

Review

Bouk, Dan. *Democracy's Data: The Hidden Stories in the U.S. Census and How to Read Them.* MCD Farrar, 2022. 362 p. ISBN 978-0-374-60254-3

What a pleasure to find this book about government information listed in the New York Times Book Review 100 Notable Books of 2022! Dan Bouk is a history professor at Colgate University who “researches the history of bureaucracies, quantification, and other modern things shrouded in cloaks of boringness” (author’s note). Tedium, he believes, can be a smokescreen for things that somebody deliberately wants to hide, so he’s on a personal mission to cut through the superficial dullness. Bouk is certainly the right person for the job. His enthusiasm for bureaucratic data is irresistible, and his meticulously researched writing is witty, lively, and not at all boring.

The book focuses on the 1940 US, Census since that was the most recent release of raw Census data when Bouk began his research. He begins somewhat tamely with a family history of the kind that often attracts library patrons to the Census—looking up his grandfather to see how a specific person is represented by demographic data. From there he launches into a dazzling tour de force of archival research and Census-based storytelling. For instance, the chapter titled

“Names and Negotiations” begins with a poem by Langston Hughes (!) about the Census, discusses how the poem is culturally meaningful though technically inaccurate, and winds up using Census data to track the life of Frederick Douglass from an unnamed slave (counted as 3/5 of a person due to the shameful influence of pro-slavery legislators) to “free colored person” and “head of household,” his occupation recorded as “Editor” on the 1850 Census. In another chapter, Bouk traces the family history of a Census employee named Iwao Moriyama who escaped internment in 1942 when the Census was weaponized against Japanese Americans because his race had been recorded as “white.”

Numbers present a veneer of objectivity, but any dataset is only as accurate as the tools used to collect it. Census data is influenced by factors like politics, laws, language, social attitudes and prejudices, the hiring and training of census takers, and the way people respond to or resist the questions. Bouk is particularly interested in how marginalized groups are represented in data that was designed to deny their existence. Are the “partners” shown in the 1940 Census Data business partners? Or queer couples? Who counts as “white”? How can the expansive diversity of human lives be reduced

to meaningful numbers? An epilogue describes Bouk’s good-faith but baffling attempt to fill out the 2020 Census form on behalf of his own nonstandard family. He is married to a transgender man and can’t quite remember how he answered. “I am kicking myself for not taking a screenshot,” he laments (p. 259).

Fundamentally, this is not simply a history of the Census, but a book about information literacy—the social context of how data is created and used. Bouk details how he came up with research questions and went about seeking answers, including several exhilarating tales of finding hidden treasures concealed in dusty archives. He frets about the preservation of born-digital materials, and strongly advocates data literacy as an antidote to algorithms that perpetuate inequality. By recording the existence of ordinary people, the Census guides the distribution of money and power: “Looking squarely at complicated data-making processes is becoming an essential activity for all those who wish to have a say in shaping our world,” Bouk writes, “from activists to policymakers, and for every person striving to remain an informed citizen” (p. 238). —Amy Brunvand (amy.brunvand@utah.edu), Librarian, University of Utah