

THE TIME OF THE CONTRACT

By Aren Aizura

When Karen talked in her introduction to the forum about the “big data” surveillance state and its effect on digital labor and contractualism, I started thinking a lot about little data. For instance, parental surveillance: the time of the preteen fighting to have the “independence” of an iPhone is long gone. These days parents totally want their kids wired up. Give your kid an iPhone and you can sync her messages to download into your phone: incoherent emojis, texts from boyfriend/girlfriend and all. Want to know where your daughter is? Just bring up the app and you can see her GPS signal pulsing on the map, still or moving. This is not 1984, you understand. It’s just parents keeping track.

Even if, reading this, you identify with the teenager (who’s probably already writing text messages designed for parental surveillance and keeping a secret Tumblr she accesses on a burner phone) you’re implicated in this. How about the frightening re-emergence of the online quiz, centralized and standardized by BuzzFeed and with far more social cachet in the time of Facebook than the obnoxiously lengthy user-generated Buffy quizzes ever enjoyed back on Livejournal time: what 90s Indie band are you? What Arbitrary Object are you? Click some buttons and we’ll spew out your chart in under a minute. We are all data collectors now; more to the point, we are all data. Little data.

The ubiquity of this form of “little data” brings together many of the questions about surplus labor, oikonomics, and risk that Angela poses in *Contract and Contagion*. My method here is to survey some outposts of little data and intersperse with a reading of the book’s arguments. “Little data” collection and analysis is currently finding formalization in the Quantified Self movement. The Quantified Self movement (or, consistent with Deleuze’s prediction in “Postscript on the Societies of Control” of the disappearance of the “in” of individual, the subsumption of the subject by data and thus a dispensing with the preposition “the”, just plain Quantified Self) was co-founded by technolibertarian Kevin Kelly. QS promises digital tracking of health, diet, mood, and life as the solution to modern life posed as a problem of decadence and bad habits. With the right data tracking you can change just about any behavior. Contracts are never far away from the language of self-tracking. For instance, the app BeeMinder helps you keep ahead of your goals by keeping a “commitment contract” with yourself. Beeminder can prompt you to enter data yourself, or you can sync it with another tracking app. At the same time, you pledge money to meet your goals. If you don’t meet your goals, Beeminder charges you \$5.

Contracts, as Mitropoulos puts it, are “preoccupied with the transformation of contingency into necessity as a specifically capitalist problem” (20). More to the point, contracts gain their legitimacy through a connection to foundation in the form of genealogy: the natural sexual and racial order, the way things should be done. But contracts are not only economic; to the extent that participation in the traditional economic and social contract depends on individual mastery of both self and property, contracts also illuminate “the nexus of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation constituted through the premise of the properly productive household” (28) and

made possible by the naturalization of surplus or unpaid labor—in the form of servitude, slavery, or women’s work (or some combination of all three). Oikonomics and by extension, contractualism itself, are always already in crisis—to be managed by the proliferation of risk and uncertainty at some moments and by the reassertion of limits at other moments; the constant redistribution of surplus labor between the calculated gambles on populations that are marked as “risky” because of their racial or classed identifiers (which are transformed into data points), and the reassertion of austerity on those populations when their desires exceed the calculus of available surplus. Oikonomics proceeds through the indistinction of the micro and the macro, or the indistinction between “intimacy and economy”. Thus, the question of surplus labor is central to the wage form itself and the lines it cuts across populations:

The expansion of surplus labor that is implied in the expectation of a labor freely given — that which is seen as a naturally constituted debt, as with slavery construed as an attribute of blackness, or unpaid domestic labor regarded as a property of femininity; or that form of indebtedness apparent in the emergence of the infinite wage contract I refer to elsewhere — has always been the central logic of capitalist re/production. In this, the wage has historically indicated the shifting lines of compensatory exclusion, hierarchy and recognition. (*Contract and Contagion* 106)

Crucial to *Contract and Contagion* is an analysis of the naturalization and redistribution of surplus labor—often in the form of housework or reproductive labor marked as “women’s work.”

It shouldn’t surprise anyone that the Quantified Self folks exhibit a preoccupation with housework: one of the origin stories of QS is that it started with a [computer geek who wanted to know how long he spent doing his roommate’s dishes](#). But some of these perspectives are critical. [Amelia Abreu](#) questions the universalist and frankly terrifying rationale of Quantified Self through a feminist analysis of data collection. Actually, she points out, data collection has everything to do with the domestic: care = tracking. “How often is what gets branded “nagging”, either maternal or spousal, just a ritual in data gathering?” Her essay traces an alternative history of domestic data collection and analysis against the enlightenment biopolitics of “big data”, placing the practice of tracking within historically feminized fields like librarianship and nursing, the move to corporate “big data” just another way that men have stolen women’s business and invented it as their own. Abreu understands caregivers as data analysts par excellence: before computers did it all for us, the traditional Fordist reproductive labor of mothering involved remembering birthdays and anniversaries. Feminine charm still means remembering the details. So then we get a contrast between the QS method of self tracking and how caregivers track under the aegis of housework: Abreu points out that caring is a grind, it’s hard work, and unquantifiable. But more to the point, caregiving is culturally devalued. The logic of QS is that every practice can be improved by tracking: but what if the practice to be tracked “veer[s] outside of the grid of what is valued and made visible by data and quantification”?

Abreu’s solution to this is to ask how Quantified Self might include those who are excluded by its ambit. “Rather than seeking to perfect measures and standards of that work through statistical working-over, can we envision workers taking their own data to management to improve working conditions? I want Quantified Self to be a messy space, one where users willingly choose the aspects of their lives they are proudest of, and most troubled by, and allow

them to track, and engage with their narratives over time on their own terms.” Ambivalently stuck in the Fordist imaginary of the worker/factory even as it rejects a vision of virtuosic self-management in the same breath, this perspective sorely needs an analysis of contractualism, which would reveal the economy of performance metrics lurking in the wings of the messy utopian vision.

We arrive at a final precipice, however, when Abreu switches the imagined gaze of efficient small data collection from herself to others—given the opportunity, how would she react if she had access to the “data records” of her daughter’s preschool teacher? “Would I feel anything but simple gratitude (and a twinge of guilt) if I saw how much effort her teacher had expended?” Despite her conviction that affective labor is unquantifiable, she has little trouble imagining quantifying the worker to whom she outsources care labor. If this remark appears blissfully unaware of the national debate on teacher merit bonuses and school funding attached to student and teacher performance tracking, it also seems out of touch with the logic of indebtedness, investment and insurance that tracking assumes in the workplace—scaled up from individuals who track *themselves* for shits and giggles. At this juncture, also, the connection between the individual-oriented QS movement and industrial worker surveillance becomes clear: the materialization of an individual-focused QS movement could be understood as a boutique front for industrial-strength performance monitoring across work/welfare/school/borders. It shouldn’t be a surprise, then, that Abreu dwells on the chain of care as the site of a fantasy of herself as surveilleur. The fantasy lets her off the hook of her own familial bonds and reinvents her on the “right” side of the contract. And it’s precisely the social bond between mother and child—the child’s symbolic value as investment and future recipient of property—that bind the quantification of care to heteronormative (or homonormative) oikonomics. The lesson is, we can’t afford to behave as if we’re immune to the desire to measure others’ labor. (And/but who is us, anyhow.)

The strength of the analysis I’ve made so far depends to a large degree on the measurability or immeasurability of affective labor (and beyond that, the measurability of care itself).^[1] Whether we agree that affect can or cannot be measured, it is clear that domestic, undervalued modes of displaying care through memory, affect, and touch are incommensurate with the algorithmic parsing involved in entering details into a device or a phone (or that the indistinction pushed to its limit might result in tracking that looked more like a personal diary than quantifiable data). People have usefully differentiated racialized and feminized forms of reproductive labor along the faultlines of precisely these distinctions. For instance, elder care workers are understood to be less “professionally trained” than nurses, and expected (depending on the workplace) to entertain, chat with, and make friends with patients far more than “professional” nursing staff. Nurses in the global north are trained precisely to perform impersonal data collection; by contrast, South East Asian health tourism markets depend on South East Asian care workers being understood to “care more” about patients, elderly people, children, and to expect less remuneration.

Implied in the above is that we have to reject with the valorization of womanhood that Federici deploys in the passage Anne quotes: “If the house is the oikos on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the house workers and house-prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a center of collective life.” This is not only because the

epistemological status of women as domestic/care workers in general is conclusively challenged by trans and queer theory/politics (though that is important). It's also because the other way to trace surplus labor is through racialization—slavery, domestic servitude, prison labor. At the scene of chattel slavery in particular, captive gender and kinship relations are fundamentally other to woman's traditional role in the household: inside and outside the household at the same time. This is why Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" substitutes the domestic as a figure with that of the oceanic, reading the slave ship and its cargo as constituting "a wild and unclaimed richness of possibility that is not interrupted, not 'counted'/'accounted,' or differentiated" in which maleness and femaleness are merely quantities, masses that take up different amounts of space on the ship.^[ii] Gender and kinship mean something totally different in the history Spillers traces of Black oikonomics. Under these conditions the notions of reproduction, mothering, and sexuality don't mean a whole lot. But the attribution of some bodies as male or female and some bodies as less than either is still oikonomics. This might demand an analysis of the subjects of surplus labor as women of color—and the still-startling-to-some observation that the Fordist household and wage-relation was a historical blip and its dissolution into immaterial labor is not a huge epochal shift but how things have always been for most of us—or it might, but not only that: it demands that we forego a valorizable subject of the oikos altogether.

I want to end with some thoughts about what care IS and the potential it could unleash. Lately I've been thinking about affect and labor with the phrase, the communization of care. The communization of care might take place within something that doesn't answer to the word community but aligns with what Beth Povinelli calls (a/the) socially cosubstantial: "My happiness is substantially within her unhappiness; my corporeal well-being is part of a larger mode of embodiment in which her corporeal misery is a vital organ." (Broom Closet, 511). Examples I have given of the communization of care include the digital labor of certain kinds of crowdfunding that function as wealth redistribution^[iii]; making a phone-tree or a list of people to bring food when your lover is having surgery or your friend is having a baby; how someone's capacity to live and be mobile every day depends on a paid or unpaid collective taking care that is practiced with intent rather than the assumption of natural capacity. But reading Anne Boyer's post this week I think this isn't ambitious enough: if care is about how we arrange ourselves in relation to others, then it's a kind of attention. Tracking something but not "data". And it's in all the modes and all the things.

Mitropoulos too locates political potential in the question of reproduction and infrastructure: "if debt marks a crisis of social reproduction, then surely the question becomes how to generate forms of life beyond its specifically capitalist forms?" (229). Consonant with this imaginary, Mitropoulos rejects the myth of independence or political self-sufficiency: debt might instead be understood and perhaps even valorized as the "irreducible, inter-dependent sharing of a world" (229). That is, we are all in debt to each other and we should be. Care here could look like queer generation: a generation with the *genus*, race, ripped out and burnt. Propagation. Extension. Loans we make with each other that we don't desire to be fulfilled. Tracing, rather than tracking, how those debts work out in relation to the other we owe and in relation to our capacities to generate credit—the "transformation of an infinite debt into an endless credit." That might break the world apart in the best sense.

[i] See for example Patricia Clough, Greg Goldberg, Rachel Schiff, Aaron Weeks and Craig Willse, "Notes Towards A Theory of Affect-Itself," *ephemera* 7: 1 (2007), 60-77.

[ii] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *diacritics* 17: 2 (1987), 72.

[iii] I'm thinking especially of Miss Major's Giving Circle here, where the long time Bay Area activist and elderly trans woman of color Miss Major is supported partially through waged folks signing up to give her monthly household money. Also of crowdfunding hijacked to redistribute money from rich people to prison commissary funds, queer of color high teas, and (for example) sex work activists who can't work because they're being harassed by the police. These examples share the quality of not functioning as "investments" in a finished product such as a film/play/project; to donate in them is to effectively refuse the contractualism of the question, "Where will my money go?"

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