"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron

"'Raw data' is both an oxymoron and a bad idea."
-- Geoff Bowker, Memory Practices in the Sciences

Data are familiarly collected, entered, compiled, stored, processed, mined, and interpreted. Less obvious are the ways in which the final term in this sequence—interpretation—haunts its predecessors. At a certain level the collection and management of data may be said to presuppose interpretation. Data need to be imagined as data, in short, and the imagination of data entails an interpretive base. Like the event imagined and enunciated against the continuousness of time, the datum is imagined and enunciated against the seamlessness of phenomena. If the event garners a kind of immanence by dint of its collected enunciation, as Hayden White has suggested, so the datum garners immanence in the circumstances of its imagination. The event produces and is produced by historicity, while the datum produces and is produced by the operations of knowledge production more broadly. Every discipline and disciplinary institution has its own norms and standards for the imagination of data, just as every field has its accepted methodologies and its evolved structures of practice. Together the essays that comprise 'Raw Data' Is an Oxymoron pursue the imagination of data. They ask how different disciplines have imagined their objects and how different data sets harbor the interpretive structures of their own imagining. What are the histories of data within and across disciplines? How are data always already “cooked” within the varied circumstances of their collection, storage, and transmission?