

Ulfried Reichardt, Regina Schober (eds.)

LABORING BODIES AND THE QUANTIFIED SELF



[transcript] American Culture Studies

Ulfried Reichardt, Regina Schober (eds.)
Laboring Bodies and the Quantified Self

Ulfried Reichardt (Prof. Dr.), born in 1956, teaches American literature and culture at the University of Mannheim. He was principal investigator of the research project “Probing the Limits of the Quantified Self” as well as founder and speaker of the graduate school “Formations of the Global”. His research also focuses on American philosophy and music as well as the uses of time in literature.

Regina Schober (Prof. Dr.), born in 1980, teaches American studies at the Heinrich-Heine-University Duesseldorf. She received her dissertation from the University of Hannover in 2009 and her habilitation from the University of Mannheim in 2019. Her research focuses on literary conceptions of networks, data fiction, and the intersections of failure and knowledge. With Ulfried Reichardt, she was principal investigator of the research project “Probing the Limits of the Quantified Self”.

Ulfried Reichardt, Regina Schober (eds.)

Laboring Bodies and the Quantified Self

[transcript]

We would like to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for funding our research project "Probing the Limits of the Quantified Self: Human Agency and Knowledge in Literature and Culture of the Information Age" and also for funding the publication of this volume. Likewise, we want to thank the University of Mannheim for generously providing the necessary infrastructure as well as Katrin Ramseier and Su Montoya for their invaluable support in proofreading the manuscript of this volume for publication. A great thanks also to Juliane Straetz who suggested the theme of the volume.

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

© 2020 transcript Verlag, Bielefeld

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover layout: Maria Arndt, Bielefeld

Printed by Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar

Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-4921-5

PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-4921-9

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839449219>

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

Contents

Introduction: Laboring Bodies and the Quantified Self <i>Ulfried Reichardt and Regina Schober</i>	7
Command and Control: The Quantified Self and Biomedical Transhumanism <i>Stefan Danter</i>	15
Reconsidering Agency and Choice: The Office, the Wall, and the Tax Code (Herman Melville, “Bartleby” and David Foster Wallace, <i>The Pale King</i>) <i>Ulfried Reichardt</i>	41
“To Be Reckoned in the Gross”: Corporate Storytelling and Quantified Selves in Joshua Ferris’s <i>Then We Came to the End</i> <i>Stefanie Mueller</i>	61
Racialized Self-Improvement: Advice in Black and White Self-Help of the Interwar Years <i>Kristina Graaff</i>	81
The Solipsism of the Quantified Self: Working Bodies in David Foster Wallace’s <i>Body of Work</i> <i>Dominik Steinhilber</i>	103
Reading Chick Lit through Numbers: Postfeminist Self-Quantification in Helen Fielding’s <i>Bridget Jones’s Diary</i> and Karyn Bosnak’s <i>What’s Your Number?</i> <i>Regina Schober</i>	123

“I Track my Cycle Religiously”: Representations of Fertility Tracking and Childlessness in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs	
<i>Dorothee Marx</i>	141
Compulsive Self-Tracking: When Quantifying the Body Becomes an Addiction	
<i>Katharina Motyl</i>	167
The Portable Peoplemeter Initiative: Wearable Sensor Technologies and Embodied Labor	
<i>Jennifer Hessler</i>	189
Instant Nerve-Ana: Biofeedback as Quantified Self Avant la Lettre	
<i>Philipp Hauss</i>	215
Contributors	239

Introduction: Laboring Bodies and the Quantified Self

Ulfried Reichardt and Regina Schober

“You’re generating big numbers,” he said, peering at the screen. “I was out there only two and a half minutes. That’s how many seconds?”

“It’s not just you were out there so many seconds. It’s your whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I’m getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’d rather not know.” (Don DeLillo, *White Noise* 140)

The use of data in conceptualizing the human body has been present in narratives of the self for much longer than current discourses on self-quantification would suggest. What Don DeLillo depicts in his 1984 novel *White Noise* already indicates the measurability of biometric data in relation to individual risk assessment, while it may not be self-tracking as we know it today. Jack Gladney, the protagonist of DeLillo’s novel, exposed to toxic fumes, tries to reach certainty about his health status – a desire that is denied to him. The novel thus exemplifies a central paradox in relation to quantified self-experience: Although numbers may seem reliable, they simultaneously create more uncertainty. While numbers provide the illusion of objectivity, like DeLillo’s protagonist, we are always left with the question of “What does this mean?” Personal data has to be interpreted to generate meaningful narratives about ourselves. Yet, what this passage also addresses is the ambivalence of probabilistic knowledge and the incalculable effects of predictions on individuals. How much data do we want to aggregate about our bodies? Under which circumstances can too much data generate problems (for example, when a prediction becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy)? The Covid19 pandemic that is keeping the entire world in check as we write these words also raises the important question of when individual data turns into a social and even political

concern. To what extent can apps that track individual behavior help contain a global health hazard and when do they begin to restrict individual rights?

These questions have become increasingly pressing in the last decades, in particular in the context of an all-encompassing digitalization. As part of this development, the body has become central to practices of self-tracking and self-improvement. We optimize our bodies by quantifying ourselves, for example by counting steps and calories, by tracking sleep patterns, heart rate, blood pressure etc. New sensor and analytic technologies have made it easier and thus more pervasive to monitor and control the body as a project. Although, of course, self-improvement through quantification can enhance physical performance and well-being, many users are unaware of the economic value of their data that is generated at the same time. While providing access to a 'deeper' knowledge of the self, our own data and by extension, our body, is turned into a commodity, particularly when data is correlated to create specific marketing profiles, or when quantification is used to adjust the body to normative standards. This quantified data of the self is instrumental in unlocking the body's potential as a laboring body, and in turn, disciplining the individual according to market demands and biopolitical agendas. In this volume, we want to draw critical attention to the role that the laboring body plays in practices, discourses, and literary as well as other cultural representations of the quantified self. Moreover, the essays in this book shed light on the ways that data collection and production redefine what passes as labor, including notions of immaterial and free labor in an increasingly virtual work environment. Of particular interest is the relationship between quantitative and qualitative knowledge, between data and narrative, between measuring and interpretation. We understand this relationship not as one that is mutually exclusive but rather as one that is complementary or, put into a nutshell: Counting without recounting is blind and, arguably, recounting without counting is empty.

US American culture and literature is at the center of the critical investigations in this volume. Indeed, self-tracking has already been a decisive component of individual self-formation in the US for a long time. We can, for example, detect early forms of self-tracking in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1793). His chart of virtues attests to a view of the individual as striving for control and discipline by way of externally datafying and monitoring internal processes. In the late 19th century, insurance companies used personal data on a large scale to assess risk, with large corporations aiming at turning data into profit. The self as a project, then, has been a well-known topos

and practice for a long time, and self-enhancement or self-optimization has a long cultural and economic history. In recent self-tracking practices driven by digital culture, however (ironically, perhaps), the body has come center stage and has become the main target of enhancement and control.

In current social, technological, and economic debates, the ‘quantified self’ – the product of self-tracking – is understood primarily as the collection, aggregation, and analysis of personal data via digital technologies. In a narrower sense, the term ‘quantified self’ refers to a movement originating in the US with an active and global community that, with the slogan “Self-Knowledge Through Numbers,” has propagated personal self-optimization through the use of self-measuring technologies (www.quantifiedself.com). While this movement itself is an interesting social phenomenon, the aim of this book is rather to explore larger cultural, aesthetic, theoretical, political, and historical dimensions of monitoring the self. How do we know ourselves through numbers, and more precisely: What version of the ‘self’ do we know, get to know or better ‘construct’ numerically? What is the relation between numbers and subjectivity? An important question in this context concerns the effects of quantification, of using numbers and algorithms, on processes of ‘knowing’ oneself. The quantified self turns into an object to be observed, known, and shaped by a controlling mind. Yet, going beyond the time-worn dualism of mind/body, a posthumanist conception regards the human body, human mind, and machine or technology as connected in a continuum. A posthumanist approach to self-tracking emphasizes the agency that tracking devices (including smartphone apps but also analog media like writing) possess and therefore also explores the effects of these technologies on the subject.

As references to DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Franklin’s *Autobiography* suggest (one could also mention the rigorous self-disciplining chart mentioned in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, 1925), literature (and culture, for that matter) has widely explored the links between numbers and the self, between measuring and subjectivity. A core concern of many essays in this volume is the question of what literature and culture can tell us about these new forms of self-exploration. An increasingly urgent problem in this context is data surveillance and the phenomenon of ‘sousveillance’, the unknowing but active participation of the individual in the act of surveillance. As data have become a valuable currency in the emerging digital economy, the practice of ‘prosumption’, defined as the often inevitable merging of consumption and

production, has come to define the entanglement between on- and offline activities.

The essays in this collection take a particular interest in the role that the laboring body has played in practices, discourses, and literary as well as other cultural representations of the quantified self. The essays focus on the relations between quantification, the body, and labor in US American literature and culture. Therefore, they also consider the tension between quantification and (self-) measurement on the one hand and narrative on the other. The collection sheds light on the ways in which discourses on data collection and production are instrumental in redefining concepts of labor, including notions of immaterial and free labor in an increasingly virtual work environment. More specifically, the contributions examine the functions of quantification in conceptualizing the body as a laboring body and examine how quantification contributes to disciplining the body. By doing so, they also inquire how practices of self-tracking, self-monitoring, and self-optimization have evolved historically.

In the opening essay of this volume, “Command and Control: The Quantified Self and Biomedical Transhumanism,” Stefan Danter describes and discusses current self-tracking gadgets and apps, before he moves to an analysis of literary representations of such devices. In his interpretation of Eric Garcia’s *Repossession Mambo* and Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story*, he investigates how literature reflects recent developments in the field of medicine, (bio)technology, and Big Data. Both novels, Danter argues, show how current biomedical and technological developments can result in distinctly dystopian scenarios. With a stronger emphasis on economic dimensions and the formation of the ‘corporate self’, Ulfried Reichardt, in “Reconsidering Agency and Choice: The Office, the Wall, and the Tax Code” examines the intersection of the economic sphere and subjective experience in the ways in which laboring bodies and subjectivities are shaped in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, The Scrivener” and David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*. His reading of these narratives traces how work situations in organizations produce specific versions of the self, and in how far characters are actively involved as free individuals. The connection between corporations and self-quantification, particularly in the creative economy, is also explored in Stefanie Mueller’s “‘To be Reckoned in the Gross’: Corporate Storytelling and Quantified Selves in Joshua Ferris’s *Then We Came to the End*.” In her reading of Ferris’s novel, Mueller shows how the narrative voice of corporate storytelling firmly places the novel within a neoliberal agenda. By demonstrating how this novel fits into an older tradi-

tion of anti-corporate rhetoric, she argues that it effectively celebrates labor and selfhood under entrepreneurial capitalism.

Kristina Graaff, in “Racialized Self-Improvement: Advice in Black and White Self-Help of the Interwar Years” historicizes self-tracking practices, while investigating the dimension of race in this context. Looking at two self-help manuals of the 1920s and 1930s, “The Way to Health” and Dale Carnegie’s bestseller *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Graaff examines how the ‘optimization scripts’ of self-help catered to both white and African American mass audiences. Her essay argues that these self-help manuals intended to standardize subjects in relation to the emerging age of automatization and mass production. At the same time, they had a large share in prescribing normative standards of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. Drawing on both Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory, Graaff discusses these texts in relation to the racialization of ability and the ableism inherent to processes of racialization. In recourse to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s public language philosophy, Dominik Steinhilber’s essay “The Solipsism of the Quantified Self: Working Bodies in David Foster Wallace’s *Body of Work*” examines the problematics of self-optimization within a neoliberal regime. In discussing David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, Steinhilber demonstrates how the novel critiques the commodification of bodies in the game of tennis, bodies that are continuously ranked. Self-quantification, the essay argues, seems to inhibit the formation of stable selves, instead enforcing solipsism.

The disciplining demands of neoliberalism are also central to the literary genre of ‘chick lit’. Regina Schober, in “Reading Chick Lit through Numbers” explores the functions of self-quantification in Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and Karyn Bosnak’s *What’s Your Number?* As the essay shows, numbers and statistics contribute significantly to the genre’s ambiguous politics. As forms of narrative rupture, the data charts expose and critically subvert the logic of a competitive rating culture, while at the same time confirming some of their underlying normative assumptions. Numbers in chick lit, Schober argues, both discipline and liberate female characters as well as readers, thereby informing the postfeminist agenda of these novels to a considerable extent. Female self-discipline is also a core concern of Dorothee Marx’s “‘I Track my Cycle Religiously’: Representations of Fertility Tracking and Childlessness in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs.” Reading fertility tracking apps next to two contemporary graphic memoirs about infertility, Marx discusses the implications of these apps for women who are trying to conceive. She argues that the self-disciplining inherent in fertility tracking practices mirrors the surveil-

lance of pregnant women. Looking at two contemporary graphic memoirs, *Good Eggs* by Phoebe Potts and *Broken Eggs* by Emily Steinberg, she examines in how far cultural representations of the female body are related to current practices of self-quantification and the image of the docile body created by these practices.

Considering the discourse of self-disimprovement, Katharina Motyl, in “Compulsive Self-Tracking: When Quantifying the Body Becomes an Addiction,” argues that self-optimization can turn into a form of compulsion. Self-tracking’s addictive potential, she claims, seems to be intensified by the competitive nature of fitness apps as well as by the immersive nature of online environments. While some may consider compulsive self-tracking an excessive aberration from an otherwise beneficial practice, Motyl contends that compulsive self-tracking takes the rationale underlying the practice of self-tracking in capitalist societies to its logical conclusion: self-tracking represents a “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988). Users mobilize quantifying bodily data to discipline their bodies in accordance with the ideological regimes of productivity and beauty concomitant to the capitalist economic order.

The following two essays propose regarding mid-20th century technologies as prefiguring current self-tracking practices. In “The Portable Peoplemeter Initiative: Wearable Sensor Technologies and Embodied Labor,” Jennifer Hessler provides insight into 1980s television rating technologies, with a special focus on Nielsen’s peoplemeter technology. She argues that the peoplemeter entrenched users within a surveillance enclosure, implicating even activities that are unrelated to television viewing under corporate surveillance, thus turning the body into a round-the-clock technology of commodification. This technology’s compliance with the body influenced contemporary logics of mobile self-tracking and body attachment. Philipp Hauss, in “Instant Nerve-Ana: Biofeedback as Quantified Self Avant la Lettre,” sheds light on another historical example of self-monitoring that can be regarded as a precursor to current self-tracking practices. The biofeedback movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Hauss explains, aimed at accessing and monitoring the body via electronic feedback technology in order to recognize and control bodily processes and reactions. Reading biofeedback against the backdrop of digital self-quantification, the essay illuminates the historical continuities and discontinuities of feedback technologies and practices as well as their biopolitical implications in relation to our body.

The essays collected in this volume underline the intricate relationship and entanglement of quantification and measuring routines, technologies, in

particular digital ones, and recent forms of subject formation. That the body figures so prominently in this process and that it is the laboring body that is foregrounded may be regarded as a significant signature of our current era.