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Radical flexibility: driving for Lyft and the future of work in the platform economy

Michelle Chihara

Whittier College, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT
Labour conditions in the first two decades of the twenty-first century in the US have become increasingly precarious and abusive. At the same time, many workers and users (no longer easily categorically separated) exhibit a sustained attachment to the idea of flexible work. For workers, internalizing the demand to be flexible as an affirmative choice can be a method of survival. But the demand for flexibility is also connected to an affective sense of agency and a refusal of alienation. For workers, flexibility connects strong convenience with access to fast cash. It connects a sense of play and creative fun with access to infrastructure and transit. The 'unicorn' rideshare company Lyft's brand narrative has capitalized on and exploited the desire for flexibility in historically specific political contexts. In light of these sticky financialized appropriations of flexibility, this essay imagines radical flexibility as a wilful re-appropriation. It explores ways that Lyft's rhetoric might be redirected and resisted. In light of existing demands for collective or cooperative platforms, radical flexibility could be a galvanizing justification for a cooperative response to the Uberization of work, part of a broader horizon that reclaims flexibility, play, creativity, and convenience as affects and practices outside of the wage relation.

> To put it bluntly, creditworthiness is worth vying for, lest we leave it to the investors to determine who deserves to be appreciated and for what motives.—Michel Feher, Rated Agency, Investee Politics in a Speculative Age

1. Radical flexibility

During the elections in California in 2020, the rideshare companies Lyft and Uber spent over $200 million to push a ballot measure creating a new kind of labourer, neither independent contractor nor employee. The sum represented a record-breaking expenditure for a ballot measure, exponentially larger than any that had come before, in a state system already awash in corporate spending. It came on the heels of a worker-backed

CONTACT Michelle Chihara mchihara@whittier.edu Whittier College, 1337 Lucile Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90026, USA

legislative push to categorize drivers and other freelancers as employees, in an effort to force the companies to comply with existing labour law. The transit corporations had threatened that compliance would force them to leave California or raise prices. Prop 22 was supposed to be a compromise: not full labour rights, but minimal wage protections and access to health care, while effectively closing off the path to collective bargaining. Days after the proposition passed, *The San Francisco Eater* and other papers reported that Lyft and Uber were hiking prices anyway. They had successfully pushed voters to make a new class of workers.

Some commentators wondered whether this legislation represented the beginning of the end of the labour movement in America. Labour law professor and gig economy expert Veena Dubal told *The Nation* in November that Prop 22 represented 'the most radical undoing of labour legislation since Taft-Hartley in 1947', the law that undercut unionization rights guaranteed by the New Deal: 'It will create a growing precariat of people who work very hard and are not able to survive off of their earnings. And it will have an impact on American politics for decades, if not the next century'. But when unions challenged the law, in August of 2021, a superior court judge found it unconstitutional. As of September, the rideshare corporations had filed appeals, and the case was on its way to the California Supreme Court.

The debacle around Prop 22 did not spell the end of the labour movement in America. However, the recent history of Lyft and its labour practices exemplify new permutations in how and why workers are mobilized and understood. Voter research suggested that many people who voted for Prop 22 thought they were voting for a pro-worker bill. This was mostly due to the cynical marketing. Lyft, Uber, and DoorDash funded a variety of shell companies which blanketed the state of California in misleading advertisements, representing the measure as a pro-worker, Bernie-Sanders-approved, equity campaign, as reported widely in publications like *SFGate* and *Market Watch*. But the success of this strategy also built on Lyft's original branding narrative as the 'woke' alternative to Uber (Steinmetz 2017). Lyft had gained a toehold in the market during the #deleteUber campaign, when Uber was associated with the 45th President's overt anti-immigrant racism. Since then, it seemed to have forced Uber to come around to its progressive ways.

Like Google's 'do no harm' motto at its beginning, or Facebook's initial verbiage about community, Lyft claimed to be 'woke' in order to deploy an initial runway of social trust to match its runway of venture capital. The money needed to last long enough to recruit and pay a network of drivers, while keeping prices low enough to destroy taxis (Bond 2014; Horan 2019). The runway of trust needed only to match that runway of capital, to last until 'unicorn' status, an IPO, and legal campaigns to roll back labour protections secured their power. The further Lyft got from the protests against Trump's 'anti-Muslim' ban at the airports in 2017, the more openly it began to play corporate hardball. A San Francisco supervisor working with racial justice groups called the Prop 22 campaign 'infuriating hypocrisy'. *The Los Angeles Times* wrote that the rideshare companies' techniques of misinformation and intimidation were the same as those once 'employed by fossil fuel, tobacco, anti-labour and other interests against researchers, scientists, activists and other critics'. Trolls associated with the campaign, predominantly funded by Lyft and Uber, harassed opponents on social media and even doxxed one prominent researcher (Hiltzik 2020).

At the same time, many workers were also meaningfully swayed by the promise of maintaining access to flexible work. Prop 22 succeeded in the polls, so soon after legislative and organizational victories on the part of worker collectives, in part because it tapped into a historically specific intersection of political affects around flexibility and autonomy in the workplace. This essay asks how an attachment to flexibility might be turned back against the creditworthiness of the private companies.

In researching this article, I gave Lyft my cell phone number as a potential driver. In the lead-up to the election, I therefore received the following ad: (Figure 1)

Whatever the truth value of the claim that drivers supported Prop 22 '4 to 1', such ads tapped into very real existing support for both workers and for the protest movement around Black Lives Matter. Many people in California were primed to support someone like Alisha. The ads were 'sticky', however, because at least some groups of Black women and freelancers did want to protect their status as independent or freelance workers (Mackey 2016). A number of drivers who I spoke with expressed an intense attachment to flexible work as a proxy for their own autonomy and agency.[1] 'Alisha' appealed to voters hoping to vote in support of people of colour in 2020, to voters who wished to support precarious workers during the pandemic, to flexible workers,

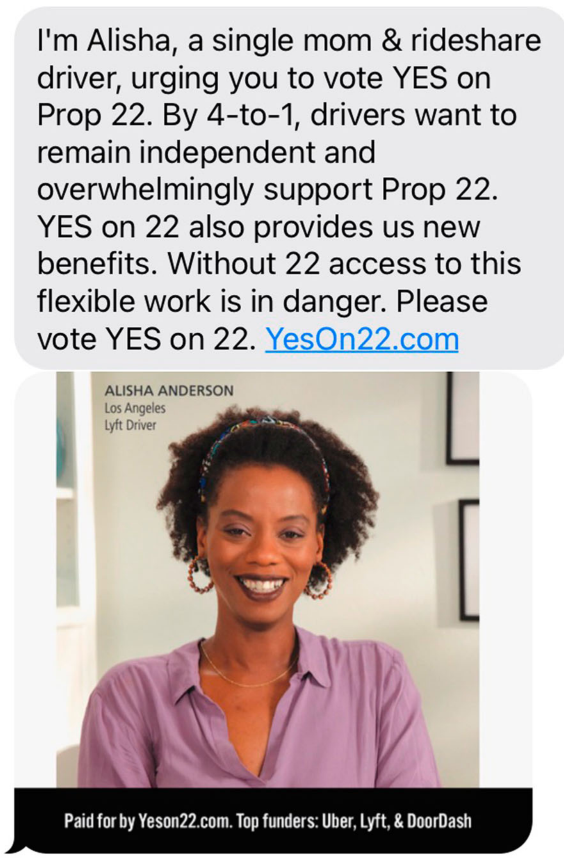

Figure 1. October 2020 political advertisement sent to cell phones, paid for by #YesOnProp22.

and to people who valued the autonomy and agency that flexible work had come to represent.

Flexible work both disciplined and provoked the affective responses of those who shared political and cultural positions with 'Alisha'. The ad provoked anxiety around threats against 'Alisha' as if they were also the threats to 'flexible work' itself: 'Flexible work is in danger'. 'Flexible' collapsed the urge to protect a vulnerable worker with the urge to protect the way of working. As with creativity, flexibility functioned as a demand--people must be creative and flexible in order to be employable. At the same time, it functioned as an aspect of lived experience that workers sought out and claimed. Flexibility functions as both a qualitative and a quantitative qualifier; it refers both to amounts of work, to authority over scheduling work, and to how workers engage with and experience their hours. Internalizing the demand to be flexible as an affirmative choice can be a method of survival. But the positive affect around flexible work is also connected to a sense of agency, it's part of a refusal of alienation. In the face of sticky corporate appropriations of flexible work, then, I imagine radical flexibility as a wilful re-appropriation or a galvanizing demand powering a cooperative response to the Uberization of the work. This is will ful in Sara Ahmed's account of the term, 'a politics that aims for no … that is not only about the refusal to be supporting limbs but the refusal of a social body that treats others as supporting limbs' (2014). If flexibility induces workers to internalize the market's exhausting pressures, then radical flexibility re-appropriates the energy behind the drive to 'always be hustling'.[2] Turned against market valuations, radical flexibility is a call to always be reclaiming life outside the wage.

In *Rated Agency, Investee Politics in a Speculative Age,* the philosopher Michel Feher suggests that as the wage loses its status as the privileged object of organization, and as the union form loses traction in certain contexts, the Left should shake off its melancholy and embrace and appropriate the politics of investees and creditworthiness (2021). Feher writes, 'The main locus of criticism has thus shifted from the market where labour is made into a commodity and priced accordingly to the market where resources and endeavours are turned into assets and evaluated as such'. Just as Marxist organizers in the labour movement demanded better wages in the name of doing away with wages altogether, in our credit driven economy, activists could target the existing private platforms as rigid, hypocritical, and terrible investments. In the name of entrepreneurial spirit itself, private platforms could be replaced with more flexible public or collective options.[3]

Decades of financialization and technological changes have not only gutted social programmes and safety nets but also reduced the sheer number and the quality of jobs together. Neoliberal conditions disciplined workers to internalize personal responsibility under increasingly brutal debt-fuelled labour conditions, socializing the risk while a small handful of private firms reaped the profits. The responsibilized individual must hustle and manage and tend every aspect of their own human capital (Silva 2013). After the Clinton era's 'workfare', the state no longer promised full or good employment, it would only help citizens make themselves more employable. Flexible workers would, the promise went, always find new and better opportunities. By 2020, that promise seemed more and more tenuous. Labour movements were energized by worker disaffection and anger during the pandemic. As the labour sociologist Ruth Milkman told *The American Prospect* in 2020, 'Whatever else transpires once the crisis abates, it will not be easy to simply erase all this progress'. If the attachment to flexibility could be not demystified but re-oriented, if it could be detached from any loyalty to employers or employment and radicalized, it could become part of mobilization efforts against venture capitalists who would use it to constrain the lives of people like Alisha.

2. Flexibility as strong convenience

While Lyft has never turned a profit, its valuation has fluctuated between a $21 billion and $15 billion, based primarily on its command of data streams, extracted above and beyond the profits from cheap labour (Trefis 2019; Elfman 2020). Its primary assets are the algorithmic dispatch platform, the data generated by users, and intellectual property in its investment in autonomous vehicles. The data includes rides in drivers' own cars and rides in rented cars from a fleet of vehicles owned by rental car companies across hundreds of American cities (Security and Exchanges Commission 2019). Lyft also owned and tracked the data for fleets of Lyft-branded scooters and bikes in various cities, and has joined with other platform companies in legal battles to maintain private ownership of all its intellectual property, as reported in *The Los Angeles Times* and elsewhere.

This business model provides convenient rides, as long as the companies keep prices low, while seeking to monetize the algorithmic tracking and monitoring of all users. This is what Shoshanna Zuboff calls 'surveillance capitalism', where the data both provides and relies on convenience (2019). Data analytics provide a 'behavioural surplus' and 'unprecedented *instrumentarian power*' in frameworks built explicitly for behavioural modification [italics in original]. At an Amazon Web Services conference in 2016, Lyft's CTO bragged about the millions of 'events' being recorded and made available with granular detail, such that in the 'fraud system … I can say every time someone ads or removes a payment method, I can rescore that user's fraud risk'. He boasted that his dynamic pricing system could improve its accuracy by looking at 'every time a driver changes neighbourhoods' (Lambert 2016). While promising not to use this information to alter pricing, Lyft and Uber revealed to *Forbes* that they knew that users would pay more for a ride when their cell phone battery was low, demonstrating that the companies could access users' battery levels (Chowdhry 2020). For the neoliberal subject, refusing to be surveilled or refusing to be flexible becomes impossible, as strong convenience blends into a form of governance and control.

Workers managing their own human capital across complex spaces of social participation, connection, and competition need convenience and flexibility. Their needs and affects become the site of instrumentarian power. In their study of emotional and temporal labour for the rideshares, Noopor Raval and Paul Dourish describe the 'double life of social and economic value generation' in which drivers participate (2016). Drivers who must hustle for work between rides are never off. Once they have a passenger, they must engage in somatic daily performances for good reviews. 'This performance requires a combination and alternation of positive and negative emotional display, empathy generation, building one's social capital as well as taking bodily risks'. Lyft used the 'Lyft Lounge' on Facebook and the free labour of drivers on YouTube to offload the mentorship and training that might have occurred in-house under a different mode of production. Raval and Dourish thus describe 'a redefinition of the boundaries of waged labour, also implying that rather than disappearing and becoming obsolete, the functions of human bodies and selves are being reconstituted vis-à-vis their role in economic production'. These shifting boundaries and affective entanglements define worker participation in the data-based provision of services.

These shifted boundaries blur the difference between convenience for the user and the worker, between pay and debt, and between emotional dividends and emotional labour. For riders, accepting a somewhat obscured form of technological surveillance was the price for on-demand, affordable rides. It also provided drivers with on-demand financial convenience. The platform technology provided not only on-demand and convenient hours, but also the ability to start driving and to get paid almost immediately. Lyft's greatest value for drivers was the relatively anonymous and efficient pay system. While they understood that the companies were collecting data on their behaviour, for many workers this felt less immediate and less threatening than the direct surveillance of a meatspace boss. When Lyft promised 'flexibility' in its ads recruiting drivers, it specifically referenced its pay programme: 'Express Pay brings the same flexibility and control you have in your car to your finances, because that's what we're all about'. Lyft made paying drivers fast a priority from the outset, and the 2019 Express Pay software made earnings available almost in real time.

My research suggests that an urgent need for liquidity was either the single reason or the most important reason most drivers got on the road. When behavioural economists worked with the company to study Uber in 2017, they described and evaluated the 'value of flexibility' to drivers. They also found that most drivers had experienced 'shocks' to their 'reservation wage' before 'choosing' to drive (Chen et al. 2019). This can be translated to plain English as signing up because you need fast cash. The behavioural economists interpreted drivers' responses to the algorithmic system as if the dynamic price mechanism were a neutral technology through which they signalled their unforced choices. By quantifying 'the value of flexibility' as an expression of drivers' positive desire to drive in the face of financial shocks, the behavioural economists externalized any potential desperation on their part. Spiralling medical debts or family emergencies were external problems that, once represented as a willingness to drive inside the market mechanism, would be coordinated away when matched with available resources. The choice to drive at certain hours at lower wages was an expression of a positive willingness to forego the higher wages offered at other times.

The value of flexibility to workers, however, does not appear within the algorithmic schema set up by the companies themselves. Express Pay may have been a good choice, for many people, but not by comparison with other jobs or even with other hours. The value of flexibility is visible by comparison with the other options for responding to financial shocks. Flexibility was a way of monetizing the urgent needs that workers must arbitrage on their own under late capitalism. By February of 2019, almost 10 million young people had taken out high-cost, short-term, inherently predatory 'payday loans' in the previous two years (Leonhardt 2019). The Trump administration had rolled back Obama's efforts to regulate the industry. Even after the Obama regulations on payday lending, however, the 'consumer installment loan' business had ballooned in the private equity sector during the Great Recession. Timothy Geithner, who criticized payday lending while serving as Obama's Treasury Secretary, was in 2019 the president of a private equity fund which had made heavy investments in consumer installment since 2008, as reported by *The Washington Post* (Whoriskey 2018).

Mariner Finance, a company owned by Geithner's fund, charged usurious rates, charged borrowers for insurance policies of questionable value, and operated 'an insurance company in the Turks and Caicos, where regulations are notably lax, to profit further from the insurance policies'. They used 'aggressive collection practices that include calling delinquent customers once a day and embarrassing them by calling their friends and relatives, customers said'. Consumer installment loans combined with payday lending to drastically constrain workers' options on the ground in American cities. They deliver drastic financial constraints, while financialized firms remain flexible because they have enough capital to exist within the fluid transnational realm of globalized tax evasion and offshore accounts (Bullough 2018). As the *Post's* headline put it, these were finance's methods of extracting profits: 'A way of monetizing poor people'.

Against this backdrop, Lyft provided strong convenience. Like the vast majority of the drivers studied by the behavioural economists, every driver that I spoke with began driving to address an urgent financial need. In such anxiety-provoking circumstances, quick payments (as well as early signing bonuses) could deliver a wave of endorphins and good feeling, almost like winning a prize or having beginner's luck (Lane 2015). This relief came with social feelings of dignity that Lyft in particular took care to cultivate. A reliable workplace is a form of social support, and Lyft had pioneered the fist-bumping casual social space inside the car, where drivers were not positioned as 'the help' (in contrast with Uber's early campaigns which specifically positioned drivers as on-demand butlers). Thus, Lyft provided a rush of relief, a reward, and a solution. Combined with the ability to set initial hours, this historical context makes it clear why drivers might have looked away from the deferred maintenance costs to their vehicles. Even if Lyft turned out to be constrictive or exploitative at some point down the line, driving made more sense than a contract held under Mariner Finance. It provided a sense of participation in the tech sector, a kind of dignified middleclass cover story, on top of a real ability to maneuver.

For contingent workers, especially those struggling in sectors of the economy where wage theft and other forms of abuse are rampant, the anonymity and reliability of Express Pay set it apart. In 2008, 68% of low-wage workers experienced wage theft, and by 2016, the Economic Policy Institute estimated that low-wage workers had lost $50 billion in wages that year (McNicholas, Mokhiber, and Chaikof 2017). Abusive, manipulative, and thieving employers, from Wall Street firms to local restaurants, were staggeringly normal. The technological interface at Lyft delivered not only control over hours but reliable pay, with almost no interactions with bosses. When workers at Lyft spoke about flexibility, they described this form of convenience as a feature that made their lives possible, in stark contrast with other work situations. Most jobs require that workers begin working before they are paid and then pay out only infrequently and on a set schedule. When workers spoke about flexibility, in part they meant the relief that Express Pay had provided when they had few options: fast cash after a few hours in, with almost no questions asked.

In the first phase of their development, Lyft and Uber thus expropriated profits from workers' existing assets. In the second phase, they shifted towards monetizing other forms of need by providing drivers with convenient access to a car via rental contracts. The contracts provided global insurance and took back the risk of depreciation on the car, such that drivers weren't driving at their own risk or uninsured between rides. The rental programmes thus became a means of monetizing those with urgent needs for transportation. *Bloomberg* reported in 2019 that Americans were struggling to pay their auto loans at levels unseen since just after the 2008 crisis, particularly among 'sub-prime borrowers' (Coppola 2019). As with payday loans, car defaults were particularly high among young people. After 2008, federal regulations tightened around underwriting standards for mortgages, but the TARP bailed out the car industry without such underwriting changes. Car debt skyrocketed accordingly, because it remained challenging to exist in many parts of the United States without a car. Some drivers bought cars specifically to drive for the rideshare companies but then found themselves stuck with even more debt.

Thus when Lyft launched its rental programme in 2016, it allowed people quick access to transportation, using debt in a different way. The financial commitment to drive for a certain number of hours in the rental programme must be compared, again, not primarily to other jobs or to the option of not working but to the prospect of taking on extremely high-APR debt, in order to get much-needed access to a vehicle. Convenience for the consumer is the flip side of flexibility for the worker. But as the lines between users and producers breaks down, the need to juggle multiple projects and income streams can make convenient access to a car a necessity, part of the need to survive and stay flexible for another day.

Strong convenience folded Lyft's promise of a trusted brand into its promise of reliable payment. Defining trust in Lyft as trust in a quick and reliable infusion of cash was part of a broader corporate attempt to pre-empt any potential trust in a union, or in any other collective entity that might force designated shift hours and complicate access to Express Pay. But once workers felt entitled to strong convenience, they seemed to become more frustrated at its absence. Drivers I spoke with expressed serious frustration around the shifting bonus system, and when Lyft unilaterally reduced pay rates, it helped provoke the May 2019 global wildcat strike, organized by driver collectives like Gig Workers Rising and Rideshare United (these in turn certainly prompted the anti-union provisions in Prop 22). Despite everything that they knew about how to control and monetize worker behaviour, the corporations could not entirely contain or define the desire for flexibility. Many drivers began to demand both Express Pay and a living wage – something more like radical flexibility. Lyft was essentially a bet that autonomous vehicles would someday resolve long term questions about profitability, that the company would find new ways to monetize the data, or that the principals could cash out before the runway of venture capital ended and the current business model collapsed.

3. Flexibility as infrastructure

Lyft bolstered utopian narratives about technology as something that would, through the vague magic of innovation, provide both historically-marked Others with a path to modernity and also somehow make up for the contemporary reality of crumbling urban infrastructure. Lyft made a branded PR commitment to transportation infrastructure and clean energy in a campaign called 'City Works': 'We work in service of cities, and all those who have dedicated themselves to shaping them before us', the webpage said in March of 2019. 'Now, we're committing a minimum of $50 million a year (or 1% of profits, whichever is greater) to continue improving city life through grassroots transportation initiatives'. As part of this campaign, on 4 July 2019, Lyft also launched a series of short documentaries, high production value short films about Lyft drivers' lives. As part of their larger 'Cities Talk Back' pro-immigration campaign, they rolled out the tagline: 'America is an Idea, Not A Geography'. Lyft provoked sentimentalized appreciation of workers specifically as immigrants or ethnic minorities, solidifying a perception of them as Others in need of a depoliticized tolerance, while associating Lyft with a nostalgia for the scope and ambition of New Deal public works projects.

Most venture-funded tech companies launched with a promise that they would somehow contribute to social progress or social value. Uber launched with a 'green' campaign, claiming it would provide a private solution for rising carbon levels by using existing vehicles more efficiently. AirBnB, when it launched, promised independent sources of income for home owners, which in some cases it provided. In practice, however, these businesses have exacerbated housing shortages and traffic congestion in American cities, evading taxation on a global scale, while rents, commute times, and the number of unhoused people climb (Schor 2016). Lyft claimed to be antiracist, public-minded, and 'woke', but has always been part of corporate efforts to skirt regulations, break laws, and ask forgiveness later, in a growth-over-profit drive to financialized dominance that undermines global funding for public services (CICTA 2021). In 2017, rideshare companies put as many as 2.6 miles of increased drive time onto the roads for every mile they took off. They did not seem to meaningfully decrease drunk driving rates. Instead, primarily young and wealthy people stopped walking or taking public transit (Schaller 2018). As these companies grew, fewer numbers of taxpayers in cities carried the burden of increased traffic, traffic fatalities, unemployment benefits, and care for unhoused communities set up around empty luxury condos. The companies have functioned without paying the regulatory fees and taxes paid by taxi companies, while making cities increasingly dysfunctional (O'Keefe and Jones 2015; Povich 2017; Farrell, Greig, and Hamoudi 2018). The rideshares continue to consolidate vast fortunes while operating at a loss as they invest in increasingly dystopian schemes.

Of course, progressive messaging was always part of a larger effort to pre-empt and contain public reactions to the slow degradation of American cities, to patch these firms into the fraying social fabric enough to establish themselves in a 'too big to fail' corporate financial layer. Almost twenty years before the rideshares, Stephen Graham and Simon Martin defined 'splintering urbanism' as the amplifying effects on social problems of privatizing digital forces, which fragment the experience of the city (2002). As networked infrastructures get unbundled, virtual bypasses help to overlay private and competitive services onto existing monopolistic elements. By 2007, Mark Andrejevic saw interactive technological spaces like the rideshare platforms as 'digital enclosures', created by the surveillance of the Internet as a commons (2007). As public transit withered, the data-mined social ride that Lyft created was a means of profiting off both existing infrastructure and the threat of its decay. With its karaoke cars and drivers who did not feel like 'the help', Lyft capitalized on the promise of affective relief from splintering urbanization and atomization, while contributing to its causes. Wealthy people in private cars combined with venture-funded corporations to further slow down under-funded buses after 2008 (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2021). As a *Streets Blog* reporter wrote: 'By giving people who can afford it escape from the subway, Uber and Lyft also reduce social interaction between people of different classes and lead to a more stratified society' in the splintering urban space (Schmitt 2019).

'City Works' was a PR strategy specifically geared towards obscuring a private company's ability to extract profit from existing public infrastructure – from roads, bike lanes, sidewalks, traffic signals, as well as hospitals and city government. Lyft's early promises of corporate social responsibility were clearly intended to help stave off its share of a rising number of legal challenges for the platform companies, not only around existing labour laws, but also around transit and hotel regulations (with multiple cases reported in *The Los Angeles Times*; for example Bhuiyan 2019). In order to remain appealing to investors and shareholders, Lyft needs to maintain its ability to operate on the basis of low fixed costs, including free access to well-maintained roads without too many lawsuits. But this need makes the platforms in some ways more susceptible to the threat of multiplying legal liabilities across many urban markets. Lyft originally positioned itself as a better investment than Uber precisely by claiming to be more socially responsible.[4] They own few material assets beyond the fundamentally political control of access to their service and the intellectual property of the data mined from workers and users. This should, on some level, make them more vulnerable to reputational attacks from coalitions of stakeholders who live and pay taxes in the areas where they extract profits. Such groups can compare the private companies' true impact on cities and public coffers to the PR campaigns.

Lyft used its runway of social trust and capital to balance a promise of reliable autonomous gigs with its need to avoid fixed costs. It promised flexible work by itself remaining flexible. It is an 'app' that may exist primarily offshore and in the cloud, but it's still a for-profit company with visible executives and posh headquarters in San Francisco, which must maintain access to brick-and-mortar infrastructure in each of its local markets. During the pandemic, Lyft posted links on its website to help struggling drivers apply for state aid. Co-founders John Zimmer and Logan Green promised that they would donate a couple of months of salary to company efforts to support drivers (they said nothing about their stock options or bonuses, where the bulk of their compensation lies; Zimmer was worth somewhere around $800 million at time of writing). This tepid gesture, like the PR campaigns, was intended to protect Lyft's image as a caring 'partner'. The company then offered protective gear for sale in its shop – California law demanded it be provided at no cost to employees in the workplace, but independent contractors were on their own. In response, the workers' collectives started giving the gear out for free as a recruiting tool (Alcorn 2020).

By design, Lyft 'innovated' to replace the hard control and liability that long-term contracts give employers with a form of soft control that could attract dispersed short-term workers. In order to attract both investors and workers, then, it needs to preserve the impression that it is nimble and in control of its political and legal future, or that it embodies flexibility. But as the fight over protective gear and the May Day strike to some degree demonstrate, as soon as the pay seems less reliable or convenient, workers may be quick to turn their expectations of flexibility into a demand. If it is flexible work itself that workers are loyal to, then radical flexibility demands platforms that guarantee local access first to city-dwellers and workers. Platforms are neither sustainable nor flexible if they don't contribute to infrastructural upkeep.

4. Flexibility as antiracism

A #deleteUber campaign began during the spontaneous uprising at airports across the US after the 45th President's 'Muslim ban'. Uber's bad-boy CEO was openly associated with the administration, and Uber broke taxi picket lines at the protests. The CEO was also videotaped ranting callously at a driver who had lost his life savings driving for the company. Uber suffered again when high profile charges of sexual harassment inside the company were posted publicly at the height of the #MeToo revelations. At nearly the same moment, accusations that Uber had targeted government officials who were investigating it with 'greyballing' software were confirmed. Uber was breaking the law (Timberg and Fung 2017; Cramer 2019; Guynn 2019). Lyft moved in quickly to capitalize on its missteps. In 2017, Lyft president John Zimmer told *TIME* magazine:

> "We're woke. Our community is woke, and the U.S. population is woke. There's an awakening … Our vote matters, our choice matters, the seat we take matters" (Steinmetz 2017).

The "America is an idea" campaign built on these seemingly woke stances. It took out the full-color inside front cover of the *New York Times Magazine* issue addressing immigration in July of 2019, during a period of continuing press accounts of the atrocities caused by child separation policies at the border. Lyft's nostalgic bromides spoke directly to liberal anxieties, in particular, promising implicitly that American technological innovation would somehow bring back the post-war social contract, without bringing back the Fordist wage.

Lyft's embrace of politics worked to focus the audience on the rhetoric of choice itself, as with the phrase 'our choice matters;' Lyft's rhetoric centralized the choice of company as the meaningful choice. By metaphorizing taking a 'seat' as taking a political stand, by aligning choosing an app with voting, Lyft created the same affective sense of community participation and citizen-like subjectivity that reality television created (Chihara 2017). In its 2018 campaign, Lyft expanded a series of pledges to round up each fare and donate the 'round up' to nonprofits. As the 45th President stirred up his political base with anti-immigrant racism, Lyft aired its documentaries about immigrants and asylum seekers, primarily people of colour. Against a backdrop of very real horrors, Lyft promoted the activism of nonprofit organizations to whom it channelled some real support. By giving spare change to, for example, the LatinX-supporting group RAICES, while avoiding Uber, antiracist users could experience momentary relief at a time when many felt a general sense of helplessness.

This does not mean that such monetary support is materially or politically empty. RAICES legitimately helps refugees and immigrants in need of legal services. But while participating in the political space within which more radical demands to abolish ICE arose, Lyft reinforced the sense of technological inevitability around the gig economy as a whole – framing the choice between apps as the meaningful choice. *America is an idea* soothed anxiety around the horror of human rights violations against immigrants, but at the specific expense of the idea that America is a materially unjust society. A display of tolerance obscured the deployment of economic mechanisms that prevented many workers from reaching full participation in social life.

In the diverse urban markets where Lyft has done particularly well, #UberisEvil sold itself. Lyft proceeded to hire immigrants and represent their stories in ad campaigns at a moment of intensely polarizing discourse around immigration and race. This might make it seem that Lyft's progressive messaging was intended for cosmopolitan *New York Times* readers only, under the assumption that the drivers wouldn't see the ads. But no easy rhetorical line can be drawn between the audience of users and labourers. First, during a time of increasing hostility to people of colour, immigrants, and women, Lyft needed to make both drivers and riders feel welcomed, despite the relatively low level of safety it could actually ensure. Second, while a 2018 report found that a majority of TNC riders were urban, affluent, young and well-educated – statistically-likely to respond well to liberal messages in the *Times* – a 2020 survey also suggested that drivers themselves were well-educated. More than fifty percent held a BA in comparison with 33% of the general population (Schor 2017; Cambpell 2020). The *America is an Idea* campaign was clearly aimed at uniting the sympathies of both drivers and riders in urban audiences, inserting Lyft's brand into a narrative about the future of America. It idealized apps as a meaningful method of participating in contemporary politics, inviting drivers and riders together to transform American opportunity in a way that might resist rising white supremacism.[5]

On one level, Lyft probably speculated that the chaos of the contemporary American media landscape would prevent anyone from holding it publicly accountable (for example, by pointing out that not long after 'the seat we take matters', Lyft worked hand-in-hand with Uber on the dishonest and nefarious Prop 22 campaign). They banked on a short public span of attention. On another level, *America is an idea* was part of a larger shift in the US towards such explicitly politicized ad campaigns. In the age of speculative politics, consumers seem to increasingly demand that brands perform shared values. While the journalistic conventions and cultural practices that might have held firms accountable in the past have been shifting (or evaporating), at the same time, brands must increasingly demonstrate that they are ethically deserving of investment. Even before protests in support of Black Lives Matter in 2020 provoked a huge uptick in white attention to antiracism, especially among young consumers, many firms had been forced to take antiracist or pro-LGBTQ stands. Trans activism, women's health, LGBTQ issues, and also crucially, environmental issues had all affected various corporate bottom lines (Steinmetz 2017; Creswell and Draper 2018). In an increasingly polarized America, attempts to be neutral could backfire, and diving into the polarization could generate free attention amongst scarce advertising possibilities (as with Nike's campaign using Colin Kaepernick and Serena Williams).

Lyft and Nike's progressive messages were, of course, bids for shareholder value. But even if the ads were purely cynical, the larger issues they represent are too important to cede to corporate interests. A political horizon that combines collective movements with campaigns targeting specific instances of hypocrisy could create accountability. Lyft sells no beloved product and has never turned a profit. Not despite but because workers remain attached to flexible work, messages around antiracism and immigration in an economic context could target Lyft's explicit promises to particular communities, using the emptiness of those promises as a sign that these communities should take their flexible loyalty elsewhere. Activists in Europe have framed legal actions around employee status (like the California bill AB5) as primarily symbolic, geared less towards bringing back stable jobs and more towards exposing the duplicity of the food and technology industry (Feher 2021). If messages can be reframed within a political horizon that looks beyond a return to the Fordist wage, then despite legal setbacks, none of the organizing that has occurred has failed. The social support for antiracism, which Lyft may have amplified, can still be channelled towards a new definition of American opportunity that resists both white supremacism and economic injustice.

If radical flexibility is not a depoliticizing liberal tolerance but a commitment to flexibility for all, then economic organizing can capitalize on growing solidarities around identitarian issues. Too often, a false separation between race or gender equity and economic justice functions to demobilize the Left. Instead of the nostalgia that permeates both the 'America is an Idea' campaign and the rightwing slogan 'Make America Great Again', radical flexibility jettisons all fantasies of a return to post-war America, whether based on a blandly ahistorical lack of racism or on an all-white polity. Lyft attempted to profit from progressive nostalgia by enclosing whatever social fabric remains. It capitalized on a baseline level of trust among anonymous strangers, which is a condition of possibility for a business where people must get into cars with each other. Without explicitly antiracist reappropriations of such social trust, however, economic reform will also be impossible. As Juliet Schor writes, 'The key to making sharing economies socially just is to emphasize an explicit politics of sharing, as well as nurturing collective, public forms of sharing' (Schor 2016).

In the absence of such an explicit politics of social responsibility, corporations will continue to circulate the narrative that their 'innovation' is itself social progress, while suffering is the necessary cost of 'disruption'. But even if technology has changed its form, the exploitation of independent contractors is no technological innovation. Labour struggles around independent contracts and driving long precede Lyft and Uber. The fight against the misclassification of drivers was the focus of extensive union organizing efforts and lawsuits on behalf of port-based truckers since before 2010 (Murphy 2017). The venture-funded penetration of urban markets in transit combined independent contracting with new technologies on a new scale, but only after pitched battles among existing actors. Silicon Valley firms overwhelmed city governments and taxicab collectives, but they fought hard for their livelihoods (Parrott and Reich 2018). Organized taxi drivers, despite terrible injustice and losses, helped galvanize political and public attention around their plight (Fernández Campbell 2018). The high-profile 'disruption' of existing consumer industries, and possibly the initial higher socio-economic status of rideshare drivers (in comparison for example with port truckers), combined with these organizing efforts to bring a great deal of public attention and media coverage to the rideshares. This boosted the transit-network companies' profile, but at the same time, it seems to have enabled further organizing (Scheiber 2019).[6] An explicit politics of sharing would use antiracist campaigns to demand that technical innovations provide public access to public infrastructure, or to demand universal access to the material conditions that make sharing possible, especially in the wake of the destruction caused by the pandemic (Morales).

5. Flexibility as creativity

Flexible work allows workers to demand subjective independence, and becomes a compensatory strategy or a performance that builds social capital and makes the worker appear employable. Inside the corporate office, snarky online friendships were the compensatory strategy that provided a release from the performance of employer-mandated friendliness in person. Snark was a way of expressing disaffection from cubicle work and individual agency, if not necessarily solidarity. Snark, or a 'cruel knowingness' epitomized the 'privileged detachment' and 'deskbound subcultural humour' of the office worker in the early 2000s (Gregg, Seigworth, and Ahmed 2010). The famous Gen X apathy was also a compensatory disaffection, a checked-out survival strategy for a particular group of workers entering the labour force in the 1990s, 'between the relative security of the postwar Keynesian consensus and contemporary all-out precarity' (Karl 2020). By contrast, digital labourers juggling multiple gigs, as they manage their social ratings through their smartphones on the road, can't afford to seem snarky. Free of the office walls, always hustling and always online, workers try to have fun being flexible because they have to appear fun and flexible.

Lyft used the aura of tech in the creative economy to inject a depoliticizing sense of excitement and meaning into flexible work (Brouillette 2013, 2020). Its marketing podcast expressly gave flexible work credit for supporting creative pursuits. *Pick Me Up!* centred on contrived pseudo-documentary scenarios with drivers as aspiring musicians or chefs, where flexible gig work made if not their dreams then at least a gentler deferral of their dreams possible.[7] For several neoliberal decades, cultural processes have trained subjects to accept precarity and insecurity with the promise of excitement, passion, and community in creative work. The illusion of self-determined and autonomous work in the creative sector devolved the effects of what Angela McRobbie calls 'stealth labour reform' down onto the shoulders of individual workers (2018). This podcast relied on vocabularies of creative independence to induce subjects to internalize the economy's demands. Here, being flexible meant supporting yourself indefinitely on the long slog towards the elusive good job that pays.

Pick Me Up!, however, was never about the driving itself. Lyft never promised to provide creative fulfilment on the gig. Obviously, the podcast was intended to yoke a sense of creative fulfilment and belonging to the Lyft brand. But the personal creative projects, the informal community of mentoring and influencer videos on Facebook and YouTube--and then the Gig Workers Rising organizing meetings--these forums were never provided by the company itself. With everything outsourced, Lyft maintained control primarily over the terms of access to the service. *Pick Me Up!* organized a few relatively awkward networking encounters, but Lyft's fundamental claim for flexible work was as a source of autonomy, adjacent to the sense of purpose and meaning generated somewhere else. This separation of creativity from the flexible gig pointed to an inherent weakness in Lyft's brand. It provides an opening, where a demand for flexibility in service of purpose and meaning not provided by work could be turned back on the company that can't provide any of it.

In much of the 'dot.com' and Silicon Valley ethos, the promise of autonomy has fostered a kind of techno-libertarianism which marshals sentiment primarily against the state, but this might be rechanneled against monopolistic private brands. By bringing attention to the rigidity and repetition of digital labour, qualitative critiques of work target the spiritually-deadening aspects of alienation. This often dovetails with critiques of all sclerotic bureaucracies, both private and public. The qualitative critique of work is thus more easily appropriated by management theory than the quantitative. Management theory has used creative discourse to make workers feel as if they have more ownership over their labour, while finding new ways to exploit them. In the platform economy's all-out precarity, characterized by wage theft and radical insecurity, the 'quantitative critique' of work, focused on hyperexploitation, 'returns with a vengeance' (McClanahan and Bernes 2019). The raw injustice of long hours and low wages has become harder to ignore.

And yet, after years of increasingly brutal quantitative precarity, even in 2020, Lyft was able to rally voters around flexibility and the creative worker, positioned together as vulnerable to state regulation. Alisha, in the Prop 22 ad, was implicitly threatened by government intervention. Many of the drivers I spoke with were keenly aware of the problems of precarity, yet still cited flexibility as one of the best things about their experience driving, and hoped to avoid further regulation. The scholar-activist Trebor Scholz uses the language of a 'myth of choice' or the 'myth of flexibility' in his excellent book *Uberworked and underpaid: How workers are disrupting the digital economy* (2017). But suggesting to drivers that flexibility was a myth not only ran counter to their experiences, but it risked becoming demobilizing. Radical flexibility, then, strives to join the qualitative and the quantitative critiques in support of Scholz's collective vision. It demands everything at once, the basic resources necessary to live and the space for a creative life, freedom from long-term contracts and cubicles, purpose and meaning, all defined not by but against the gig.

6. Flexibility as play

Creative work induces labour to accept precarity by providing affective autonomy and self-actualization – it makes it feel less like work. One of management's strategies in the age of flexible work has thus also been to make work feel like a game. Lyft combined its monitoring of social credit (where drivers were reviewed by passengers, while passengers were also reviewed by drivers) with algorithmic pricing mechanisms, in order to merge behavioural control over drivers with the feeling of playing a videogame. At Lyft, sign-up bonuses could provide real financial relief *and* could feel like beginners luck. Beginner's luck is known from the study of gambling to increase the addictiveness of online games because early wins release dopamine, a feeling people are then physiologically driven to recreate. At Lyft and Uber, in-app micro-targets encouraged drivers to extend their shifts, while 'micro-branding' meant that they internalized the need to be fun for passengers (Raval Dourish). In 2019, Lyft was using individualized 'power zones'. These types of bonuses and leaderboard-style goals and badges materially increase feelings of satisfaction and relieve boredom in both work and gaming, providing stimulation missing from so many un-gamified jobs (Mollick and Werbach 2015). Meanwhile, workers who had signed up to solve a financial problem with Express Pay were seduced into one more ride, over and over, while ignoring the losses mounting behind complicated tax forms, fluctuating gas prices, and slowly-depreciating vehicles.

The affective rewards of gamified work mix with real social support (reflected in multiple news articles about the cars as hookup zones and newly romantic spaces). If the dot.com era, with its boy-CEOs and nerf guns at the office, tried to compensate for disaffection in cubicle life with autonomy and excitement, the platform era attempted to reinvent service work as flexible technological fun. Such a reinvention required taking a job that had been devalued along racial lines, chauffeuring, and changing the social position of the driver. After its start as a hipster outfit with ironic pink moustaches on the grills of cars, when passengers were invited to sit in the front seat and fist-bump drivers, Lyft extended its first karaoke cars into a series of special 'Lyft Creatives' campaigns, with on-the-ground promotions tied to film and TV shows, pastry chef cookie cars, Harry Potter cars, and poetry cars (for example, Nagy 2014). By giving driving a speculative sense of liberal transgression against the previous racialized order, Lyft in some sense turned driving into a game that middle class people could play on the way to real life.

At the outset, the transit network companies sold their business model with 'surge pricing'. They claimed prices would respond dynamically to supply and demand, which, as free market theory had it, would allow price signals to allocate driving resources effectively and efficiently. In practice, when prices surged during rainstorms and after crowded events, the spikes tended to provoke angry or even furious reactions from customers. They felt it was price gouging (Lowrey 2014). The companies promised the surges would incentivize drivers to meet demand and that customers unwilling to pay such high prices would be able to wait them out. Basically, however, surge pricing was never fully unleashed. Instead, the algorithmic generation of prices was primarily used as a method of control by the corporations (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). They applied pressure to driving patterns, using the asymmetry in access to information to insure algorithmic control over employees.

A study of the algorithmic management of Uber drivers found that Uber eventually punished drivers who tried to choose higher paid rides over other rides, or who tried to respond to the ostensible incentive mechanism of the surge. Rosenblat and Stark found that the company instead used the algorithm to 'generate and coordinate clusters of labour in response to dynamic market conditions'. Algorithmic control protected the company from liability or responsibility, while they used it to even out prices and wait times for consumers in a bid for market dominance. Customers wanted reliable and predictable pricing. For drivers, on the other hand, the intentionally-elusive promise of high-priced rides propelled them 'into a similar emotional space as gambling or gaming'. The companies asymmetrically managed information around how much a given ride would be worth, where high-priced rides would appear, and the destination of rides, which in 2019 Lyft only provided to drivers who met certain criteria. This asymmetry was always the house's tool for soft control.

Uber and Lyft both hired behavioural economists to design what *The New York Times* called 'an extraordinary behind-the-scenes experiment in behavioural science to manipulate [drivers] in the service of its corporate growth' (Scheiber 2019). They triggered loss aversion, nudged drivers to hang in for one more ride, and implemented a host of other tricks that deployed behavioural research to get drivers to internalize the company's needs as their own. At the same time, drivers felt like they were playing a game and making independent choices. Algorithmic pricing set the pace of work, while flexibility induced workers not only to work long days but also to imagine that the urge to keep playing was a fun and positive aspect of flexible work and flexible worker.

Lyft wanted to capture the value created by these social practices, while retaining soft control over worker behaviour. But algorithmic control is approximate, and the platforms could not entirely capture or predict the dynamics unleashed by gamified driving. Customers hated surge pricing. Meanwhile, drivers could be encouraged to do karaoke cars, but Lyft was limited in preventing or enforcing their provision. Many consumers never wanted such cars; many never encountered one. During the novelty period of the shared ride, people circulated stories of romantic encounters with other passengers and drivers. It was an intimate and casual experience – new, but never entirely in the companies' control as they gambled with the social fabric. The Creatives campaigns may have differentiated Lyft from Uber at first, and increased social trust in some areas. But for both companies, as the expectations around social participation shifted, racial and gendered conflict threatened to erupt in the social space of the cars. Drivers and passengers were harassed, threatened, and sometimes harmed, with concerns about passenger safety peaking when a young woman was killed by a man posing as her Uber driver in South Carolina (Healy 2019; Bussewitz 2020). New patterns of lawsuits appeared around bias amplified by the apps, as studies showed that the corporate control of digital systems of social credit exacerbated different forms of prejudice (Allyn 2020; Wiggers 2020). Overall, the 'sharing' economy and the gamified car put the social expectations of the ride space in flux.

Gamification provided different kinds of social engagement, a socially constructed sense of belonging that imparts meaning to all work experiences, and that is also a crucial element in behavioural addictions. The sense of ownership and participation imparted by a sense of play contributed to new interpersonal and group dynamics around driving, which some built on for collective organization (Covert 2020). The social dynamics also fuelled addictions. From within the behavioural economic mode, the marketing professor Adam Alter describes the six features of behaviourally addictive practices as (Alter 2017):

(1) Compelling goals just beyond reach
(2) Irresistible and unpredictable positive feedback
(3) Incremental progress and improvement
(4) Tasks that become slowly more difficult over time
(5) Unresolved tensions that demand resolution
(6) Strong social connections

In his book, which covers successful products like Fit-Bits and the World of Warcraft (WOW) videogame which have proven startlingly addictive, Alter is clear that such addictions connect affordances in the technologies to individual vulnerabilities in the players. Unmet psychological needs in the individual make her vulnerable. While the chemical qualities of certain substances can be addictive, for games, the socially located aspects – including the larger narratives in which players participate – help determine their addictive qualities. Games like WOW provide not only particular forms of mental and visual stimulation, but also incredibly rich social engagement around feelings of masculine belonging (Alavi et al. 2012). People who do not feel a sense of agency in their day-to-day life, who do not feel mentally stimulated, or who, simply put, are lonely, are more likely to respond to the feelings of reward and social support that gamified work provides. For example, a young, highly indebted college student in a new city could present a highly vulnerable subject to the appeal of addictive driving. They might be low on stimulation, agency, and liquid luck, perhaps especially if they are highly-skilled and unable to find a well-paying and interesting job. Lyft's bonuses, badges and acceptance-rate targets, often unpredictable and just out of reach, created features 1 through 5 in spades. The social space of the ride and the online forums and groups provided number 6.

Alter's description is intended as a warning against the dangers of addictive practices, given that some patients end up in inpatient recovery facilities for upwards of seven months. But his six features could just as easily be used to create sticky driving apps (or college classes). Behavioural psychologists like Alter, or like the behavioural economists who worked with Lyft and Uber, research and teach primarily in business schools or economics departments, and they command much of the research on how people respond to gamified incentive structures and algorithmic pricing. The ideological position of the behavioural economists who first studied and worked with Uber was that driving at different hourly wages was a pure expression of driver choice. In other words, the 'value' that a driver put on flexible work could be calculated into the price at which she was willing to drive at certain times and not others, expressed in the 'choice' between pay rates. By studying how drivers chose to drive at certain times and for certain wages, the behavioural economists modelled flexibility as a positive metric with which to capture worker behaviour (Berman 2014). Once algorithmic pricing was in place, however, the language of addiction allowed companies to leave responsibility for over-indulgence, or poor choices, with the individual.

The widespread implementation of 'gamification' strategies in corporate America becomes a way for management theorists to turn the value of flexibility and the problem of addiction into soft control (Terranova 2004). In response to this, pathologizing addicted drivers or suggesting that work should be rendered less fun seems obviously unhelpful. In the 1990s, the figure of the addict galvanized shame-inducing neoconservative rhetoric, but contemporary discourse is more demoralized than moralizing. Soft control often takes 'the form of a tolerance which exploits the disciplinary potential of a carefully bounded freedom in order to keep individual behaviour in check' (Beaumont 2020). Thus in the behavioural economic mode, companies orient their rhetoric around freedom of choice and tolerance. Addicts have simply abused their freedom, or, 'behaviour engaged in freely has led paradoxically to an inability to exercise free will … it reflects a more thoroughgoing instrumentalisation of rational choice theory in which the "abuse" of a given substance becomes equivalent to the "abuse" of the faculty of choice itself'. Here, flexibility plays into the cultural process of making workers ultimately responsible for how much they drive, sidelining long hours as either an 'abuse' of the faculty of choice or as an expression of intense experienced utility.

At the same time, flexibility does give drivers a way to talk about their needs without shame. Even if addiction is a demoralizing instantiation of neoliberal governmentality, it can be contextualized within the increasing cultural attention being paid to mental health (Fisher 2009). The figure of the pathologized addict has lost much of its scandalous power in an American context widely engaged with mental wellbeing; gig workers are more likely to be willing to talk openly about addictive habits than their cubicle forebears. Thus even if they have abused flexibility, they maintain the authority to say how much is too much. While people cope with the awareness that they can be addicted to their phones *and* their jobs, the demand for flexibility can reclaim mental agency within emerging conditions. Addiction is nothing if not a mental form of rigidity. Against conservative appropriation of the rhetoric around the 'right to work', radical flexibility reappropriates a fluid sense of the right to play, or the right to move among multiple pursuits and places, free in body and mind.

Gamified addictive digital practices present material risks. But the complicated ethical questions they raise exist embedded in contingent social circumstances. In these contexts, workers hailed as game players might be approachable in new ways. A tax preparer who helped upwards of 70 of Lyft and Uber drivers each year said in 2019 that he thoroughly believed that driving for the transit network companies was addictive. Many of the drivers he saw qualified for Medical or other federal assistance and were making thousands of dollars below the poverty line or minimum wage per year. Many were not aware how little they were actually making until he tallied it up for them. Nevertheless, even once he showed them their real wages, he told me he thought most of them would keep driving. The quantitative critique was not enough. He did not think government regulation would help, he was openly anti-statist. But he said that most of the drivers in his neighbourhood of South Central Los Angeles who did not make a living wage were, as a group, simply unwilling to go back to conventional jobs. 'It's hard to leave the lifestyle behind', he said.[8] This accountant also identified a man he thought was the most addicted driver: The one who combined an addiction to driving with an addiction to organizing for one of the workers' collectives.

7. Radical nomads

As housing and transit services continued to decline in through 2019, journalists started to document the rising number of people living in their cars. Parking lots full of sleeping rideshare drivers dotted the high-asset-price Bay Area. Community college and Cal State students were increasingly in need of parking lots, not in order to go to class but in order to spend the night during the school week (Xia 2016; Fagan 2017). Drivers were getting sucked into long hours in their cars, which were liquidity traps, addictive games, transportation, and shelter, all at the same time.

During my research on these issues, I came across the vlog of a young woman named Katie Carney. Carney lived out of her car, for three years in an unbroken stretch and on-and-off for longer than that (Carney 2020). She insisted, unflinchingly, that this was her choice. Hobo culture, on the railroads, was America's historic precedent for this nomadic sense of self. Like many of the thousands living out of their vans and crisscrossing the country for itinerant labour, documented in Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland* (2017), Carney thought of herself as houseless by choice, not homeless. Unlike many of the nomads in Bruder's book, however, Carney was young, her commitment to an extreme form of flexibility did not come because her ability to retire was stolen by the Great Recession. Something in Carney herself was drawn to weightlessness. Her sense of entitlement to an unencumbered life seemed mostly depoliticized but absolute (Carney). There is no question that her beauty and her whiteness helped her make these choices. At the same time her privilege does not entirely explain or contain the politics of Carney's insistence on her right to radical flexibility, to live alone and on the road. Funded by digital labour in the platform economy and by the influencer payments that she received from YouTube and Instagram, Carney monetized and lived out a new permutation of the American commitment to autonomy.

In the same way that I wanted to understand Alisha, in a world with narrowing options for fiercely independent young people, it felt important to me to look at Carney's narrative in context and on her terms. Insisting that her freedom was entirely a myth, that she was nothing but internalized neoliberal economic discipline, or that she be categorized as a mentally ill addict or as homeless seemed not only disrespectful but also, on a fundamental level, incorrect. The picket-fence American dream of the previous century is dead (Adkins, Cooper and Konings). Any new imaginary for American life must account for and speak to people like Katie Carney and her already shifted orientation towards cars, homes, and jobs – using orientation to mean 'how we reside in space' as economic realities shift, with a focus on 'the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness of what is ready to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds' (Ahmed 2006). Radical flexibility and post-wage-labour platform co-operativism might critically re-appropriate aspects of changes that are well underway, they might connect lines of flight in Carney to others, building towards collective demands for shelter and autonomy that are in no way provided by work.

Notes

1. Over a period of 18 months, I interviewed 11 Lyft drivers at length and with permission to use the interviews for this research. I also spoke informally with many more drivers (between 30 and 40) in their cars, primarily in Los Angeles, but also in Washington DC, and Seattle. I used these informal interviews to get a sense of the range of common positions. I made a qualitative effort to include a range of subject positions, including drivers who created YouTube influencer videos; Nicole Moore of Rideshare Drivers United; drivers who had driven for both Uber and Lyft or Lyft and delivery services; drivers from different parts of Los Angeles and drivers with different experiences of gender and race. I used these interviews to amplify and flesh out the journalism, economic history, and sociological research cited here.
2. Hustle culture is a Silicon Valley idiom for the entrepreneurial work ethos. Former Uber CEO Travis Kalanick was quoted in *Business Insider* in 2016 saying his company was successful because of their motto, 'Always be hustling'.
3. Sanjukta M. Paul documents how independent contractors who organize into collectives can be targeted by antitrust laws, while private corporations are not. Paul also suggests pathways towards new forms. She writes of the 'resilience' of 'the deep-seated collective intuition that those who are doing the material work of economic life are entitled to a role in governing it and that indeed we all benefit when they do'. 'The enduring ambiguities of antitrust liability for worker collective action'. Loy. U. Chi. LJ 47 (2015): 969. (1043)
4. #DeleteUber was a disinvestment campaign. As post-wage-labour activists seek universal and unconditional guarantees, Feher suggests that stakeholders form coalitions in the model of the 'Defund DAPL' movement, which combined a broad-based disinvestment campaign with legal battles. 'Native American activist Jackie Fielder explains: 'We have the economic power to show companies that when they finance an environmentally racist project … their bottom line will suffer'. (Feher 75)
5. I spoke to at least three LatinX female drivers who chose to drive for Lyft because of a vague sense that it was better for women than Uber. The white men did not care about the politics of the companies. Everyone I spoke with was either unwilling to discuss Trump himself or strongly opposed to him (all interviews took place before the events of January 2021). But these are very small samples from one urban market. There is no question that drivers are now making far less than they were in 2013. Drivers were not, in 2019, making the monthly

earnings that Lyft promised, promises which had themselves already gone down from their height in 2014, even though Lyft and Uber were increasingly competing for drivers not only with each other but with delivery services. After both major players went public, investors started to ask when they would have a plan to become profitable. It's not clear which aspect of their model will crumble first. The insurance situation is in flux, as well.

6. Rideshare organizers were sometimes frustrated with old-labour organizers. Author interview with Nicole Moore of Rideshare United on 24 July 2019.
7. For a particularly poignant example of the podcast forcing optimism to the point of cruelty, see 'I will have won that Grammy'. Smith, Mariah narrator. 'Pick Me Up!' Gimlet Media, 23 October 2018, https://gimletmedia.com/shows/pick-me-up/llhd8j/i-will-have-won-that-grammy. Gimlet Creative. iTunes app, 25 September 2018.
8. Interview with Rey Rivas, 24 July 2019.

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Notes on contributor

Michelle Chihara is Associate Professor of English and Associate Director of the Whittier Scholars Program at Whittier College, where she teaches contemporary American literature, media studies, and creative writing. Her book's working title is Behave! –Economics & the science of influence in American popular culture. Recent publications include *Postmodern Culture*, *American Literary History*, *Post45: Contemporaries*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books* Quarterly Journal and a chapter in *New Directions in Print Culture Studies* forthcoming from Bloomsbury. She co-edited *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics* and currently edits the Econ & Finance section at *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. In a former life, she was a reporter, and has published fiction, nonfiction, reportage and essays in a variety of publications, online and off.

ORCID

Michelle Chihara http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2984-0049

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