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## Laboring bodies and the quantified self

by Ulfried Reichardt and Regina Schober, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, Germany, 2020, 246pp., €40/\$50, ISBN 978-3-8376-4921-5

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Laboring bodies and the quantified self**, by Ulfried Reichardt and Regina Schober, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, Germany, 2020, 246pp., €40/\$50, ISBN 978-3-8376-4921-5

How has the laboring body become so central to regimes of quantification and measurement, and how has this played out in literary and cultural representations of the quantified self? Through tracing narratives of entanglement of data and selves that predate current discourses of self-quantification (often by decades), this collection of essays makes an extremely important contribution to our understanding of quantification, datafication and subject formation. The central tensions of the quantified self (QS) movement – that self-tracking can inhibit as much as it enlightens and provoke feelings of anxiety as much as a control – are thus shown to have a long, rich and wide-ranging history, traceable through self-help columns, graphic memoirs and novels as well as devices.

In chapter one, Stefan Danter examines how literature both reflects and responds to developments in the fields of medicine, technology and big data through examining representations in Eric Garcia's *Repossession Mambo* and Gary Schteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*. In doing so, he reaches the balanced conclusion that both positions of euphoria and skepticism in relation to tracking and quantification are problematic, and that a literary focus on potentially dystopian scenarios may foreclose more optimistic visions of the future. In his chapter, Ulfried Reichardt examines how particular work situations produce specifically embodied selves through close readings of Herman Melville's *Bartleby* and David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*. He argues that the laboring body becomes a crucial site for the working out of agency and free will, and that too much freedom to choose may actually "tip over into the complete loss of choice". In her chapter on Joshua Ferris's novel *Then We Came to an End*, Stefanie Mueller questions the extent to which literature is able to offer new epistemologies, arguing that whilst the novel offers a critique of corporate capitalism, it effectively endorses entrepreneurial capitalism, thus remaining firmly within the neoliberal mold. The distinctive feature of Ferris's novel is that it is narrated in the "corporate we" and Mueller argues that being reckoned "in the gross" represents quantification. She fails to note, however, that this quantification seems to operate using very different logic to the quantified self (QS) movement, which is all about individual self-realization through numbers rather than generalization.

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In chapter four, Kristina Graaff examines two examples of self-help literature, “The Way to Health” column published in the Black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* from 1913 to 1937 and Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In doing so, she traces how optimization advice functions to standardize subjects both in relation to shifting labor demands and in response to newly developed quantification tools. This is a particularly strong chapter that illustrates how these processes of normalization occur in relation to race, class and gender, as well as how self-quantification relates to the adjustment of individuals in relation to larger collectives. In his essay, Dominik Steinhilber explores the connections between body, work and selfhood in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. In the novel, he argues, tennis players are reduced to a set of numbers in such a way that their selves become fragmented and their interiority becomes something to be described in a “climate of ironic self-objectification” (107). In chapter 6, Regina Schober examines the implication of numerical charts and quantification in neoliberal subject formation in Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and Karyn Bosnak’s *What’s Your Number?* In doing so, she argues that the function of self-quantification in chick lit novels depends on reader participation to both reproduce and playfully challenge the neoliberal approach to the body as a project. In her chapter, Dorothee Marx traces the presentation of pregnancy tracking apps in two contemporary graphic memoirs, *Good Eggs* by Phoebe Potts and *Broken Eggs* by Emily Steinburg, noting that self-tracking, whilst oriented towards self-realization and control, also encourages moralizing and highly normative behavior that is in line with neoliberal concepts of citizenship. Through tracing the process of writing and illustrating graphic novels alongside attempts to conceive children, though, she argues that this more creative form of self-assessment offers an escape from more numerical forms of self-tracking.

In chapter 8, Katharina Motyl explores what happens when self-tracking becomes an addiction, arguing that the compulsive self-tracker represents the ideal neoliberal subject. In chapter 9, Jennifer Hessler traces the history of the portable people meter (PPM), an audience measurement device used by the media industry from the 1970s, arguing convincingly that the development of such devices was both prescient of and influential to contemporary logics and practices of self-tracking. Crucially, she notes the importance of such devices in reframing passive audience members as active agents through processes of gamification and incentivization that clearly offer a precursor to contemporary self-tracking practices. In the book’s final chapter, Philip Hauss looks at another precursor to contemporary self-tracking from a similar time, biofeedback, arguing that the logics of self-improvement and optimization, and reliance on the correlation of various data, are very similar. He makes the important point that interpretations of self-tracking that rely upon notions of surveillance and biopolitics do not adequately account for individual self-reflection. Focusing on the utopian vision of the biofeedback movement, with its claims to increase sensitivity to bodily processes, makes clear a message that runs throughout the book – that there is nothing all

that new or different about the QS movement. This makes the volume's focus on relating everything back to the QS movement – rather than more ubiquitous and quotidian self-tracking practices – seem a little forced in places. This is a minor criticism, however, and one that is equally true of many social scientists' analyses of self-tracking. By drawing on an enormously rich set of literary and cultural texts spanning a large historical period, this volume makes clear that the concerns animating the QS movement have a long and fascinating genealogy. It will be of as much interest to social scientists and STS scholars as it is to literary and cultural studies specialists.

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