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Melissa Villa-Nicholas, **Data Borders: How Silicon Valley Is Building an Industry Around Immigrants,** Oakland: University of California Press, 2023, 224 pp., $29.42 (paperback).

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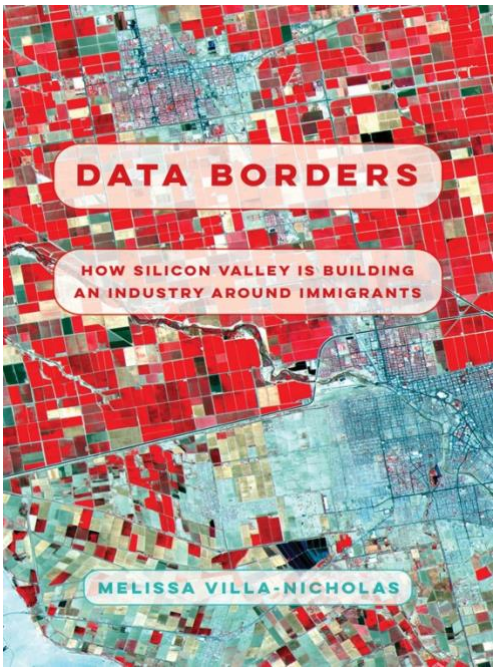

In ***Data Borders: How Silicon Valley Is Building an Industry Around Immigrants***, author Melissa Villa-Nicholas questions the bounds of information-tracking systems not only through quantifiable expanses but also through sociocultural persistence. Delving into the intersecting histories of the US-Mexico border and the development of digital surveillance infrastructures, Villa-Nicholas articulates American technologies as a systemic reinforcement of past citizenship hierarchies rhetorically mobilized by American "futurity" (p. 7). More specifically, Villa-Nicholas positions Silicon Valley (one of the foremost agents of technological commodification and advancement) as a quintessential force in realizing American "innovation" as a systemic and historically pervasive enforcement of the U.S. American identity. Perpetuating the paradigm of American exceptionalism through tech development, Silicon Valley's most heralded digital infrastructures coalesce deeper into facets of our society to become largely gilded, normalized, and invisibilized.

Parsing through an embedded series of government-funded partnerships, the book positions hallmark American tech organizations such as Amazon Web Services, Palantir, and Anduril as quiet facilitators in the "unconsented" (p. 44) datafication of marginalized demographics within the United States. Throughout the successive chapters of the book, Villa-Nicholas impresses upon the reader the true range of how individuals' information and behaviors are siphoned into scaled data points: across mundane exchanges and daily practices of online shopping, checking out books at a local library, and even dropping children off at daycare. Innocuous through their entrenchment in everyday social landscapes and exchanges, Silicon Valley tech enterprises fragment the populace by highlighting visibility and denying privacy. In particular, the book emphasizes how the bodies and movements of Latinx populations are inextricably traced by technology and surveillance throughout the most foundational facets of their lives.

Despite playing an instrumental role in the development and activation of technologies for advocacy, Latinx contributions are omitted from the current system of technological enterprising through reinforced organizational practices and datafication. The book elucidates both the history of Latinx involvement within crucial technological systems and the enduring disidentification of this involvement. "Latinxs have historically been embedded in technological design and even built the underlying infrastructure of surveillance networks" (p. 50). Through the siphoning of data and the resultant structurization of

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"belonging," Latinx communities are systematically tracked, marginalized, and excluded *through* networked information systems. As such, their belonging *within* tech structures is structurally and rhetorically denied.

Chapter 2 elaborates on the historical construction of datafication and surveillance systems that now commodify "immigrant data as a product" (p. 43). Covering the emergence of anxieties in response to instances of war and global unrest throughout the 20th century, the chapter details the development of a rhetorical and social need to predict and protect the nation through identification. Prediction and protection through identification soon became entrenched in Big Data procedures and frameworks founded on a quantifiable, trackable, and measurable hierarchy of belonging. Villa-Nicholas coins the term "correlative normativity" (p. 55) to articulate the commodified pursuit of identifying undocumented immigrants who are positioned by the datafication process as a "threat [. . .] for their inability to be mapped [or] tracked [. . .] in the way of the acquiescing citizen-consumers" (p. 64). Operating on systemized norms of safety within racialized conceptions of the American identity, undocumented Latinx populations' personhoods soon become subject to the quantification of tracking systems. Most significantly, the chapter questions the bounds of systems that are symbolic of American ingenuity and advancement and yet so "invisibly" steeped into our everyday surroundings: Where do they begin and where do they end? And, with their constant presence, what do they consistently reinforce to us about "belonging" and the ideologically driven need to quantify, track, and visibilize "unbelonging" within migrant communities?

Chapter 3 continues to contextualize the historical paradigms of racialized surveillance, systemic exclusion, and tracking with current tech entrepreneurship and networked partnerships composing the "new Migra" (p. 78). "Data-driven, ubiquitous, and all-seeing" (pp. 78–79), the chapter positions Silicon Valley's new Migra and its hallmark investments as key facilitators of digital infrastructures within surveillance structures. Charting through some of the cornerstone organizations within the tech industry such as Palantir and Amazon Web Services, the chapter elaborates on underlying government contracts and funding that institutionalize a pervasive and inescapable system of quantification.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of the "citizen milieu" (p. 87) to describe Americans' largely unknowing entrenchment within and contribution to the "Military-Industrial Startup Complex" (p. 88). Individuals interacting with everyday public spaces and interfaces are thus inadvertent contributors to the tracking systems that quantify a citizenship hierarchy and inform deportation strategies. Critically, the text reinforces the rhetorical themes of civic duty and unknowing sacrifice of privacy to protect the well-being of the nation at large. Drawing a close focus on mundane Amazon devices such as Alexa and crucial library systems within both academic and community contexts, the author demonstrates our entrenchment in data infrastructures. Opaque disclosures on data farming practices and regulations—termed "retroactive data consciousness" (p. 99)—can further obstruct datafied individuals from learning about illicit use of their information years after the fact.

The concluding chapters' tones shift to focus on the role of mythos within surveillance data farming systems and the stories of those quantified by it. Chapter 5 draws on Joseph Campbell's (1968/1949) quintessential "Hero's Journey" narrative framework; the author articulates deep-rooted narratives through which tech organizations position themselves as altruistic and powerful heroes. The text delves into Palantir and Anduril's rhetorical emphasis on J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (p. 126) epic to signify tech

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entrepreneurs as hardened champions for good while othering undocumented populations as outsiders. Tolkien symbols denoting resistance and power are transposed onto the proverbial self-actualizing and misunderstood Steve Jobs-esque tech innovator. This is the narrative construction of a mythic and fandom-driven "clean good-versus-evil binary" (p. 112) that organizations like Palantir and Anduril typify and justify themselves through.

Chapter 6 positions first-person parables against the mythical stories that reinforce and justify the "heroism" of data tracking infrastructures; "the antidote to a story is a parable" (p. 148). Conveying the firsthand experiences of Latinx individuals who have lived within deeply surveilled regions in the Californian "borderlands," the text turns away from accounts of tech organizations and focuses closely on "putting the body back into the data body" (p. 156). Villa-Nicholas draws on Ruha Benjamin (2019) and Safiya Nobles's (2018) "methods of imagination as a counter to systemic oppression" (p. 152) to rearticulate Latinx migrants' personhood, agency, and lived experiences. Within this last and profoundly intimate chapter, we learn of the experiences, hopes, and fears of those who are systemically excluded and dehumanized by the pervasive digital Migra. This conclusive chapter realizes the heart-blood of the entire text by positioning the deeply poignant articulation of stories as an embodied denial of systemic erasure.

Data Borders: How Silicon Valley Is Building an Industry Around Immigrants is an edifying introduction for readers seeking to learn about current surveillance, information systems, and data aggregation procedures within the American sociopolitical imaginarium. Readers of Aihwa Ong and AnnaLee Saxenian will find the book to be a moving, urgent, and critically informative text exploring Silicon Valley's almost mythic direction of technological advancement as a sociopolitical impetus. The text is densely interspersed with case studies of the tech partnerships composing the digitized surveillance system and highly personal accounts of Latinx individuals' experiences within it. Though Villa-Nicholas's wide coverage of Silicon Valley tech enterprises' most invisibilized partnerships and data infrastructures are one of the book's greatest strengths, a more connective coverage of these partnerships could have benefited its overall scope. It is undeniable that the entrenchment and functions of these organizations are incredibly opaque, scattered, and intrinsically vested within our society's intrinsic structure. Villa-Nicholas explores commercial data siphoning systems while considering the empirical limitations of what is known and unknown, effectively framing and contextualizing the book with frightening and severe instances of weaponized data. However, a more comprehensive section focused on delineating this network of varied tech organizations and unseen connectivity could bolster readers' holistic understanding of the pervasiveness of commercial data aggregation. While the case studies integrated throughout the chapters of the book are incredibly informative, a section designated to chart this shrouded network could potentially provide a more salient foundation for readers unfamiliar with the range of organizations and their involvement in data assemblage and commercialization.

Villa-Nicholas conveys not only the history of datafication but also the profound and continued dehumanization its functions cause marginalized populations within the United States. In doing so, the book conveys what is perhaps the most significant warning, one that is reinforced throughout each chapter: As we move forward in the throes of technological prowess, we must continue to recognize and rectify the embedded remnants of a deeply enduring and exclusionary past. And as a consequence of our unawareness

and its fundamental entrenchment within the structure, every one of us unconsciously plays a contributory role in perpetuating it.

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