures what can be reasonably known by the individual. As an attempt to create a single source of knowledge, the documents function as an archive. But the unknowability of this archive leads to "an amorphous stream of gradual revelations, whose elusiveness mirror the secrecy of the very surveillance state [they] sought to expose" (p. 35). This destabilizes our own phenomenological limits in order to give form to data's signified future. The indefinite archive's knowledge is only accessible through messy processes of translation, editorialization, and curation of what a public needs to know. Thus, on the formal level, data's claims to furnish information actually prefigure a knowledge based on speculation and empty signifiers, one that further delimits our ways of knowing.

Hong is not condemning the release of the Snowden archive, but illustrating the work expected of the individual when access to information is the only consideration deemed worthy of fulfilling for the liberal subject. The indefinite archive inverts the formal functions of information, which Hong takes up in chapter 3's discussion of "recessive objects" (p. 54): objects in our phenomenological horizon that do not present us with familiarity, but instead reduce epistemological certainty. The Snowden archive is one such object, as is the terroristic fabrication of the "lone wolf." In data's knowledge-by-correlation, the presence of the actual-terrorist is replaced by a spectral figure of risk factors and correlations; likewise, the Snowden archive is formally understood as an object of transparency, but appears to comprehension as unknowable. This results in social knowledge that must account for the "absent presence" (p. 128) of danger on the horizon, a "structural paranoia" (p. 67) caused by the recessive object's spectral presence. Data's correlative knowing does not find truth in objects, instead asking for something more encompassing: the very ground against what can be considered truth or falsity, a dismissal of the noncorrelative epistemologies that make up knowledge of the experiential or relational. From this promise comes a sort of Rawlsian maximin applied to society itself, where labors ranging from counterterrorism to risk assessment end up configuring futures of paranoid epistemology that take the place of the present in our decision-making processes. Chapter 5 extends this question of knowledge's grounding through the phenomenon of self-tracking. Hong argues that when self-tracking mediates our relationship with our bodies, it provides its own interpretation of the conscious, subjective relationships we have with our behavioral patterns. In one telling anecdote, Hong details that the common "10,000 steps" heuristic of fitness trackers is an arbitrary holdover from a 1980s Japanese pedometer company's advertising campaign (p. 3). Living alongside the aspirational "ideal quantity" of various metrics,

self-tracking creates self-knowledge as subjunctive knowledge, based on the "as-if" of correlative predictions that prefigures a future body and acts as though this prefiguration is determined (p. 149).

But data's dreams penetrate far deeper than our possible futures. Chapters 4 and 6 take up the "Quantified Self" paradigm and its dream of self-knowledge through quantification, a loose movement that believes in the tracking and measuring of personal health data as the key to being healthy, wealthy, and wise. Chapter 4 explains how this paradigm fosters what Hong calls "data's intimacy": the idea that self-data knows better than the user knows themselves (p. 109). This self-surveillance renders the body machine-readable, but instead of opening up new avenues to self-knowledge, it narrows the horizon of what questions can be asked. Eventually bypassing the subject entirely, we become subject to the whims of a quantification that is as error-prone and contingent as that which cannot be measured. Chapter 6 takes up this alienation from phenomenal experience as a posthuman conception of augmented sensory perception. Datafication's march toward its own horizon places its fabricated knowledge as primary to perceiving the world, fostering what Hong refers to as "data-sense" (p. 164). But taking up data's correlative way of knowing cancels the validity of experiential knowledge through their contradiction: I may feel well-rested today, but my Smartwatch tells me I slept terribly. The promise and premise of this posthuman imaginary is, in reality, a dystopian subjectivation where machinic sensibility replaces the human.

Hong's writing does not necessarily follow a clear, linear route; instead, it routinely dances back and forth between the different conceptual frameworks that together comprise data's knowing. Data's sublimation follows a similar pattern, and such a style helps in his attempt to articulate the deep interrelations involved in this epistemological shift. By illustrating how datafied knowledge and its speculative gaze moves with stealthy efficiency across bodies politic, temporal, and fleshlike, *Technologies of Speculation* sets up the stakes required to critically question what data—and we—can know.

References

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