Alex Rosenblat, "Driving as glamorous labor" in Uberland: How Algorithms are Rewriting the Rules of Work (Univ. of Calif. Press, 2018).

CHAPTER ONE

DRIVING AS GLAMOROUS LABOR

How Uber Uses the Myths of the Sharing Economy

In the spring of 2010, Uber launched the first beta version of its now-famous smartphone app. It promised to revolutionize transportation. Uber offered anyone with a car a new way to earn extra income through casual jobs as a driver. Meanwhile, anyone needing a ride could now benefit from an affordable, on-demand chauffeur service to get around. The Uber platform allows users to seamlessly connect passengers and drivers: it calculates the rates, transmits credit card information, and maintains quality ratings for drivers and riders alike.

As a company, Uber has unquestionably changed the way people get around hundreds of cities across the world. It has become a symbol of the New Economy and, for some, the future of work. Uber advertises that its drivers are entrepreneurs who can, with flexible schedules, make middle-class incomes even in an unstable economy. But do these assertions hold up to scrutiny, or is the company playing us with false claims?

THE GREAT RECESSION AND THE SHARING ECONOMY

Before we can understand how Uber treats its drivers, it's necessary to take a step back. Uber's employment model was born in the so-called sharing economy,[1] a social technology movement that capitalized on the economic instability of the Great Recession to sell a narrative.[2] Between 2007 and 2009, the Great Recession and collapse of the subprime mortgage markets ravaged American households with waves of foreclosures. The collapse of financial markets challenged societal confidence in American institutions, like banking and governance,[3] while an exodus of former homeowners shut down neighborhoods and led to urban blight in cities like Detroit and Cleveland.[4] Job losses increased suddenly,[5] and national unemployment climbed to 10 percent in October 2009.[6] This instability sharpened the economic consequences of prolonged joblessness for white-collar workers, who comprised 60 percent of the labor force; by 2009, they accounted for nearly half of the long-term unemployed.[7] Still, the greatest job losses from the Great Recession were concentrated in blue-collar industries among workers under thirty.[8] Although the Great Recession officially ended in June 2009, its impact on unemployment persisted well into the economic recovery.[9]

This context helps explain why sharing-economy companies with roots in Silicon Valley, like Uber, so often frame their technologies as powerful engines of job creation. In the media and in some academic debates, the future of work is framed as the threat of a robot coming for your job. While society may benefit from automated work, the fear is that these benefits will not be distributed equally: jobless futures imply some will get left behind. This threat is not an inherent characteristic of technology but, rather, comes from the current American economic climate. As Philip Alston, a poverty investigator from the United Nations, observed at the end of 2017, "The reality is that the United States now has probably the lowest degree of social mobility among all the rich countries. And if you are born poor, guess where you're going to end up—poor."[10] When technology innovators use "job creation" language, they engage in virtue-signaling: the implication is that not only do they deserve credit for producing large economic gains for society,[11] but also they should be shielded from harsh criticism for their methods because the end result is positive.

The sharing economy promised to save the day for a population shaken by the Great Recession: using technology, millions of people across society would now be able to efficiently pool and share their limited resources. The seeds of Uber took root in a climate of profound economic uncertainty. After the recession hit in 2007, shockwaves of economic downturn rippled across the globe: Greece's government tumbled into insolvency, while in Iceland, bankers were frog-marched to jail for burdening the country with a private banking debt seven times its annual GDP. In the aftermath, the front pages of newspapers regularly featured Middle Eastern and African refugees drowning as they tried to reach Europe, compounding a sense of economic urgency in the United States with global humanitarian concerns arising from geopolitical conflict. The collapse of Wall Street was a reminder that no empire, not even the American kingdom of financiers, is absolute. At the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, leading economists began to rewrite their theories with a new focus on income equality, replacing earlier ideas that had emphasized growth above all else.[12]

Back in the United States, victims of the Great Recession began to push back against the corporations and practices that had caused the crisis. The City of Baltimore, the State of Illinois, and the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission, among other, bigger victims of foreclosures, sued the notorious lending institutions whose high-risk lending fueled the Great Recession—institutions like Wells Fargo—and settled for hundreds of millions.[13] Predatory lending practices targeted racial minorities during the subprime boom, highlighting the role of finance in social injustice. Emergent social movements that advocate for social equity, like Occupy Wall Street, organized activists with a common desire to re-center society around a moral economy.

While Occupy Wall Street activists formed a tent city in Zuccotti Park on Wall Street, members of Black Lives Matter were staging protests across the country to advocate a political agenda that could address the root causes of inequality.[14] Soon, more voices joined the chorus, this time from the top. Facebook cofounder and philanthropist Chris

Hughes dedicated his intellectual thought leadership to promoting a universal basic income,[15] and Mark Zuckerberg, his former roommate, mentioned it in the commencement speech he gave at Harvard.[16] This quasi-moral solution to income inequality—and to expanding the definition of equality for this generation—finds its strongest American proponents in Silicon Valley. Home to the billion-dollar titans of industry, who form a slightly reluctant political elite in the New Economy, Silicon Valley and the culture of technology radiate influence across the business, political, and media culture of major American cities. And Silicon Valley has a strong stake in national debates over whether automation technology, such as self-driving cars, will take all our jobs. Universal basic income is one form of "automation alimony" that is proposed to relieve the rising inequality often attributed to automation.

It was in this economic and cultural climate that the buzz around "the sharing economy" began. Its promise was seductively simple. The sharing economy was a social technology movement designed to use tech to share resources more efficiently—a true "commonwealth" aimed at remedying some of the insecurity fostered by the Great Recession. The sharing economy was built atop earlier cultural conversations, like those about rental commerce, car-sharing, and cooperative housing. Technology could connect those who possessed underutilized assets, skills, or time with potential consumers, a form of commerce that reduced the costs of ownership and more efficiently distributed goods and services.[17] For struggling millennials displaced by the recession, this new model provided a hopeful new paradigm for earning income. As Robin Chase, cofounder of the car-sharing service Zipcar,[18] wrote in 2015, "In the new collaborative economy, sharing and networking assets, like platforms, car seats and bedrooms, will always deliver more value faster."[19]

Critics, like scholar Nick Srnicek, countered the idea that the sharing economy was anything novel, branding it as a mere reiteration of the platform capitalism of the 1970s.[20] Arguing that platform capitalism will hasten the end of work, Srnicek advocates a future of different possibilities.[21] Meanwhile, culture scholar-activist Trebor Scholz sees platform cooperativism as a viable way of redistributing corporate profits of platforms like Uber to workers. The disparity between billion-dollar tech giants and the rest of society makes it easy for critics of capitalism to shout from the rooftops, and by the mid-2010s they weren't alone. The question that academics, policy makers, labor advocates, and others were asking outright, with greater insistence, by the end of 2017 was blunt: Why aren't wages growing in America?[22]

Against this contentious backdrop, ridehailing platforms began promoting themselves as a pathway to the middle class for anyone who wanted to drive. Uber quickly became the poster child for the sharing economy, advertising itself as "a smartphone app that connects riders and drivers at the touch of a button." Founded in March 2009 in San Francisco, the company grew quickly by hiring decentralized staff in each new city or region. These new staff were empowered to establish Uber's operations with lightning speed, like a vast network of start-ups. By the middle of 2017, the company operated in over 630 cities worldwide, and it had provided 5 billion rides to passengers.[23] By March 2018, it had 3 million active drivers worldwide.[24] More importantly though, Uber offered its drivers a job with personal autonomy and a path to a middle-class life, even as that middle class was shrinking.[25] Meanwhile, as early as 2014, Uber announced that the median income of its drivers was a little more than ninety thousand dollars per year in New York City and over seventy-four thousand dollars in San Francisco.[26]

Arguably, the chief accomplishment of technology in the sharing economy has been the creation of robust platforms for serving temporary jobs to a flexible workforce that cycles through a variety of part-time or precarious and temporary jobs to make ends meet. Of course, gig work predates the technological framework that the sharing economy draws on as one of its distinguishing characteristics.[27] Economists Lawrence F. Katz and Alan Krueger argue that the percentage of workers employed in gig work climbed from 10.07 percent in February 2005 to 15.8 percent in late 2015, a decade later.[28] (Although growth in this area is high, the exact measures of the gig economy are unknown: the Bureau of Labor Statistics did make plans to conduct a 2017 survey of contingent workers, though their efforts are still pending as this book goes to press.)[29]

The prevalence of temp, gig, and contingent work is summed up by a *Wall Street Journal* headline at the end of 2017 announcing, "Some of the World's Largest Employers No Longer Sell Things, They Rent Workers."[30] Highlighting how three out of five of the biggest employers in the United States distribute contract labor, the article describes how they operate like temp agencies. Uber shows us how a company can organize masses of *people* through technology into discrete units who are available on demand to take passengers from point A to point B—until the drivers opt to log out. That same technology fundamentally alters labor relations as well: drivers are billed as consumers of Uber's connective technology, rather than as workers.

To join the Uber driver workforce, prospective drivers download the Uber driver app onto their mobile smartphones. They then take their Uber-eligible vehicles to local mechanics to be certified as in good working order and upload their driver's license numbers and auto insurance policy numbers to their accounts on Uber's website or through the app (drivers I speak with rarely obtain commercial insurance, unless they are obliged to by regulatory requirements). Then, after consenting to a background check that takes under a week in many places, they're ready to go. In other words, barriers to entry are very few. Part of what makes platforms so valuable is their ability to provide jobs to anyone and everyone in a decentralized workforce. As economic sociologist Vili Lehdonvirta observes:

> Piece rates are a substitute for more direct managerial control. Employers who pay hourly rates are pickier about whom they accept into their ranks in the first place, whereas one of the strengths of these platforms is that essentially anyone can sign up and start working right away with minimal hurdles. And workers who are paid on an hourly basis usually cannot take breaks quite as easily as pieceworkers. This low entry barrier and potential for almost minute-by-minute flexibility are genuine features of platform-based piecework, and some workers value them.[31]

Uber's platform manifests a profound tension: the company seeks to standardize work for the masses through algorithmic management while, at the same time, distancing itself from responsibility for workers.

The popularity of Uber among passengers has been central to public support for the sharing economy. Bolstered by popular opinion, tech and labor advocates take to the media to discuss how employment through an app is the future of work, a gangway of progressive opportunity off the sinking ship of the post–Great Recession economy. Perhaps underscoring Uber's shiny prospects as a new player in the labor market, economists have noted that after the job losses of the Great Recession, "recovery job gains came largely from new establishments entering the economy."[32] Sharing-economy employment is often concentrated in the service industry: jobs like delivering passengers, food, or laundry cannot easily be offshored or automated (yet).

With the example of Uber's success, countless other firms began following suit. It seemed that every new company, from domestic cleaning platforms like Handy to the multi-industry temping platform Fiverr, wanted to idolatrously claim their service as the "Uber for X."[33] Many of these imitators went belly-up, including Prim, for on-demand laundry services; HomeJoy, a home-cleaning marketplace; Tutorspree, for tutoring; and SideCar, a direct Uber competitor.[34] Nevertheless, Uber inspired a variety of companies across industries, including nursing, trucking, and others, to think about how technology can be used to create efficient on-demand services by organizing independent providers and consumers through a digital platform. Defining the sharing economy is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. It is a haze of converging ideas with popular appeal. Will employers across industries adopt sharing technology to manage their workforces?

The sharing economy grew much more quickly than anyone imagined it would. A Pew Research Center survey published in November 2016 shows that 8 percent of American adults earned money from an online employment platform in the previous year across industries such as ridehailing, online tasks, or cleaning/laundry.[35] Rounds and rounds of venture capital funding bolstered Uber and Airbnb, the two most successful companies to emerge from the sharing-economy period. Both companies became "unicorns," a term for start-ups that reach billion-dollar valuations. In 2016, Uber reached a $68 billion valuation, while Airbnb was valued at $30 billion,[36] less than a decade after their beginnings in 2009 and 2008, respectively. By July 2017, the Oxford Internet Institute's iLabour Project published a report finding that the online sharing economy, which includes clerical and data entry services for jobs posted online, had grown 26 percent in the previous year.[37]

But as the sharing economy has grown, things have gotten complicated. Increasingly, the "sharing economy" has been identified as an intensification of the "gig economy," as people have become suspicious of the way that words like *sharing* euphemistically describe precarious, part-time, and piecework employment.[38] Scholars, as well as media outlets like the *New York Times* and *Buzzfeed,* have moved to rechristen "ridesharing" as "ridehailing" in an attempt to ease the contradiction between altruism and employment. The sharing-economy language has long been both expansive and imprecise, recasting service industry and white-collar jobs alike in the amorphous terms of digital culture and the New Economy.

The sharing economy has also made for odd bedfellows: hopeful, left-leaning advocates of cooperative housing and bike-sharing found themselves allying with industry tech positivists (those who believe that technology will inevitably lead to continual social progress). As sharing technology has taken on a more significant role in society, other civil society actors have chosen to become stakeholders in Uber's future developments. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People allied with Uber to provide employment for drivers with nonviolent criminal records,[39] and Mothers Against Drunk Driving promoted Uber to reduce drunk driving through ridehailing.[40] (Later, when the working conditions of drivers proved wanting, civil rights advocates were effectively pitted against labor rights advocates through Uber's clever maneuvering, though they might otherwise have found common ground in protecting the rights of vulnerable groups.)

While conversations about the role of Uber in society have their place, the commotion in Uberland may be fairly incidental to the lives and work of many drivers. In Montreal, I met Adnan, a Syrian immigrant to Canada. As I listened to him speak, I absorbed the drama of his life stories. Adnan recounted how he retrieved his pregnant daughter from the war zone of Syria by renting three guys with kalashnikovs to steal over the mountains from Lebanon with him, driven by a man who wore night-vision goggles. Adnan used to work in the entertainment business in Syria, and he developed many contacts among famous actors there who would be hired or invited to attend events for high-level government officials. They alerted him early on to the fact that it was going to get really bad. He started preparing to leave before the conflicts in Syria exploded into a full-out civil war. In 2012, he took his eldest daughter to visit Syria, and she stayed behind to get married. When she got pregnant, she wanted to find a safe haven; Adnan came to her rescue. Adnan drove for Uber in Montreal because, as he described, the manager at his previous job didn't like him. He said driving for Uber is good in a pinch because it's flexible, but he didn't earn enough to make it his livelihood. Luckily, his wife had a steady job as an accountant, through which he maintained his health benefits.

As the gig economy continues to grow, it functions sometimes as a social safety net for workers with high income volatility or gaps in employment, even outside the United States.[41] This is partly why sharing technology has been reframed as an engine of economic populism. Uber's influence on the future of work is compounded by the company's outsized valuation, upward of $70 billion through 2017,[42] and the oversized influence of Silicon Valley in the world. Uber's valuation as a private company is not set in stone: at the end of 2015, the company's investors valued it at $62.5 billion; in 2016, the high point for Uber's valuation was $68 billion;[43] a consortium led by SoftBank invested in the company at the end of 2017 with the understanding that it was valued at $48 billion;[44] and Alphabet obtained shares in Uber in February 2018 on the basis of a $72 billion valuation.[45] The company's value will be determined more concretely after an initial public offering, but the multibillion-dollar question of Uber's worth is part of what propels Uber to the front pages of the news. The company's place on the world stage is fairly irrelevant in contrast to the upheavals that a driver like Adnan has chronicled in his own life. At times, it can feel like the politics of Uber are dwarfed by the lived realities of its drivers. How does a question about whether the sharing economy is really about sharing compare with rifles and night-vision goggles? But this view mistakes exactly how incendiary Uber is. Uber is not incidentally political, nor are the company's politics limited to the features of its app or its driver policies. Everywhere Uber has set up operations, it has disrupted the structure of everyday life, ranging from that of communities to transportation industries. So much of what allows Uber to play us all is the fact that it has such a wide variety of stakeholders who have uneven investments in its methods, or its success, including drivers, civil rights groups, nonprofits that support girls who code, and regulators. Even when Uber plays only a small role in the lives of some of its drivers, such as Adnan, its politics may affect their working conditions and the risks they incur on the job in far larger ways.

The chapters that follow explore the nuts and bolts of Uber's practices and how these practices impact everyone from passengers and regulators to civil rights activists and other Silicon Valley companies. But first, what about the foundational promises of Uber as a service, a company, and an economic symbol in the United States? Uber's business model and its public image, like those of so many other start-ups and imitators, rely on three poetic fables: the myth of the economic value of "sharing," the myth of technological exceptionalism, and the myth of glamorized millennial labor.

THE MYTH OF SHARING

Uber spins itself as an altruistic company. It identifies as a technology company, not a transportation company, to draw a distinction between

the laws that govern the taxi industry and what Uber does. But it is also saying that when work is mediated through a technology platform, labor becomes a type of communion, a message that comes from sharing rhetoric and through driver recruitment ads, such as "Get paid weekly just for helping our community of riders get rides around town." Uber drivers are classified as independent contractors in the eyes of the law and termed "driver-partners" in Uber's official lexicon: these categorizations imply a higher level of autonomy and equity in the company than they have in practice. The company positions drivers as "partners" with messages like "be your own boss and "get paid in fares for driving on your own schedule." Other digital economy labor platforms, like Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and sharing economy companies like TaskRabbit, call their workers, respectively, "Turkers" and "Taskers" or "Rabbits" and bill them as entrepreneurs or micropreneurs.[46] This careful dance with terminology distances platform employers from the rules and norms of labor law.[47] These new platform companies attempt to align themselves with a lineage of "cooperative commerce"[48] or acts of mutual help and generosity like hitchhiking, carpooling, and couch surfing. But they also identify this image of cooperation with technology as fundamentally a new force in society.

Technology does facilitate access to underutilized resources and secondary markets of redistribution for goods and services,[49] and it extends opportunities by bringing the efficiencies of scale to existing transactional relationships.[50] And stories about what sharing technology can do "play a role in binding together these disparate industries and forms of labor: cheap, convenient, and fast services made possible through the empowerment of entrepreneurial, independent contract workers who benefit from the scaling of these industries via digital platforms," observes researcher Alexandra Mateescu, citing the work of media historian Caroline Jack.[51] But there is a gap between the promise and the realities of work in the sharing economy.

Uber, Airbnb, and other sharing-economy services downplay the amount of work that goes into driving, hosting, and similar kinds of "sharing" labor. Instead, they frame these jobs as a form of social reciprocity—users are simply sharing their homes, cars, tools, skills, or time with other users on the platform. This logic comes from the technology culture at large. As an article of faith, Facebook holds that all 2 billion of its users are a "community." Social software, like Wikipedia, fosters collaborative environments across communities of users who can contribute equitably to a common goal.[52] (Although this is the idea behind collaborative, open-source software projects, there are many examples where this vision of equity doesn't hold true. Women's edits to Wikipedia pages, for example, are rejected or reverted more often than men's edits. Their experiences warn us that not all contributions are treated equally.)[53] When companies like Uber capitalize on and co-opt the goodwill that organizations like the Wikimedia Foundation inspire and put it toward a business model that creates precarious work, they are trading on people's unstated notions and understandings about what collaborative online projects do. In the gig economy model, a top-down hierarchical employer is remade into a platform in the image of open-source software culture, where anyone can contribute or share their code to achieve a superior digital product or service.[54] And it's this very act of sharing that suggests a disruption of role identity, because the line between producers and consumers blurs—some scholars use the term *produsers* for this combined identity.[55] By obscuring the incentives of the market economy, the sharing economy painted a portrait of capitalism that felt community-oriented.

As a job with a low barrier to entry, driving for Uber is cast in this image, as an "open-source" opportunity for drivers to contribute their labor and earn "extra" money. Technology often blurs the line between paid and unpaid labor, in much the same way that women's contributions to work are undervalued. The societal failure to acknowledge some forms of women's work, such as emotional care, as work is premised on the assumption that they like doing it or that it's easy for them and therefore not work. The sharing economy similarly posits that technology makes work different than before: it draws on base assumptions about how things that are socially or community-oriented or involve personal passion are fun and therefore not work either. This technology culture can and does blur categorizations between what counts as labor and what doesn't. For example, Internet blogging created a type of free content contribution that effectively undermined professional journalism and made it a more precarious job by loosening access to information production. Uber trades on our cultural assumptions about technology to frame every driver as his or her own boss, implying that its platform fosters a collaborative and equitable environment without traditional top-down labor or management hierarchies. This is an illusion, but sharing rhetoric does overlay longer histories of contingent work.

The gig-economy job offerings at Uber, TaskRabbit, and Fiverr are a feature of low-wage work already. As sociologist Julia Ticona discussed with me in conversation, for low-wage workers it's not a choice between TaskRabbit or Uber and a forty-hour-a-week job with benefits. It's TaskRabbit or twenty hours a week at McDonald's and the other twenty hours at a friend's hardware store. The blend of formal and informal work blurs all the categories of employment we've held sacred for a long time.[56] Nonetheless, sharing-economy companies have had remarkable success in redefining the nature of work as a technology phenomenon and as a form of "sharing," because technology can be framed as a countersolution to more predatory forms of commerce.

THE MYTH OF TECHNOLOGICAL EXCEPTIONALISM

Taxi drivers have protested that Uber violates the laws that regulate their industry by operating without permits,[57] but Uber maintains that it is not a taxi company—it's a technology company that uses neutral algorithms to merely facilitate connections between consumers and drivers. Meanwhile, the growth of Uber has quickly become a threat to the highly regulated taxi industry's monopoly on chauffeur services. Companies like Uber and Airbnb separate themselves from their predecessors, taxis and hotels, by emphasizing the altruistic premise of their "sharing" platforms. Airbnb argues that it is a technology platform, like Facebook, YouTube, or Google, that connects hosts with guests. In conflicts with Airbnb, the hotel industry alleges that the company operates illegal hotels: hosts rent out their spare rooms or homes to traveling guests but do not have to comply with the safety regulations that govern hotels or bed and breakfasts.[58]

Likewise, Facebook, which is in the business of sharing news, resists being categorized as a media company. A media company can be regulated and held to account for journalistic ethics, editorial responsibilities, and news accuracy (rather than "fake news"). A neutral platform that uses algorithms to spread content or to curate newsfeeds is the product of engineering and automation, and these efface the responsibilities a media company might have under the guise of technological innocence. Scholars[59] and journalists[60] have penned marked retorts to Facebook's arguments, but the logic that Facebook uses is similar to what Uber deploys.

Silicon Valley carries the banner of "technological exceptionalism," the idea that the regulations and laws that apply to their industry competitors or predecessors do not apply to them for the simple reason that they identify primarily as technology companies. These tech giants reason that the technology services they offer to achieve a familiar goal (like moving a passenger from A to B in a taxi) are qualitatively different from the actions that these laws were designed to govern. This effectively renders laws archaic, to some degree, and this pattern among Silicon Valley tech companies is often termed "disruption." Law scholar Julia Tomassetti argues that the sharing economy amounts to regulatory arbitrage (an attempt to circumvent unfavorable regulation).[61]

THE MYTH OF GLAMORIZED MILLENNIAL LABOR

Uber has carefully crafted its recruitment messages to invite potential drivers to work for a global technology company, rather than a newfangled taxi service. Its marketing is almost exclusively organized around

the archetypical image of the "millennial." Born between the 1980s and the early twenty-first century, millennials are touted as society's most active technology users, and they often find their work in the on-demand, gig economy. The CEO of Intuit, a company that offers tax accounting software for independent contractors that is particularly popular with Uber drivers, echoed the idea that the gig economy is a millennial phenomenon when he commented, "We know the gig economy is real. It's here. It's a secular trend. It didn't just start with Uber and Lyft. It started years ago. It's a lifestyle choice for millennials."[62] Even though they have been the butt of jokes about their limited employment prospects, millennials are simultaneously credited with access to the boundless opportunities of the Internet.

Digital-culture millennials are typically portrayed on TV shows, such as *Girls,* as living in cities with huge service-industry economies, like New York. The protagonists on *Girls* are primarily young women who demonstrate characteristic millennial "narcissism."[63] These characters are locked into perpetual recreational life choices as they flit between jobs and unhinged romantic prospects. Their intimate lives reflect their neoliberal choices in their careers as they seek self-determination based on their passions, rather than on the stable markers of older notions of adulthood, like marriage or steady employment.[64] Consider a 2017 campaign by Fiverr (see figure 1), a labor platform aimed at freelancers and "lean entrepreneurs" who hire workers in a range of capacities, including programming and tech. Fiverr ads plastered on NYC subways appeared to be aimed at selling a fantasy of glamorized gig economy labor built on cultural images of hardworking but unrooted millennials chasing their dreams.[65] In one such advertisement that I observed, a winsome young woman rests her head in the palm of her hand, but tilts it upward, looking slightly beyond the viewer. The caption reads, "How much did you make for your boss today?" followed by a green Fiverr icon and the Fiverr logo, "In Doers We Trust." Another, in the same subway car, read simply, "Reading about starting your own business is like reading about having sex," followed by the green Fiverr

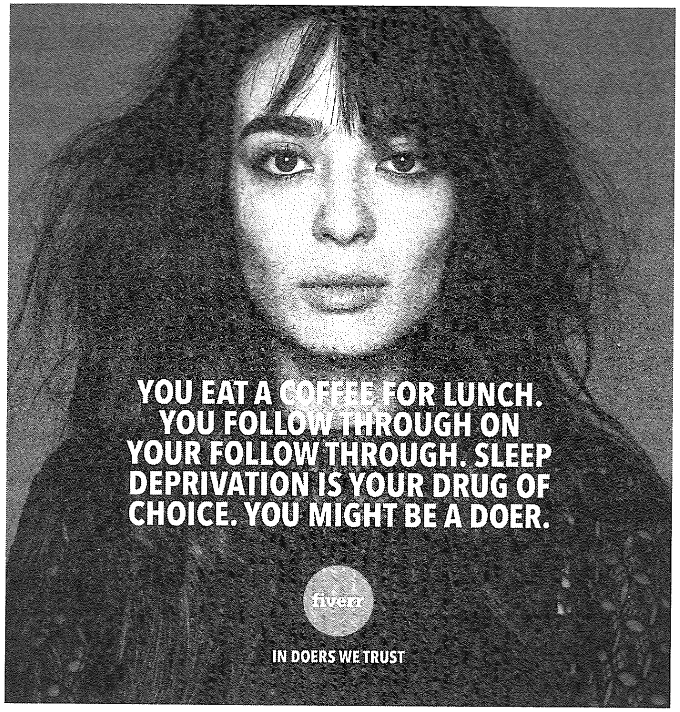

Figure 1. Sample Fiverr advertisement from 2017.

icon and the same logo, "In Doers We Trust." As the title of one *New Yorker* article observed, "The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death."[66] An Uber driver posted a link to this article in a forum with the comment "I'd still rather overwork in the gig economy than be a corporate slave tied to a desk from 9–5." This observation affirms the thrust of the Fiverr ad profiled by the *New Yorker*: a beautiful woman is determined to rise above lesser mortals, who need things like lunch. Her slightly gaunt face and long, unkempt hair glamorize the labor that defines her as a "Doer."

The sharing economy takes gig work traditionally done by pink- and blue-collar workers—including people of color and new immigrants—and bills it as fashionable glamor labor for popular technology companies

and on-demand platforms.[67] Labor is glamorized in part because popular technology communications, like social media, romanticize mundane aspects of our lives in general. The digital lives of millennials are held up as evidence of their self-indulgence, flakiness, and access to opportunity: the photos of food, friends, and fashion that they share on Instagram broadcast ideas of affluence and extravagant consumption, irrespective of where they fall on the socioeconomic spectrum. (Of course, it's not just millennials who actively project their status onto social media: swiping through Instagram accounts, Adnan proudly showed me pictures of his two daughters thriving in their new lives. One was living on the other side of the world on an exchange program.) Meanwhile, personal updates and excerpts that millennials post on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter give the impression that they are always busy being "Doers" of something. Unpredictable, "flexible" labor has become just another part of the way today's economy functions. These realities are not unique to the way that Uber does business: digital life keeps many workers "on" all the time. When Uber, and others, frame gig work as a job for flexible millennial labor, it shapes our expectations of what this job should provide.

By using the image of a millennial to identify who workers are in the gig economy, Uber and other on-demand platforms project a higher social status onto work that has long been associated with lower-status workers. Lower-status work is merely an extension of historical attitudes that identified as second class the traditional jobs of women and minorities. Agricultural laborers and domestic workers, for example, are not protected by minimum wage laws in the United States, a concession that nods to the racialized and gendered labor legacy that includes enslaved African Americans working on plantation farms and women of color providing domestic labor to more affluent households. The gig economy tech-washes this work into something more culturally desirable, but the passion and sharing rhetoric reinforce an older idea that workers in this line of work aren't entitled to a living wage or labor protections. The gig economy is also a social expression of an economic trend in employment. For example, during the recessions of 1982–1983, 1990–1991, and 2007–2009, the loss of stable employment for male breadwinners resulted in more wives entering the workforce or increasing their hours, which economists term the "added worker effect." According to one prominent study, the 2007–2009 Great Recession produced the strongest such effect: perhaps the "need" for extra work has been reframed by the gig economy as a positive opportunity for "extra" income. In effect, the work culture that promotes the idea that everyone should get a side hustle puts a positive sheen on the declining economic prospects of male (and female) breadwinners.

The sharing economy draws on these histories, delegitimizing and feminizing work by pigeonholing sharing-economy jobs as mere side hustles. Even when drivers and other gig economy workers depend on their earnings for major household expenses, like mortgages, college tuition, or medical expenses, the pervasive notion that these are just "side gigs" dismantles expectations about what these jobs should provide. Moreover, women's work in the household (child-rearing, housework, and so on) has long been considered a social commitment that women make to their families and society, rather than a job that should be compensated with a living wage.[68] The language of "sharing" plays on this idea—that the social good is somehow an acceptable substitute for compensated work. "Sharing" also points to how culturally undesirable it is to think about gigs as work: it's as though we can't change the conditions of labor, so we change the way we think about it instead.

UBER DOES WORK

Uber has proven to be more than just a successful new service. It has rapidly changed how people experience cities, and even how cities *work*. For cities with a saturated market of drivers, passengers no longer need to plan ahead to craft their itineraries; they can just order an Uber. This simple fact has changed how people date in car-heavy cities like Los Angeles,[69] and how likely they are to get behind the wheel drunk when a sober option is only a tap away. To many, Uber solves a problem. It creates cheap private transportation for people in cities with less reliable public transit options, and it improves the efficiency of private transportation for people in cities where are many public and private options too. The ridehail model brings the benefits of innovative technology to millions of people around the globe, and the effects are felt immediately.

For consumers, Uber's network effects at scale are astonishing. A global traveler can disembark from her flight in a midsized city in the middle of the country, pull out her iPhone, and hail a ride with the touch of a button. Chris Sacca, an Uber investor and venture capitalist, summed up the popular support Uber enjoys in its battles with the taxi industry when he declared in a Pando interview by journalist and Uber critic Sarah Lacy: "Who is happy with their taxi service anywhere in America? Like nowhere." On the topic of taxi service in New York City, where yellow cabs are a prominent form of transportation, Sacca commented, "People choose it as a way to get around that city, but nobody at scale is gonna tell you that they fucking love the New York taxi system." Many consumers witnessed the destruction of oligarchic taxi and hotel institutions by tech companies with the peculiar satisfaction that comes from watching a lot of complacency come crashing down. Uber passengers can watch their driver's car approach on the screen and track its movements by the minute. A text alerts them when the driver has arrived, and after they insert their destination, away they go. They don't have to worry much about being taken for a ride, because the whole trip is monitored: if the trip is inefficient, they can complain to Uber and get their money back. Taking an Uber is usually cheaper than taking a cab, and the level of human interaction is low. Payments are processed by credit card, and up until June 2017, there was no tip button. At the end of the trip, the passenger simply gets out of the car and, later, rates the driver on a scale of one to five stars. Rating systems, combined with other forms of verification and safety mechanisms, facilitate trust among strangers. In this way, gig economy companies like Uber are more mature or evolved than other informal networks of commerce mediated by the Internet, like eBay or Craigslist.[70] Uber has professionalized and scaled these patchwork e-commerce solutions and, with its improvements, set a precedent that other institutions more readily adopt.

THE REALITY OF DRIVER EXPERIENCE

The Great Recession made visible the fact that the institutions we trust, like finance and home ownership, are no longer working. It also underscored the narrowing of established pathways of social mobility, whether as a result of education or career-advancement expectations. Diminishing trust in institutions helped pave the way for Uber's rejection of established norms and laws that govern employment.

Driving for Uber has benefits as well as disadvantages. Michael drives for both Uber and Lyft. To do so, he commutes into Atlanta from Marietta, about an hour away. When I interview him on a mild afternoon in spring 2017, he gestures toward the main highway that runs through the city center, which has collapsed, supposedly because homeless kids set fire to it but possibly because of corruption, according to Michael. The collapse added traffic to the streets, which now slows him down as he ferries passengers around. He started about two months earlier, and this week he's driven every day except for Tuesday. Because he is a divorced dad, flexibility at work is important to him, because it enables him to see his younger children. Similarly, mothers of young children who drive for Uber and Lyft have told me they appreciate their ability to work in their spare hours without killing themselves to arrange childcare during an obligatory shift at Walmart or a similar retail outlet. "I have my sons every other weekend," Michael explains, "so the weekend I don't have them I just work through the week and the weekend, and when I do have them I only work during the week." He appreciates the freedom to set his own schedule: on a long week, he does about seventy hours and doesn't take a day off, while on short weeks it's more like twenty-five to thirty, or thirty to forty, hours. Before Uber and Lyft, he mostly did factory work. "I was working third shift at a manufacturing plant, making tires. I did not like working night shift. I did it for over a year. I just could not get used to it. My body just could not acclimate. It was horrible, man," he says, energized by the finality of his statement, and by the note of surprise it still brings him. "So I just quit. For the first time in my life, I quit a job with no other job [lined up]. Two days after I quit, I said, 'I'm gonna drive for Uber.' So I started with Uber, I did Uber. Then I said, 'I'm gonna try Lyft, too.' Now I do both of 'em," he drawls, with the confidence of someone announcing matter-of-factly that he works out regularly at the gym.

Michael was ready for a change after his divorce, which took place about a year before we spoke. Not too long ago, he graduated from a for-profit Christian university. He's hoping to get into business with his bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies, with concentrations in education, psychology, and mathematics. As we accelerate through an intersection, the car in front of us takes too long, and Michael nearly rear-ends him, but barely a ripple passes through his muscular arm. We're a hairline fracture away from the other car. While my thoughts turn fleetingly to the universal public health insurance I could have back home in Canada and my heart catches in my throat, Michael continues. He's not at all perturbed by our near miss.

"I went through college throughout my adult life," he reflects, "I didn't just go get it. I started when I was twenty-two. I would go to work, and I would have to quit school sometimes and work more hours. It took me about ten years on and off." With three children to raise—a daughter who is eighteen, and two sons, fifteen and ten—going to school full time wasn't an option, though he hopes his kids will go away to college and do it all at once, for the experience. About his degree, he adds, "It hasn't helped me very much yet."

Michael's extended efforts to obtain a degree from a for-profit college give me pause, because it's an indicator that the established paths to middle-class life in America aren't working for him. He's not alone. Poor credentialing systems are a reflection of a poor labor market, observes sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom. She writes, "We have a labor market where the social contract between workers and the work on which college has previously relied has fundamentally changed and makes more workers vulnerable."[71] The rise of useless college degrees is a clear signal that the established systems of social mobility have failed in America, and the gulf of opportunity is part of what makes jobs in the sharing economy appealing. Technology in the sharing or gig economy is framed as an intervention in the declining pathways toward upward class mobility.

Some drivers—so-called "optimizers" because they find clever ways to maximize their earnings—are making the digital economy work for them by juggling multiple kinds of jobs and opportunities. Ron started driving for Uber and other ridehail companies in New York City and New Jersey over three years ago, after his business as a web host went under. When I first interviewed him in 2015, he and his wife ran an Airbnb to support their growing family. He used a number of strategies to maximize his profits, although he chafed against rules Uber set that kept him from making more informed decisions, such as by hiding the destinations of passengers before he accepted their ride requests.[72] Another optimizer, Nicholas Stewart, is a former high school teacher who quit to drive for Uber and Lyft full time in Atlanta. He'd been driving for four years, though he planned to return to teaching in 2018–2019. When I interviewed him in 2017, he was simultaneously pursuing a PhD at the University of Phoenix online, a for-profit university, and running an Airbnb. He calculated that he would drive for Uber only when prices were surging at a premium of two and a half times the base fares, because then he could make $2.50 per mile—otherwise, it wasn't worth it. At airports, Uber's dispatcher puts drivers into a queue, and they may wait for hours until their number is called. When Nicholas waits in long airport queues, he runs laps around the terminal to keep fit and keeps his phone on him in case his turn in the queue approaches. He is also one of the administrators for a local forum of Atlanta ridehail drivers, where he shares advice about his experiences with other drivers, such as how to do taxes or how to account for expenses.

Not everyone who drives for Uber is working multiple New Economy hustles; how drivers identify with their work often depends on their backgrounds and their motivations. Nicholas identified primarily

as a teacher, but former taxi drivers and truckers like Ricardo and Faiq in New York City identify as occupational drivers who just happen to be driving for an app now. Others, like Manoj in Montreal and Karen in New Orleans, put driving for Uber into the same box as other service economy jobs available to them, such as working in the restaurant business. Working in a full-time job with benefits isn't necessarily an option for them. Manoj drives for Uber part time, but he prefers his job at the restaurant because the tips are better. Previously, he worked in a garment factory for twenty-one years in Montreal. Some drivers are doing multiple types of gig work, but they don't see what they do as falling under the rubric of "sharing technology."

In Atlanta, I have the misfortune of experiencing two stressful rides in a row as a participant-observer (I don't interview either driver). In the first, the GPS malfunctions and we ride around for twenty minutes circling my original pickup location. I politely exit the vehicle after the driver begins hinting that he can't keep burning gas. In the spring of 2017 in Atlanta, Uber and Lyft paid drivers $0.12 per minute, much lower than the $0.75 they earn per mile, so drivers made money only on distance travel. On the next trip, the driver is anxious because he has trouble logging out of the Uber driver app when he picks me up via Lyft, and he whizzes past speed limit signs while poking around on his iPhone. If drivers don't log out of, for example, Uber within seconds of accepting a trip with Lyft, they might receive a ride request from Uber's dispatching algorithm that they will be unable to accept, which will negatively affect their ride acceptance rate. The action requires a swift, coordinated hand-to-screen motion across multiple phone screens while continuing to drive. It's common for drivers to work for multiple ridehail apps as they strategize to maximize their income, though competing options are not available in every city.

Empowerment-branding celebrates independent, entrepreneurial workers who can choose between competing employers and log in or log out of work at their discretion; but the reality of working for multiple apps or even just managing one app is often stressful. Tim, who drove for Uber and Lyft in San Francisco when I interviewed him in 2016, told me there are times when he's looking at the road, driving, and then a little ride request pops up on the screen, which he says lasts for only ten to fifteen seconds (technically, Uber tells drivers, they have fifteen seconds to accept the ride). "What if a car is coming or you're about to pull over? You can't have your eye on the clock the whole time or it's a safety hazard." Before Uber introduced a feature where drivers could opt to stop all incoming ride requests, he was exasperated with the bind they put him in: "It could be 2 A.M. and I want to get off because I'm done for the night, or I have to pick up my daughter from the sitter and, just as I'm getting off, another ride comes in." And he might, for example, have spent the whole shift working toward a bonus that requires him to maintain a 90 percent ride acceptance rate; if he misses the ride, he could lose the bonus. The technical difficulties of the app also frustrate him: sometimes he gets ghost requests, where the ride request appears for only a second, before he can respond to it, and then disappears—but it still counts against his ride acceptance rate. In some ways, it's as if drivers have become little more than digital pawns on the chessboard of the sharing economy.

Platforms are preparing people to accept gig work as the new norm for employment. But the Uber-touted promises of freedom and flexibility often fall short. Ricardo was a truck driver before he started driving for Uber.[73] He wants to spend more time with his seven-year-old daughter and less time on the road. During the last nine months he's put in fifty hours a week driving for Uber and other ridehail companies in New York City. Gesturing with evident pride, he says,

> The thing with Uber is you have a home base, so if you have a family, guess what? You be there for the family. The problem is, when you look at Uber's actual busy-hour schedule, there's the morning from 6 to 9 A.M., then the evening 5 to 7 P.M., and then from 9 P.M. to midnight. If you were to look at that and you have kids, and if you follow their busy schedule, you'll never see your kids in the morning. You'll come home at lunchtime to sleep, but you still won't see your kids. You might see your kids if you pick them up from school, but in that time frame, you'll only be able to pick them up, drop them home; then you'll have to leave to get into the city for that busy-hour rush.

For David, driving for Uber and Lyft was a stopgap solution after his job with a local firearms retailer went south. He leased a car through Uber in San Francisco for eight hundred dollars per month, but with low pay and long hours, he struggled to balance it with the demands of his family life. "It was a real strain on my marriage. I worked ten-plus hours a day, six days a week. I didn't spend a Friday night with my wife for almost nine months. I was on the verge of a divorce," he observes soberly. In less than a year, he transitioned to his dream job in a managerial position at a local brewing company.

Michael, who commutes into Atlanta from Marietta, says he keeps all his receipts so he can account for his expenses as an independent contractor. But like many new drivers, he isn't necessarily prepared to account for the full range of his possible expenses, like maintenance, wear and tear on his vehicle, commercial insurance for his vehicle, health insurance for himself, self-employment taxes, and more. "If you drive no peak hours and you drive forty hours a week, you can average twelve to fifteen dollars per hour, before expenses," he calculates—but the only expense he accounts for is gas, a fairly common oversight among new drivers. Many people who start working for Uber are prepared to run errands, but they're not necessarily prepared to run their own business. It can take months for them to figure out what they're actually earning, and in the meantime, new drivers often cite the earnings marketed by Uber and Lyft, like "$30/h," before they become aware of hidden costs.[74] *BuzzFeed* reporter Caroline O'Donavan dove into Uber's own data on its drivers, as well as a previous *BuzzFeed* investigation of drivers' earnings, and estimates that, "for example, a part-time driver of a minivan in Chicago earning an average $15.48 an hour would, based on Uber's model, incur $4.02 an hour in expenses, for a net hourly earning of roughly $11.46 an hour. A full-time driver in Washington, D.C., earning an average $18.21 an hour driving a four-wheel-drive SUV would have expenses of around $5.94 per hour, for net hourly earnings of $12.27."[75] The studies Uber has conducted in collaboration with notable academic economists typically cite drivers' net earnings (after Uber's fees but before costs like depreciation and fuel); the true earnings drivers take home after expenses are often unknown not only to new drivers but to the public and regulators as well.[76] It's complicated to accurately estimate drivers' costs overall, because each driver has specific operational costs that depend on factors like the cost of repairs and maintenance, fuel, depreciation, and the make of their car, among other items.[77]

Over time, many drivers say that it's worth it for them to drive only if they work specifically during "peak hours," such as when surge pricing, Prime Time, hourly guarantees, Quest Rewards, or other variations of incentive pricing are in effect. Adjusting the black sunglasses riding atop his closely shorn hair, Michael continues: "For me, I want more than that eventually, because I put all that money and time into that degree. I really just want to own my own business. I work when I want to work, but it's not the same. They [Uber] get 20 percent, that's their fee, which is not bad, I guess." Michael says they could make it a little easier on drivers by cutting it to 15 percent, but in cities where Uber has been established longer, the commission only goes up, usually to 25 percent and 28 percent for the lowest tier of service, uberX. Michael articulates the desire to truly be his own boss, and he enjoys the independence he has as an Uber driver that he didn't have in his previous job at a factory. He is grateful to have this job during a period of career transition. However, he may yet find himself working against higher commissions and rate cuts that Uber implements unilaterally. When the conditions of work change for Uber drivers, many hew closely to Uber's suggestions to work at particular places at particular times to earn premiums on their pay, effectively giving up some of their independence to work on a schedule that is subject to frequent changes and few guarantees.

The reality of working for Uber aligns more closely to the stories of working- and middle-class people who are often far removed from the millennial model typecast as an avatar of digital-technology culture. Amir, who drives for Uber in Montreal, worked as a chemical engineer in Algiers for twenty-eight years before he emigrated to Canada. His adult son and daughter are both married, and he lives with his son in Gatineau, Quebec, just outside of Ottawa. When he tried to transfer his engineering credentials to Canada, they advised him to return to school. He shrugged slightly as he furrowed the deep wrinkles in his brow, saying, "This is not for a guy like me." For the last year and a half, he's been driving to make a living. For ten to fourteen days at a time, he commutes an hour and a half into Montreal to drive for Uber. During these stints, he rents a home-sharing apartment in D'Iberville, about a twenty-five-minute drive from Montreal's downtown core. When he has a day or two free, he returns to Gatineau to relax and play with his granddaughter. He likes working for Uber, but he is critical of the growing role of technology in daily life. He sees babies playing with their iPads, and he thinks that they look at their mamas and papas with vacant expressions after they have spent time absorbed in their screens.

Uber tells its passengers that they, too, can start driving for Uber through its app, which promotes the idea that riders and drivers are interchangeable. After a passenger requests a ride, the message below their destination address might read, "Join thousands of riders who also drive with Uber," an opportunity, illustrated with the image of an outstretched hand holding a smartphone screen with a large dollar sign on it. That idea appealed to Tadesse, who was a ridehail customer before he began driving for Lyft in Washington, DC, and he's considering Uber as a future option. "I ride all the time because, after I have a few drinks, I don't drive. I just call a Lyft, and I talk to the drivers. Then a few friends start[ed] driving too." For a few weeks, he had nothing to do, so he rented a car to try it out. "Some people like it, some people don't like it. It's fun so far, it's not bad. You have to make a whole lot of runs to make money, and that's why I get a lot of customers, too. . . . It's cheap. You just have to make more trips to make the same as a taxi driver." The path that led him to this line of work is far removed from the archetypes of *Girls*, but it is part of the immigrant biographies that characterize many drivers in the Uber workforce. Tadesse left Eritrea when he was sixteen because of a brewing civil war. When he moved to the United States, he was completely alone, though he expected his twelve brothers and sisters to join him. Every single one of them perished. As a young immigrant, he enrolled in a computer science degree twenty years ago at a nearby university; but halfway through, he took on work as a taxi driver. As he started to make friends, and then girlfriends, the money drew him away from his studies and into full-time work. Leaving school is a decision he regrets—he cites the absence of mentors who could have guided him into better choices, which is evocative of his lost family. He's had a slew of other jobs since his early days as a taxi driver, including as the manager of a restaurant and bar. "I really don't want to work for anybody else," he says, and he's trying to figure out what he wants to do next. But, he adds, technology has been a boon to him. "If it wasn't for technology, we cannot do this job. With this thing right here"—he points to the GPS navigation system on his Lyft app—"I can go anywhere."

For some time, the sharing economy myths have protected Uber against a truer accounting of the working conditions it creates for drivers: the experiences of Michael, Amir, and Tadesse are a far cry from the company's promise to deliver mass entrepreneurship and a pathway to the middle class through technology. Contrary to the company's rosy rhetoric, their jobs do not carry the signature of sharing-economy altruism. Some drivers are working hard at jobs to support themselves and, often, their families. Others, like Tadesse, are trying it out, and they appreciate the fact that technology opens up new possibilities to them. This new gig marketplace is billed as a natural extension of the technology culture and glamorized labor. But there is a stark gap between the sexy marketing of the sharing economy and the more sober realities of who does this work and why.