BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Eubanks, Virginia. *Automating Inequality*. New York, NY: Picador, 2019, pp.271, $24.50 CAN paper, (978-1-250-21578-9).

Characteristic of American capitalism and the attempt to achieve the American Dream is intense and visible class disparity. This economic stratification does not just affect the poorest of the poor; rather, it affects countless Americans as poverty creeps its way up the class structure. Virginia Eubanks' book *Automating Inequality* seeks to chronicle the path that such disparity has taken in the digital age, as increasing automation not only further marginalizes those that are already poor, but shapes poverty for those on the brink. In order to do this, Eubanks focuses on three case studies of automated social assistance systems and delves into the lives of a select few who interact with these systems: Indiana's welfare system, Los Angeles' homeless housing assistance program, and Allegheny County's child welfare system. Eubanks traces the evolution of the material poorhouse into what she has coined the *digital poorhouse*, which is emblematic of how the United States government and non-governmental organizations use information and data on the poor to track, categorize, and police their existence in ways that other socioeconomic classes are not subjected to.

A large portion of the data presented in *Automating Inequality* comes from interviews with primary stakeholders in the respective case studies. This includes former, current, and potential service users, as well as former and current service employees. By having both service users and employees represented in the interview data, Eubanks is able to analyze the full picture of how data and automation are affecting decision making, administration, and organization in the services utilizing new software and technologies. Further, it is to Eubanks' credit that throughout *Automating Inequality,* she returns to her central idea of the *digital poorhouse* to convey the message that the automation of social services that are meant to assist the poor are often likely to further push them into poverty. By tracing through the methods of impersonal surveillance and categorization that comes in hand with the automation of social services, Eubanks highlights the very real inequality in America,

and how inequality is exacerbated by the resources that are meant to reduce it.

Automating Inequality, however, fails to critically engage with the role race plays in poverty and discrimination. This is not to say that Eubanks ignores this altogether – there are several sections in the book where she recognizes and states that black Americans are disproportionally represented in welfare systems, and are often discriminated against when trying to utilize social services. Examples of this include the brief discussions on "cultural differences" in child rearing being a likely rationale for black parents to be unfoundedly reported to the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families, as well as the gendered and racialized stereotype of the "welfare queen" and the implications this label brings with it. Unfortunately, Eubanks does not engage with the legacy of racism that affects the experiences of impoverished people of color in the United States much deeper than this. Although Eubanks takes painstakingly long sections of many chapters to trace the historical evolution of poverty, welfare, and analog systems of assistance before looking at the shift to automated assistance and categorization, she continues to overlook how both historically and contemporarily, many functions of poverty for black Americans have deep institutional roots. The ghettoization of black neighbourhoods, racialization of drug usage, and historic disenfranchisement of black Americans are only some examples of critical pieces of American society that warrant greater attention. To miss this, and then to invoke the words of black civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in the final chapter is an oversight that leaves the question of why Eubanks wouldn't spend more time throughout the book acknowledging and unpacking the racialization of poverty salient in readers' minds.

Additionally, *Automating Inequality* fails to engage with the relationship between data collected for social services and the police in any meaningful way. This failure is most obvious in the chapter "High-Tech Homelessness in the City of Angels" where, almost in passing, Eubanks mentions Operation Talon where government agencies "mined food stamp data to identify those with outstanding warrants," and that police have "blanket access" to data collected by housing organizations (p.116). This would have been a good section to critically analyze how the police use the data but this discussion in the book is minimal. Arguably, this relationship could have been its own chapter in order to realistically and critically look at how the digital and automated data collection and categorization is working not only as a way to surveil the poor but to control them in the most punitive sense. In a similar vein, Eubanks' recount of the LAPD confiscating and destroying the belongings of

people experiencing homelessness is framed as if the practice ceased after the 2012 ruling against it in *Lavan v. City of Los Angeles*. This is a problematic portrayal of the LAPD's ongoing turbulent relationship with skid row residents, as Los Angeles police and sanitation workers continue to conduct homeless sweeps, which ultimately results in the removal and destruction of private property (Currier, 2019). Although this is a small detail, this inconsistency is concerning and further limits the book's critical engagement with how automated data is harming the poor in relation to policing.

An additional point of concern is Eubanks' equation of her experience with debt from private insurance with the intense ongoing poverty that many experience when the government fails them. Eubanks, as a professional, middle-class individual, will likely recover from this financial setback. Those disadvantaged by government systems often will not. To Eubanks' credit, in her introductory chapter, she acknowledges that for those experiencing critical poverty with intense needs, their run-ins with government services are significantly harder to recover from and are perpetually disenfranchising. This acknowledgment is lost in the penultimate chapter. In what seems to be an effort to convince other middle-class professionals that they should care about automated inequality, Eubanks uses her story to indicate that automation can prove harmful to anyone. While this is a well-intentioned point, it is concerning as it comes across as an erasure of the intersecting hardships that the poor face.

Automating Inequality does a good job at conveying information about the digital poorhouse that Virginia Eubanks writes of. For a readership that includes the general public, the book does what it sets out to do in a way that is accessible and digestible. Eubanks tactfully introduces concepts and systems that are complex using accessible language, demonstrating how the automation of information collection and decision making is deepening inequality and the disenfranchisement of the poor. However, for critical readers who have an existing knowledge of class inequality or a theoretical background in intersectional schools of thought, this book lacks a critical engagement with pertinent factors of inequality that *should* be included in discussions of poverty and inequality, automated or not.

University of Alberta   Jillian Bevan

REFERENCES

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Jillian Bevan is a master's student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta studying harm reduction practices and resources for drug users in the electronic dance music community.

Email: jbevan@ualberta.ca