Forefronts of the sharing economy.

Uber in Cape Town.

Abstract

The sharing economy is one of the latest business innovations fuelled by Silicon Valley's firms and venture capitals. Making use of information technologies, it allows transactions where products are accessed beyond individual property, creating a global tribe of micro-entrepreneurs: handymen with TaskRabbit, hoteliers with Airbnb, private drivers with Uber, etc. Using these narrative, sharing economy firms find their way also into the cities of the Global South, where entrepreneurship is a powerful discourse of neoliberal development. In these contexts, far from where software is developed, markets are created and experimented at the intersection with world-city aspirations and existing, often informal, urban economies.

This paper explores the urban geographies of the sharing economy in the marketization of Uber in Cape Town, South Africa. Through an ethnographic engagement with its software and its local drivers, it is argued that

will show how the technologies that enact Uber's urban market are embedded in its infrastructure and how they uncannily allow for a diverse range of economic manipulations and asymmetric conversions of value.

Keywords: Uber; sharing economy; marketization; marginal gains; Cape Town.

Introduction

In a time of "sluggish" capitalism (Brenner, 2003), the sharing economy holds the promise of a new, disruptive, billionaire market for entrepreneurs, investors, urban governments and new kinds of consumers. Although there is little consensus on its definition, a growing grey literature produced for national and local governments identifies the sharing economy as digital innovation allowing economic transactions where products and services are accessed beyond individual property and with new, on-demand, labour arrangements (BIS, 2014; Codagnone et al. 2016; Nesta, 2014; PwC, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2016).

As Lizzie Richardson has pointed out (2015), there are two diametric dimensions of the debate around the sharing economy. On one hand, sharing business models can be understood as commoning practices alternative to dominant forms of accumulation (Gibson-Graham, et al., 2013; McLaren & Agyeman, 2015; Ramos, 2016), as responses to neoliberal austerity (Färber, 2014; Tonkiss, 2013), as new forms of consumption (Botsman & Rogers, 2011; Collins, 2010) or even as a new market order which—Jeremy Rifkin predicts (2014)—will bring capitalism to an end. On the other hand, more critical voices see the sharing economy as a mask for business-as-usual (Morozov, 2014), if not as a narrative used by corporations to lobby particular (urban) agendas (Slee, 2016; see also McNeill, 2016).

A *Time* Magazine 2011's "ten ideas that will change the world" (Walsh, 2011), collaborative consumption—as the sharing economy is often phrased—entails a diverse, on-demand workforce, which advocates describe as a global tribe of self-employed entrepreneurs, unfastening their "idle assets" in a "gig" market (Stephany, 2015; Lieber and Puente, 2016), whilst more critical commentators speak of a "futuristic feudalism" (Wright, 2015) of precarious, unprotected workers (Friedman, 2014; Hill, 2015).

This paper intersects these debates on a different level, and in a different geographical context than those of most accounts of the sharing economy—it charts ride-sharing with Uber, the San-Francisco-based company, in the city of Cape Town, South Africa, from the technologies that enact its market to the very last end of the economic activity: the transaction. Crossing oceans and bypassing local legislations, sharing economy firms like Uber find a fertile terrain in the cities of the Global South. Here, the promise of creating revenue streams from sharing and collaborating, and "unlocking a new generation of microentrepreneurs" (BIS, 2014:6), resonates with powerful, neoliberal narratives of international development about empowerment through entrepreneurship (see, among others, Rankin, 2001; Elyachar, 2002; Ferguson, 2007; Roy, 2010).

In Cape Town, a growing tourist destination with long-standing worlding ambitions (McDonald, 2008; Bickford-Smith, 2009), Uber creates its economic space by harvesting these narratives of empowerment, the idea that the "what-is-mine-is-yours-for-a-fee" is an African invention (Sanchez, 2015), and the availability of cheap labour in a country deeply concerned with job creation (Barchiesi, 2012; Ferguson, 2013; Di Paola & Pons-Vignon, 2013). However, the strict affordances of the software generate other, unexpected economic possibilities in the asymmetric conversions that they enable.

By focusing on the processes of "marketization", which Çalıskan & Callon (2010) identify as one of the empirical fields of economic performativity, this paper looks at the material making of the market arrangements that enable the existence of Uber in Cape Town. Specifically, I adopt two different "vantage points" that offer a perspective on the making of these "*agencements*" (Çalıskan & Callon, 2010). In the first section of the article, the vantage point is that of the software as a marketizing device, capable of incorporating calculations and rationalities. I first describe how a ride-sharing market was created in Cape Town, building on local urban discourses that could be aligned to its technical features (1.1). I then argue (1.2) that the idea of Uber as an agent of 'good' development is crucial in sourcing the supply side of the software platform, the layer of on-demand labour that underpins ride-sharing.

In the second section, I move to the ride-sharing transactions, the "market encounters" (Çalıskan & Callon, 2010) where software features are renegotiated on different scales of value (2.1), and at the interface with existing urban economies in Cape Town (2.2). To frame a discussion about the asymmetric conversions of value that take place during ride-sharing transactions, I use the concept of "marginal gains", which Jane Guyer (2004) developed in order to discuss how monetary transactions in the context of Atlantic Africa are prone to dissonances that allow for economic, moral, and social benefit. Her work on the interface between capitalism and other social institutions in Africa has been crucial to document not only the "failure of capitalist arrangements to become universal forms of economic life" (Roitman, 2007:156), but also the inescapable asymmetries that are bound to the performativity of the latter. I suggest that bringing this insight to the forefronts of the sharing economy—it's actually-existing urban forms—offers a fruitful perspective to understand how contemporary capitalist enterprises are at work in an African city. Though not exclusively monetary, Uber transactions are similarly caught within various asymmetries that drivers and other lateral economic subjects use to enact value in different fields.

As I discuss in the conclusive part, the article seeks to contribute both to the growing literature on sharing economy firms, by showing their strategic adaptations in the context of a city of the Global South, through the lenses of economic performativity, and to the debate about African urban economies as sites of worldly experimentations, where Uber's socio-technical platform becomes fraught with disjunctures that pave the way for forms of dispossession and exploitation, but also enable other economic relations.

This paper is based on various modes of ethnographic engagement with the software, the drivers and the marketization of Uber in Cape Town. Over the course of seven months, between March 2015 and October 2015, I collected 96 ethnographic vignettes of Uber transactions where I was the e-hailing client. The stories that were generously shared with me during those transactions are the empirical core of this work. When told about my research interests, many drivers offered to take me around the city until I had asked everything I wanted to know, at the price set by Uber itself. With some of them (7), I sat down in a formal interview. However, with the idea of extending ethnographic work beyond participant observation, I collected various documents (press releases, blog posts) and artefacts (youtube videos, tweets) in order to trace how Uber discursively crafted the form of its Cape Town's market.

1. Marketization by software.

Although there has been research in the cunning maneuvers that global firms adopt to enter urban economies (Halpern et al., 2013; McNeill, 2015; Söderström, 2014), or shape local corporate cultures (see Ong, 2006; Boussebaa et al. 2012), less is known about global sharing economy players entering urban economies in the Global South—an area where this article seeks to make a contribution, by showing some of the material practices through which markets are made.

One of the "vantage points" through which processes of "marketization" can be explored is that of "marketizing agencies"—the calculative actors, institutions, and artefacts that collectively contribute to the making of markets (Çalıskan & Callon, 2011). In this first section of the paper, I argue that the enactment of a market for Uber in Cape Town was made possible by the capacity of the software[1] itself to embed local narratives and tropes that are unique to a city caught between worlding aspirations and developmental hopes. In other words, Uber strategically adapted to the specific postcolonial context by incorporating rationalities and calculations that were not only functional for marketing purposes, but they became a vital, performative part of its technical life.

1.1 E-hailing in Cape Town.

Uber arrived in Cape Town in August 2013, with a “stealth launch” of “secret Ubers”, a Twitter account, a blog, and a marketing team (Studener, 2013). A few months later, in October 2013, Uber officially started its operations, with a local sports celebrity as client zero. By the beginning of my research, in March 2015, there were at least one thousand operating cars and a long waiting list of prospective Uber drivers[2]. The service extended to most parts of the metropolitan area, covering districts as distant as the wine hills of Stellenbosch, with the exclusion of many townships, urban segments of economic marginality in a divided city (see Sinclair-Smith, & Turok, 2012). In less than two years, Uber had disrupted the local taxi industry: cab drivers had recently protested in the streets of the city, lamenting its unfair competition and avoidance of local bylaws (van Zyl, 2015), a local taxi company had announced the launch of an Uber-inspired software, whilst other taxi drivers had simply started using the app to boost their businesses.

From the beginning of its operations in the city, Uber was advertised as a more reliable, safer technology of mobility, building on the narratives of unsafety that underpin some of the spatial configurations of Cape Town (see Lemanski, 2004; Didier et al., 2012; 2013). However, the strongest “quality”—to use Callon et al’s formulation (2002)—of the software was its ‘coolness’, its capacity to make its users world-class urbanites. Uber’s coolness was rooted in the imagery of Cape Town as a trendy, creative hub (Wenz, 2012) and a first-class

[1] Uber’s software provides a service that connects potential customers to private drivers through a multiplatform application and a cashless payment system. On the demand side, eventual customers download the free application to their phone and create their own user profile. Uber then connects users to the closest available driver, by sharing their name and position. In tech savvy jargon, this is called ‘e-hailing’. On the map, clients can see the position of the car that Uber has chosen for them. They then receive updates about the estimated arrival time (ETA), and they can manually select the destination of the trip. Price is calculated in a fashion that is similar to metered taxis: time and kilometers, on a balance that varies according to the city. The more a place is congested, the more the fare is weighed by monetising time.

[2]Though I have reason to accept the accuracy of this quantity, this number was used by the drivers as the quantifiable proof of Uber’s success in Cape Town, which was their shared understanding.

tourist destination (see Pirie, 2007). The backdrop of @uberCT twitter feed was populated by images that spoke, for Capetonians and international tourists, about a privileged lifestyle, from wine drinking in the metropolitan winelands—to which Uber purposefully extended its coverage in July 2014—to watching a sunset in the affluent Atlantic seaboard suburbs, or enjoying a *braai* (barbecue) in one of the social hot-spots of the Cape. As in other cities of the Global South (see Bedi, 2016), the quality of taxi mobility sets the pace of world-class aspirations. However, the distinctive geographies of Cape Town, both as a global tourism capital and as a economically divided city, are the sources of actual, technical variations of the software. In October 2014, to celebrate one year of operations, Uber joined forces with a local helicopter tour agency to offer an "uber-chopper experience", an extravagant ride-sharing available on the application for a limited time. In February 2015, selected Uber users could book a lavish yacht as a promotion that was widely publicised on social media. Through partnerships with the events that form the marketing of the city itself—music and food festival, shopping experiences, markets, sports competitions—the software works as one of the vehicles of the "recreative" city model (Peck, 2012) that Cape Town has embraced for some years (Hiller, 2000).

Uber does not only employ marketing narratives that rely on Cape Town's 'worlding' experiments with global tourism and entrepreneurial governance, which David McDonald has eloquently described as a "world-city syndrome" (2008). It also draws upon the racialized economic legacy of Apartheid, whereby large part of the population lives in deprived townships (Seekings, 2011). These social and economic divides generate, among other things, moral geographies of care, solidarity and voluntarism, whereby privileged Capetonians (and humanitarian tourists) engage in various anti-poverty enterprises (see Besteman, 2008; Daya; 2014; Daya and Ather, 2012). Uber strategically intersects these forms of ethical engagement by communicating its "rightness"—a concept that Nigel Thrift (2006) used to describe the functioning, the governance and the aesthetics of the inventive capitalism to which the sharing economy seems to belong. In this case, rightness is also a market-making moral category, scripted into the socio-technical platform.

As I show in the next paragraph, the core of this business "rightness" is the capacity of the company to empower self-employed entrepreneurs—in other words, to be an agent of development. This narrative is part of a global marketing strategy that Uber uses to enter urban economies in developing cities. In the case of Cape Town, Uber also took advantage of local humanitarian organisations. In April 2015, the firm publicized a partnership with Reach for a Dream, whereby part of the earnings on each single transaction were donated to the NGO. Later in the year, the programme became *uberGIVING - you rode you raised*, and extended to other non-profit organisations. As the local Uber manager puts it, it is the ride-sharing transaction itself that has a moral rightness:

> A special thanks goes out to all those riders using the Uber platform, by simply requesting a trip each of you are making a difference, and every little bit counts[3]

Earlier in 2015, during the late-summer fires that destroyed hundreds of hectares of the floral scrub in the Cape, Uber made a new software feature available to deliver aid to firefighters and residents. In 2014, on election day, to celebrate 20 years of democracy in South Africa, Uber offered free rides to the polling stations. On the application map, instead of little cars, users could see small South-African flags roaming around the streets of the city.

These examples show how some of the discursive rationalities of the sharing economy, its world-class and moral rightness in particular, are not only functional but intrinsic to one of its socio-technical marketizing agencies—Uber software in this case—which embed flexible features that can be adapted to a local urban context. In the next paragraph, the focus moves to the making of another element the material platform—its supply infrastructure.

1.3 People as supply infrastructure of the sharing economy.

However real Uber's moral commitments are, the heart of what the company communicates as 'rightness' is in the capacity of the platform to create opportunities for self-employed entrepreneurs. This is crucial in a country where, as Franco Barchiesi suggests, employment and job creation have been used "both as policy remedies to social emergencies and as moral predictors of the nation's soundness" (2012:232), and more generally in the context of the entrepreneurship-as-empowerment turn in international development (Elyachar, 2002).

As much of the popular literature on sharing economy holds, platforms like Uber enable forms of entrepreneurial self-help. This speaks well to the World Bank's appropriation of microfinance (Roy, 2010) and ideas like the bottom-of-pyramid approach (Elyachar, 2012) which share the view that poverty should be fought by spurring entrepreneurial opportunities among the economically marginalised. The legal arrangement that underlies Uber's platform

[3] https://newsroom.uber.com/south-africa/ubergiving/ [accessed Oct 28 2016]

in South Africa establishes a form of self-employment that fits this view. The contractual relationship that binds the company and the drivers through the software is called ‘partnership’. Drivers are ‘partners’. Whilst the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (De Stefano, 2016) highlights the condition of precarity and deprivation of these forms of on-demand work, Uber’s performative narrations focus on its potential as an entrepreneurial platform. As part of a global strategy for entering developing economies, in the early 2015, the company launched a partnership with UN Women, in order to create job opportunities for women in the majority world, with a video where female drivers described how Uber had empowered them. A few weeks later, the partnership with UN was ended, allegedly after a public letter of the International Transport Federation, which criticised the UN’s affiliation with a precarious workfare where women are further marginalised and lack basic protection (Alter, 2015). None of these criticisms prevented Uber South Africa from reusing the same self-empowerment tale with another video celebrating the saga of local, all distinctively black, entrepreneurs of ride-sharing, in May 2015.

By intersecting neoliberal ideas of self-help that have had an enduring power in the constitution of post-apartheid developmental politics (see Tapscott, 1995, Ferguson, 2010), Uber employs ‘just-in-time” or “on-demand” labour arrangements to constitute a layer of entrepreneurs as its supply infrastructure. Several of the drivers that I interviewed, even those disenchanted with Uber, described themselves as self-employed entrepreneurs, echoing the language of the promotional video, in which a driver succinctly explains:

> I work for myself. I can break it or I can make it[4].

This self-employment regime, however, may come at a price that is masked by tales of empowerment. Chris, one of my interlocutors, was resisting the temptation of becoming a full-time driver. He had invested money and time to get a diploma that allowed him to be a tourist guide, and bought a car to drive international visitors around, only to find out it was hard to pay back all his debt as a self-employed chaperon. Uber, however, did not hold a better promise:

> of course, you are an entrepreneur, someone who doesn’t have the security of a wage. But then you’d have to work crazy hours to make it a stable income [...] for me, Uber is a top-up (conversation with Chris).

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHTqI5ttpAM

As he explained, driving with Uber filled the long lags of being a tour guide, and the economic gaps of being a self-employed one. Nonetheless, it is precisely this kind of just-in-time work arrangement, scripted into the platform, that underpins the latter with a layer of—borrowing from Abdoumaliq Simone (200)—"people as infrastructure". This is not new in the way in which capitalist enterprises appropriate certain human infrastructures in relation to precarity and developmental rationalities (see Barchiesi, 2016; Elyachar, 2012; Maurer, 2012) but it assumes here a specific technological form that becomes part of the software. Drivers—and their cars— are, in fact, the supply layer of the platform.

Another common thread in the literature about the sharing economy is the reference to its capacity to unleash, via a technological platform, the potential of "underutilised" or "idle" assets, which could be a room, a couch, a car, a skillset, or simply free time (Stephany, 2015; Lieber and Puente, 2016). The notion of idle assets is a powerful narrative to lure drivers into Uber's fleet and resonates with another stalwart idea of neoliberal development—'dead' capital. According to its proponent, economic guru Hernando de Soto (2000), 'dead' capital is what most poor people possess but cannot leverage on. In the Global South, de Soto argues, there is a "bell jar" that hinders participation in the economy. This bell jar is a property rights system—made of red tape and inefficient bureaucrats—that does not recognise informal possessions, and, therefore, the potential of "dead capital". De Soto's solution is to ease the formalisation of these assets, housing in particular, to unleash their entrepreneurial potential as securities. Similarly, Uber creates an opportunity of empowerment through formalisation: if drivers are able to prove the ownership of a car and go through the necessary paperwork, they can become self-employed entrepreneurs. Uber is then a technology that vitalises 'dead' capital, ideally moving it to the formal, sharing economy.

However, this opportunity is scripted into a complex socio-technical arrangement. Safety concerns, for example, cast a strategy of control that covers many aspects of the drivers' lives, movements, habits, and personal devices. The sharing economy intersects labour in an industry—private driving—which extends to both the so-called formal and informal economy (Rogerson, 2000), and, historically in South Africa, has been associated with risk and crime, pre and post-apartheid[5] (Barrett, 2003; Khosa, 1992; Pirie, 2013). Several of my informants

[5] The accuracy of the divide between formal and informal economies in South Africa—often described as "second economy"— is rightly contested (Devey et al., 2006). I use this distinction here because, as the authors

had stories about how not all cars were deemed to be suitable, and about GPS trackers that needed to be installed in their vehicles to make sure that riders were safe. One of them, who used to be a taxi driver, pointed out that it was precisely this regime of control which set Uber apart from the existing industry:

> we are trained, taxi drivers are not. We all own a PDP [professional driving permit] but that is not enough. When you apply, Uber checks your criminal record, I went through a very strict interview where they really tried to understand if I liked alcohol or not. [...] you have a series of driving tests, and a training where they teach you how to behave with customers, and some client tests, before you hit the road. You think having a car makes you a driver? (conversation with Jeremy)

The empowering nature of vitalised idle capital, however, is not available to all. Many drivers do not own the cars they drive, but are part of the platform through other mediating technologies. Over the course of my research, I had the chance to speak to one of the middling agents that ensure the stability of the infrastructure. He was not a direct employee of Uber, but worked for a partner company that rented cars to third-party drivers whom, in turn, shared their income with the interposed agent.

> I make sure that everything is perfect, check that the cars are clean, that the drivers are not f**** it. It'all under my control. I can enter the system dashboard and see how much money they are making, and how they are driving, and where. We don't want them to be driving aimlessly, or run their errands, or go home for their business with our cars. We can check everything [...] It's not only about money, it's also about how much fuel they waste. It's about performance (conversation with anonymous agent).

In other words, Uber's promise of liberation through self-employment, if ever disingenuous, confronts a context where not only dependence is a stark reality, as I argue in the next section, but where 'dead' capital is often only available in mediated forms—if at all.

2. - Marginal gains of ride-sharing

The last ethnographic sketch in the previous section introduced the main concern of this second part of the article. When adapting to a local context, sharing economy platforms may

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concede, it is a mainstream, powerful narrative and my informants employed it to frame their understanding of Uber.

lose some of their core tenets—as in this case the idea of idle capital—and, more generally, they enter a diverse set of relations with existing urban economies. In particular, I argue that the ride-sharing transactions are the moment when Uber drivers establish a range of disjunctures both in the conversion of different values through the software platform, and in the relation with other economies that intersect ride-sharing.

To frame a discussion around Uber transactions in Cape Town, I use the concept of "marginal gains", which Jane Guyer employed to describe the complex results of "Africa's long experience with capitalism" (2004:xiv). Concerned with the interface between systems of exchange in the context of monetary transactions in Atlantic Africa, Guyer argues that conversions of value, in particular between different currencies, always entail asymmetries whereby individuals may produce personal gains. Transactions are hybrid institutions where dissonant scales are brought into dialogue at specific conversion points, or "tropes" (2004:49). While the concept of marginal gains was specifically monetary, it offers a perspective on the often conflicting calculations that cohere in "market encounters" (Caliskan & Callon, 2010).

In the context of this paper, I use marginal gains as a heuristic unit that speaks to how ride-sharing transactions are asymmetrical conversions of time, money, moral values, or other forms of profit, and to how such asymmetries are used to produce personal gains in these different fields. This is true of ride-sharing itself, but also of the way in which the platform's socio-technical affordances encounter local urban economies. The power of the concept of marginal gains, Guyer claims, is in that it brings together theories and meanings whose languages are diverse. *Marginal* means, in neoclassical microeconomic terms, that gains concern each single transaction, endowing them with purposiveness (Guyer, 2004:25). *Marginal* is also the *peripheral*, here the long distance that separates Uber's headquarters in San Francisco and Amsterdam[6], and the drivers on the streets of Cape Town. *Marginal*, finally, is also a synonym of *small*, here the small fact of "the persistent possibility of a gainful margin in exchange, what people hope and plan for" (Guyer, 2004:26), from within or without the technical constraints of the platform.

2.1 Transactional asymmetries

[6] This was the case as of 2015, prior to Uber establishing regional headquarters in Sub Saharan Africa.

Ride-sharing transactions are institutions where drivers enact personal gains from the conversion between different forms of wealth. The simplest of these conversions is time into money, a calculation embedded within the property of the software, which turns a series of quantifiable qualities (the manufacturer of the car, the intensity of the demand, the kilometers driven) into an e-metre rate that attributes a monetary value to the drivers' time. However, other scales of value are pegged to this apparently simple transaction, and at different moments different conversions take place, enabling forms of profit that may or may not be monetary.

The production of personal gains in the conversion of disjunctive value happens when different economic registers are brought into dialogue without being reduced to a single common denominator (Guyer, 2004:49). These transactional asymmetries take place in "tropes" that are the "linkage points" between the diverse scales which economic subjects use to put things into a certain order (ibidem). Key conversion points in Uber transactions are the e-hailing, the payment and the rating.

The moment of e-hailing, when the driver receives a push notification from the software, is the beginning of any conversion of the driver's time into a monetary profit. However, the qualities of these temporalities beget other gains for the drivers. A former private driver, Sean, explained to me that the mediation of the software enacts a technological liberation:

> the great thing is you don't have specific working hours. You can work whenever you want, I can go offline, if I'm busy. It's a great business innovation, it allows me to work when I can. True, Uber tells you when there are more people on the streets and less cars, they recommend a timetable, but you are free to comply or not. Only, as long as you are online you have to accept a job, even if it takes you somewhere you don't really want to go. But that's ok, right? (conversation with Sean)

His words were often shared by drivers who used to be employed by private driving companies. Just-in-time work is seen as a liberation from the temporal constraints of wage labour—although several drivers admit to work too many hours to actually engage in other activities with their free time—but also from other temporal qualities of the work for taxi companies. As other drivers who used to be employed by a local company put it, e-hailing reshapes the nature of their idle times:

> You make more money with a single trip, driving a cab, but you wait for hours. It is not a nice job, waiting, waiting, waiting. With Uber you're always on the move. [...] A taxi driver's

> waited for hours to get a job. And a customer jumps in and asks for a very short trip. How can you not be grumpy and treat your client badly? (interview with Jeremy)

> I think this is a much better life that I have. I just wait, and a client will eventually come. I don't drive around, and that allows me not to waste fuel, and so I don't need clients desperately because I've wasted fuel... I just wait, and that's the best thing, the satellite will eventually send a client (conversation with Muammar)

These are instances when monetary profit is assessed against other qualities. By their own admission, working for a taxi company was an available option that, for some of my informants, would translate into a higher rate of money/time conversion as well as more working rights. Yet, they chose to work as self-employed Uber partners because of the temporal qualities of ride-sharing.

The payment system is another tropic point where conversions happen beyond the purely monetary margin of ride-sharing transactions. Some drivers shifted to Uber because of the cash-free transactions, which make them feel safer on the streets, at night. For Jim, another partner, the cashless system is also a tool of life-management that counteracts financial illiteracy:

> It’s good discipline. The fact that the money goes to my bank account and not in my pockets… it's a thing that helps you manage your life better. You receive a weekly instalment with what you’ve earned in the previous seven days. It's not cash that flies out of your pockets (conversation with Jim).

Payments are also subject to the fluctuations in the ride-sharing demand. When there is a peak of clients in a certain area, or, conversely, a lack of cars, the software calculates a surge in the e-meter rate, which lasts for a short temporal segment. These are gainful opportunities for the drivers, and often inextricably entangled in local urban geographies. Leela, an Uber partner in her thirties, sees a potential in the alignment of price surges and Cape Town’s creative happenings.

> the best is when the city organises events that attract people. People drink and don't want to drive, parking is hard, and as a driver you can work so much you make up for an entire bad week in the space of one day, especially when the events are in the surroundings, like wine festivals are the best for that (interview with Leela).

The payment system is also where Uber partners can build investments in other assets. The software becomes the intermediating security of financial risk. Against the generalising idea of ‘idle/dead’ capital, many drivers do not possess the cars they drive. Capital is available either through forms of dependence, or through loan technologies that are part of the platform. I was in a car with Zola, one of my interlocutors, when a metered taxi stopped beside us and triggered a conversation about how Uber’s payment system could incorporate the risk of ‘dead’ capital:

> I used to drive for them [...] they are not really competitors. They saw a competitor in Uber and understood they could not beat it. So they just invested in it, as you do when you cannot beat someone, you make an alliance. I was driving for them—I can't say it is much different now, but I own my car. Instead of giving them 50%, I use that money to pay off this car to the bank. I went to the Toyota garage, and you know what? They had a specific framework for Uber drivers to buy their cars through a bank loan. So they did everything, they went to Uber, checked my statements, my driving permit, and they organised the loan with the bank (conversation with Zola).

Zola knew that the relationship with the bank was just another form of dependence, one built within the technical arrangements of the payment system, but, as he explained to me, it was the pride he took in possessing a car, the gainful experience of ownership, that made Uber preferable to a traditional taxi company.

Lastly, the rating system is the final trope where marginal gains are enacted. After each transaction, both drivers and clients are invited to rate the experience on a scale of five stars. This translates into a star-value which characterises each customer and each driver on the basis of an average calculated on the last 500 trips. For Uber, it is an instrument of quality control. In each city, there is a rating threshold under which badly-performing drivers are “deactivated” (Uber terms and conditions). My interlocutors had a different perceptions of the mutual-rating system. For them, it was process where moral relations are established, and where value is co-created. In the words of one of the drivers, rating distributes the burden of accountability:

> if a client is rude to me, I complain. If I’m rude to a client, he can complain. This doesn’t happen on taxis or business drivers. That’s the other thing I like about Uber. I have more power even if I’m working for someone else. There’s a more balanced relationship between my client and me. Each single time, whoever the client (conversation with Muammar).

This last example and those above suggest that at different points of the ride-sharing transaction, Uber drivers seize profitable chances in the asymmetric conversions of value that are enacted by the software. Each transaction is an exchange of time and money regulated by an external rate. However, other forms of wealth stem from the disjunctures in the different scales of value that are pegged to each Uber trip. These opportunities are often built within the platform itself, but also, as I discuss in the remainder of this section, at the intersection with existing local economies.

Actually-existing ride-sharing

As I have argued thus far, marginal gains are opportunities situated across temporally distinct tropes that allow asymmetric conversions through Uber's ride-sharing platform. Conversely, other opportunities for various forms of profit are scripted in the encounter with local urban economies, sometimes in defiance of the software constraints.

When entering Cape Town, and South Africa more generally, Uber performed an economic regime with strict, formal rules allowing only certain kinds of software-mediated transactions. Nonetheless, at each trip, several drivers see the chance of building alternative cash economies. These additional operations, usually informal, are opportunities nested onto the formal business of e-hailing. Especially for those who used to be employed in the tourism industry, Uber boosted secondary businesses in which they were still involved:

> I am one of those drivers that drive around the cape, not only Cape Town. Sometimes I go to Stellenbosch, sometimes elsewhere. It works well, and through Uber I get more jobs as a private driver for tourists. (...) Tourists ask me: do you know where we can get a driver to go to the Cape of Good Hope? How can we go to Stellenbosch? And I say: here I am. We can do it with Uber, otherwise I give them a fixed price. Less than what Uber requires. [..] Just like that. Sometimes we do one way with Uber, then they realise I am reliable, and they pay me in cash the way back (interview with Kyle).

> Now I'm mainly a driver, but I get jobs driving people. You get to drive tourists, and you ask them if they want a guided tour, and they are often looking for it. I drive them around, and that's a new job. Cash (conversation with Buzwe).

The chance of getting another job is a marginal gain in itself, an ever-present chance in each transaction. Uber appears an island of formalisation "amidst what continue to be the extremely vital logics of 'informal' negotiation, conversion, and manipulation of value"

(Ferguson, 2007:72). Chris, the driver who did not want to become a full time Uber partner, had a makeshift exhibitor between the front seats. It displayed business cards that showed the potential destinations where he could take clients—whale-watching, safari, Cape of Good Hope, Garden route, etc.—as a reminder of the possibilities of other transactions he was available for.

Existing informal economies, however, did not only intersect Uber dealings as additional opportunities. Sometimes, they were the reason of the transaction in itself:

> this is temporary, I am working so hard because I wanna buy my own minibus and go back to Harare, there are great opportunities if you just have enough money for a second-hand cab, then you can make lots in the driving business (conversation with Harrison).

Harrison's story reveals the unexpected coupling of ride-sharing and migrant labour in Cape Town. In his plan to move back to Zimbabwe and become an entrepreneur, Uber was a temporary springboard to the minibus business, a usually unregulated system of transportation at work in many African cities (see Rasmussen, 2012). Against De Soto's understanding (2000), entrepreneurial opportunities may move in the opposite direction, from the formal to the informal. Such urban economies are intertwined in practices of "worlding from below" (Simone, 2001) whereby ride-sharing becomes a resource to operate in the global economy through informal networks. Michel, for example, a driver from Rwanda, informed me about his plans to open a money transfer agency. As he described his business model, I realised it was based on US dollars moving from South Africa to Rwanda through illegal channels, devoid of any banking witchcraft. For him, Uber did not only hold the potential of a future, different career as entrepreneur, but also presented additional opportunities for profit at each payment. Every week, he would buy small amounts of US dollars through a network of aids, and eventually smuggle the money to his brother in Kigali, where his agency was not yet a legal enterprise, but already channeling overseas remittances.

Whilst the examples above show that Uber transactions could be gainful resources in their disjunctures with local economies, not all of them are productive for the drivers. Some of these gains are the marginal benefit of those who are already in control of informal transport. From the early "taxi wars" of the last years of Apartheid, over the control of transit routes by informal cabs alliances (Khosa, 1994; Dugard, 2001), to the more recent uneasy relationship between minibus economies and the rolling out of a Bogota-inspired BRT (bus-rapid-transport) (Schalekamp and Behrens, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010; Wood, 2015), the private driving industry in Cape Town has a long history of controversies with formal operators. In this context, Uber created an economic space for companies that would operate with a business model that mimicked the minibus profit mechanism (see Barrett, 2003): few owners owning car fleets that were subsequently rented out to Uber drivers, whom, in turn, yielded between 40% and 60% of their margin. Many of my informants were not, in fact, self-employed entrepreneurs. Despite the self-empowerment rhetoric, or the fact that they described themselves as entrepreneurs, they did not own idle capital, but accessed ride-sharing through a mediating technology of subordination. Whilst some would overcome the issue of ownership through debt, by becoming “subjects of risk” (Roy, 2012), others avoided debt by becoming the informal employees of car owners. Relationships of dependence, James Ferguson (2013) explains, are not alien to labour regimes of self-help. By subjecting themselves to a car owner, some drivers access a network of protection that is far more extended than the one they would have as self-employed drivers. The price: longer work hours, a smaller income, and, in the words of one of my drivers, their self-worth:

> I was driving trucks, and thought: no, I can’t drive a car that is not my own. But that’s what you do, you swallow your pride, you work for the same old people (conversation with Anthony).

Whereas most of these marginal gains were achieved within the technical constraints of the platform, other profit opportunities could spring from mischievously tinkering with the software:

> You have to know the system and you can make lots of money. Do you know which car receives the call? The one closest to the client. You can have a better car, a cleaner car, you can be a better driver, but if someone is two-metre closer to the customer, it's him who gets the call. So I have two mobile phones. With one I use Uber as a driver. With the other one, I use Uber as a customer. Customers can see where the cars are. I can’t, as a driver. But if I use Uber as a customer, I can check where the uncovered areas are. Look, in the last hours and a half I’ve had seven calls. If you ask any other driver, they’ve probably had two or three, if lucky. Because I keep moving where there are no cars. It's useless to keep waiting outside a shopping centre. Other cars might be just a few metres closer to the client. So I check where the is a shortage of cars, and drive around there. That keeps me working more than the others. You’ve got to know the system, and the city (conversation with Allan).

The driver used a cunning trick to overtake other drivers in getting trips through the software. Accumulation can be against (monetary) marginal gains (Guyer, 2004:79); in this case, it was against the gains that the sharing economy enacted in the realm of “rightness”, which many other drivers, and Uber itself, describe as a foundational feature of ride sharing. As Antina Von Schnitzler has shown with the technopolitics of electricity meters in South Africa (2013), travelling technologies are unstable devices that need to be renegotiated within local political agendas and ethical regimes. Conversely in this case, the driver did not only defy the software from a technical perspective, but also the progressive, communalist rationality of the sharing economy (Richardson, 2015).

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how Uber, the US company, created a market in Cape Town, South Africa, through strategic maneuvers that beget specific technical features, and how the ride-sharing transactions have become, for local drivers and other economic subjects, asymmetric conversions of value where various forms of gains can be produced.

By starting with the software, I have embraced Langley and Leyshon’s proposal (2016) to look at the sharing economy through one of its own neologisms: the platform. The latter is the infrastructure of mediation that has become a dominant “feature of the global economic landscape”(30). Digital platforms like Uber, according to the the authors, not only subsume precarious workers in the profit pipeline, through a luring culture of communalism and participation (see Richardson, 2015), but also become the channels of heavily capitalised investments that underpin a fragile, voracious, probably unsustainable, cycle of contemporary venture capitalism (32). However, paying attention to how the platform is a technology of market creation, in the context of an African city, has uncovered other distinctive features of its process of “marketization” (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010). From this vantage point, I suggest, universalizing claims about both Uber as a sharing-economy global firm and as a software platform are not easy. Even the nature of precarious work, which is often used as a rather eurocentric category of critique of the sharing economy, appears as a contested field. What emerges, instead, is a complex arrangement of calculations and rationalities that are activated through the platform in relation to the unique geography of, in this case, a capital of the Global South, with its world-city aspirations, its developmental goals, and its colonial legacies. These features, I have proposed in this article, are not simply variations from a global standard (Robinson & Roy, 2015), but they rearticulate the supply side, the productive layer of ride-sharing, in a way that, not incidentally, resonates with neoliberal ideas of empowerment through entrepreneurship (Elyachar, 2002; Rankin, 2001; Roy, 2012).

The second part of the article has addressed how the platform is also the connective technology whereby Uber drivers and other economic actors glean what I have called, after Guyer (2004), "marginal gains". These are the various forms of personal benefit—social, monetary, moral—that are produced in the transactional asymmetries of ride-sharing. Such disjunctures take place at different moments—tropes—of the platform-mediated exchanges, and in relation to both the intrinsic features of the software, and the informal urban economies that are legacy of racialized economic planning (Rogerson, 2000) as well as the vital constructions of alternative modes of existence in Cape Town (Devey et al., 2006). These heterogeneous gains, too, resisting and intersecting the formal economic exchange of ride-sharing, show that the postcolonial city is not just the context of a variation from a global paradigm, but intrinsic to the making and understanding of its features.

This article speaks to the recent debates about the sharing economy, which are framed in a continuum between practices that produce alternative modes of living in contemporary cities (McLaren & Agyeman, 2015) and the extensive capacity of a few global firms to profit from these economic modes (Slee, 2916; McNeill, 2016; Langley and Leyshon: 2016; John, 2016), often in relation to precarious forms of living (Friedman, 2014). By looking at the marketization of Uber in Cape Town, I have tried to show how even strict platforms of sharing are continuously experimented and renegotiated as travelling technologies for which contingent processes of marketization are necessary.

Secondly, this article seeks to contribute to the study of urban economies in contexts that are "off the map" of the usual global cities (Robinson, 2002). Though a global player, Uber's ride-sharing platform intersects local, often informal, systems of value and exchange and unfolds as a frontier experiment on "the contours of contemporary capitalism" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012:113). This is not to say that African urban economies are only 'extroverted' to the global circuits of capitalism, as in the classical analysis of Bayart (1999), but that they are contexts where other logics and modes of engagement are scripted into the functioning of their immanent infrastructures. In this sense, I have shown that the African city of this paper, Cape Town, does not constitute "an object apart from the world" (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004), but, on the contrary, a space where economic worldliness is exercised at the intersection of diverse and vital logics of exchange.

Looking at “platform capitalism” and its existing urban economies in Cape Town—through the fine-grained lenses of Jane Guyer’s work (2004) on the interface between Western and African economies—also speaks to how the lenses of economic performativity may contribute to urban theory. As Abdoumaliq Simone has argued (2006), a closer look at what he calls “real economies” is crucial if we are to engage in broader debates about African cities, their politics, and their potential for transformation, beyond the idea of “structural inertia” (Mbmebe, 1996:2, cited in Guyer, 2004:7) or other generalising categories that fail to acknowledge the radical possibilities of urbanism as an experimental arena (see Robinson, 2008). At the interface between the formal and the informal, at the intersection between different scales of value, Uber’s urban economies in the Global South may be, as in the words of Ananya Roy, “the active frontiers of contemporary capitalism, the greenfield sites where new forms of accumulation are forged and expanded” (2011:229), but they are also, I have suggested, the experimental forefronts where diverse, asymmetric, marginal gains are cultivated.

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