INTRODUCTION

Using an App to Go to Work—Uber as
a Symbol of the New Economy

Freddy, a driver with both Uber and Lyft, pulls into the parking lot when he comes to pick me up, giving me a moment to search out his large sedan on a bright day in Atlanta, Georgia. With more than three years of vagrant sociology research under my belt, I've learned to hop into cars on busy streets as soon as I recognize the vehicle's license plate from my smartphone screen. His Chevrolet Impala is spacious, and I'm struck by the instrumental jazz on the car radio, which reassures me like a lightweight fleece on a foggy day. Most drivers stick to pop music when I'm in the car, perhaps because of the color of my skin. And I've heard some drivers suggest they get higher ratings from black passengers if they play Cardi B. or other rap music. I guess Freddy just enjoys jazz.

Freddy tells me he's a twelve-year veteran of the army, having left around 1989, just before the Gulf War. I explain to him that I'm not just another passenger; I'm a researcher studying how Uber and technology affect work. As I ask him basic questions, he tells me that he also works full time as the manager of a fast-food restaurant in a nearby city. When he has time off from his primary job, he commutes three hours into Atlanta to take ridehail jobs. During his vacation period, he spends about four days working ridehail jobs, heads home for a day or two and

then returns to the lineup of drivers waiting for ride requests in the air-port parking lot. "We have a quale [queue], a place where all the Uber and Lyft drivers park, and I stay there." His sister lives not too far away, and that's where he showers.

When I ask him where he sleeps in between driving shifts, he nods to the front passenger seat and exclaims, "You're sitting in my bed!" With a reassuring smile, he adds that he's not the only one who does it—men and women from outside the city are catching up on sleep in the airport parking lot.[1] Sometimes he works fourteen to sixteen hours in a single day, and the next day he'll do eight hours, depending on how he feels. He aims to average two hundred dollars a day, and on this trip he's proud to be earning "double money"—his vacation pay from his fast-food job supplements whatever he makes driving. "During the vacation period, I really had nothing to do," he says, "and I'm a people person. I love meeting new people."

As in the case of many of the people I've met during my research, driving is a second job for Freddy, and he genuinely enjoys the social connection he gains from conversations with passengers. Taking men-tal notes as I ride with him, I notice an open pack of Newport cigarettes that sits neatly on a little shelf near the gear shift, and a frayed brown wallet below. After hundreds of Uber rides, I've learned that the mini-mal personal effects that drivers leave scattered in their cars can pro-vide revealing windows into their lives. Most keep their valuables out of sight, except for the phones and charging wires they use to manage their ridehail work. Freddy's own phone is mounted on the windshield, but I notice that its charging cord runs down and partly obscures a business card tucked into a crevice beneath his wallet: "Learn how 1000's are earning FREE GOLD while being paid a weekly massive RESIDUAL INCOME."

The promise of free gold is perhaps a fitting symbol for the gap between hype and reality in Uberland. A culture of shaky and insecure work in precarious times shapes the dynamics of driving for Uber,[2] even though drivers do not individually perceive their employment as

being precarious. As a near-geriatric migratory driver, Freddy illustrates the "fool's gold" of Uber's rhetoric. Contrary to the company's marketing, he isn't "sharing" his spare asset and time with his riders: he is working hard to make ends meet. Uber claims drivers can earn upward of ninety thousand dollars per year doing ridehail work,[3] but Freddy's situation is a far cry from the picture of middle-class comfort promoted by the company.

Uber rose to prominence as an employer by providing the masses with low-barrier-to-entry employment opportunities—with little more than a car and a background check, anybody could be on the road driving as much or as little as he or she wanted. At its core, Uber does one thing really well: it organizes work for drivers and rides for passengers through a smartphone app. When it comes to marketing, Uber paints itself as the whole package for would-be drivers, pulling off a clever doublespeak. On one hand, it promises drivers freedom, flexibility, and independence. It tells them that they are entrepreneurs who can "be your own boss."[4] For legal purposes, Uber classifies them as independent contractors, meaning they are largely excluded from the employment and labor law protections to which employees are entitled.[5]

Yet on the other hand, Uber leverages significant control over how drivers behave on the job. Rather than supervising its hundreds of thousands of drivers with human supervisors, the company has built a ridehail platform on a system of algorithms that serves as a virtual "automated manager."[6] Freed from the necessity of layers of real bosses, algorithms manage drivers directly according to the rules that Uber lays out. But it's not as glamorous as it might sound at first. As entrepreneurs, drivers theoretically set their own hours, accept or decline passengers freely, set their pay rates, and build client lists. Some of that is true for Uber drivers. Drivers benefit from flexible hours, but Uber's promotional offers can effectively create shift work for drivers who need the money. The company may deactivate drivers who try to build their own client lists, and many drivers with whom I broach this subject say they don't even bother trying because they feel safer knowing they

are covered by Uber's insurance policy (which offers $1 million in auto liability insurance per accident if one occurs between the time a driver accepts a trip and the trip's completion).[7] They are penalized if they decline passengers, but Uber doesn't actually give them the information they need to assess whether a ride is profitable in advance. And Uber perennially, and unilaterally, changes their pay rates, usually by cutting them. Drivers are supposedly free and independent, but Uber's rules, enforced by these algorithmic managers, significantly limit the opportunities for entrepreneurial decision making available to them. Drivers have noticed the tension between the promise of freedom and the reality of invasive algorithmic management. In fact, this tension is the basis of legal claims that drivers should not be classified as independent contractors.[8]

One of the fascinating aspects of Uber's approach is that according to the company, its drivers are not workers at all—they are "consumers" of Uber's technology services, just as passengers are. In 2013, a group of drivers and lawyers filed a class-action misclassification lawsuit, alleging that Uber was not justified in classifying drivers as independent contractors; they argued that Uber treats drivers like employees.[9] In a January 2015 court hearing of the case, Uber's lawyer explained that the company's drivers are actually customers of its software. "Fundamentally, the commercial relationship between these drivers and transportation providers and Uber is one where they are our customer, where we license to them our software, and we receive a fee for doing that."[10] If we follow this logic to its natural conclusion, the company doesn't have any worker problems, despite mounting lawsuits, protests, and conflicts with drivers across the country.[11]

This is a book about how Uber created a fundamental cultural shift in what it means to be employed. It is also a book about technology ideology—the stories Uber tells us about users, and the stories we tell each other about the role of technology in our lives. It's a tale of how a small start-up in Silicon Valley put algorithms in charge of managing hundreds of thousands of people in the United States and Canada. By

2018, Uber employed 3 million active drivers globally. *Uberland* traces the story of how the company crafted a narrative that defined workers first as working-class entrepreneurs, then as customers, because redefining traditional categories was a clever way of pursuing its own growth. *Uberland* exposes how Uber has utilized self-serving arguments to advance its own interests. For example, Uber self-identifies as a technology company, not a transportation company. As federal judge Edward M. Chen articulated in the same lawsuit where Uber argued that drivers are actually customers, this technology-exceptionalism reasoning is "fatally flawed." Uber may use software for the mechanics of its business, but it is substantively in the business of arranging transportation. Judge Chen writes, "Uber does not sell software; it sells rides. Uber is no more a "technology company" than Yellow Cab is a "technology company" because it uses CB radios to dispatch taxi cabs."[12] But by self-identifying as a technology company, Uber has proceeded to argue elsewhere that it isn't covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) because it's not a transportation company. Therefore, by their argument, Uber is not legally obliged to provide wheelchair-accessible services for disabled passengers under the ADA, unlike its competitors in the *transportation* business.[13] Uber has continued to flourish as a technology company despite misgivings about its rhetoric, though not without certain pitfalls.

More often, Uber's arguments about its identity or its actions are dressed up in morally persuasive causes that appear to promote the interests of drivers, passengers, civil rights activists, regulators cities, and the public at large. These alliances each contain a grain of truth, but they mask much more than they reveal. Under our noses, the company has ushered in a wave of changes touching most aspects of society, be it family life or childcare arrangements, worker conditions or management practices, commuting patterns or urban planning, or racial equality campaigns and labor rights initiatives. Uber's wide-ranging impacts have not just upset the status quo across society but have also created a future of uncertain implications. The company has harnessed technology to create an entirely new business logic for employment,

like Napster did for music and Facebook did for journalism.[14] Uber is a symbol of the New Economy, a powerful case study illustrating how digital culture is changing the nature of work.[15] In short, Uber is the single most important driver of technological changes in work—and what it means to work.

RIDING IN CARS WITH "ENTREPRENEURS"

For nearly four years, my job has mainly been to ride around in cars with strange men (and sometimes women).[16] Studying Uber drivers from mid-2014 through the winter of 2018, I've crossed more than twenty-five cities and traversed more than five thousand miles in cars in the United States and Canada, from Juneau to Montreal. In the traditions of multisite ethnography and immersive journalism, I've observed the culture of work in Uberland in more than a dozen major cities,[17] like New York and Atlanta. I've had one-off rides and short conversations with ridehail drivers in other cities, like Bozeman, Montana, and with taxi drivers, such as in "pre-Uber" cities like Vancouver, British Columbia, and Winnipeg, Manitoba.[18] Once in a while, I've conducted phone interviews with drivers in cities I haven't been to, like Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Houston, Texas; and Raleigh, North Carolina. In some places where Uber was illegal, I observed and interviewed drivers while they worked underground, and I returned to observe after the company came out in the open. In all, I have conducted interviews with 125 drivers who work for ridehail companies, as well as some taxi drivers, in cars, on the phone, through Skype, and occasionally in online chats. I have also made observations by riding along with over 400 drivers in cars. Hundreds of rides later, the treacly scent of air fresheners I inhale on each trip still makes my eyes water.

The stories that these ridehail drivers share with me remain etched in my mind. Manoj is an Uber driver in Montreal who started driving for the company while it was still operating illegally. He explains to me why, back then, he was unfazed by the risks of attack by taxi drivers or

censure from the transportation police. "I cross many countries' borders, illegal," he says with a crackle in his voice as he shares his life story with me. Both quiet and brazen, he isn't afraid to break the rules. A Hindu religious minority in his native Bangladesh, he left for the Soviet Union as an economic migrant to find work. He continued through the former Czechoslovakia, burrowed under electrified fences to cross through East Germany to Frankfurt, and found asylum in Canada after his refugee claim in Germany was rejected. Although Manoj was indifferent to the prospect of driving illegally, Uber finally obtained legal permits to operate in Montreal in October 2016,[19] where Manoj continues to drive for the company.

Nathan, a researcher during the AIDS epidemic who now works as a psychotherapist, started driving for Lyft (Uber's smaller-twin competitor) in Los Angeles to find emotional relief in the less-pressing needs of his passengers. He read reports of Uber's shadier practices, and he tells me it gave him pause as he wondered if he might be treated in a similar way at Lyft. Karen, who had long worked in the service industry in New Orleans, liked driving for Uber, in part because of the flexible schedule: if her son were to have a sudden episode of his chronic medical condition, she could stop working at the drop of a hat. Meanwhile, Hukam, who studied mechanical engineering in India, used his immigration work permit to drive part time for a taxi company in Winnipeg, after completing graduate studies in Canada. Anticipating Uber's impending arrival in the city, he observes, "Definitely the taxi business will go low for some time; because it's new, people will love to try the Uber." Upon reflection, he says he may try driving for Uber, but he will wait and see.

My rides across cities and across the continent have reinforced the idea, for me, that Uberland is an array of contrasts. Some drivers sign up because they need extra cash on the side; others do it as their full-time job. Many resort to it as a stopgap solution when businesses fail or unemployment strikes; others take up ridehail work for the fun of it. Some are trying it out to pad their savings; others have little choice, putting in fourteen-hour days just to feed their families. Some tell me

that they do it simply to get out of the house and experience a sense of human connection; others are desperate to find a way out of Uber. Former taxi drivers, chauffeurs, and truck drivers are part of the Uber workforce, but others have no primary occupational identity as drivers, even as they drive for both Uber and Lyft.

Their stories are all too often tales of folks on the margins, of workers in transition, of people who are part of a new wave of social progress that we are still trying to comprehend. Uber drivers frequently make the headlines as part of larger societal discussions about the future of work, and as part of a growing nervousness that technological advancement threatens to automate all of us out of jobs. But beyond this simplistic narrative, I've found that drivers are barely treated as workers at all. Given that Uber treats its workers as "consumers" of "algorithmic technology," and promotes them as self-employed entrepreneurs, a thorny, uncharted, and uncomfortable question must be answered: *If you use an app to go to work, should society consider you a consumer, an entrepreneur, or a worker?*

Why does it matter? Consider government benefit programs. In 2014, attorneys with Philadelphia Legal Assistance noticed a rash of frustrated unemployment claims. Pennsylvania has a robust unemployment system: even those with part-time employment are eligible for benefits. But the recently unemployed who began driving for Uber to try and make ends meet? That's independent contractor work—*self-employment,* not part-time employment—and so their unemployment benefits were jeopardized.[20]

Or consider immigration status. Ibrahim, an Uber driver I chatted with in Montreal, emigrated to Canada from Libya. He was caught in bureaucratic limbo when he tried to sponsor his wife so she could join him, because he could not provide the necessary proof of employment. Uber was operating in Montreal without a proper permit (as it does in many places before it becomes legitimate), so immigration authorities had trouble recognizing his job. Ibrahim assures me the authorities made accommodations for his case after his wife became pregnant.

There is a real argument to be made that Uber provides employment to its drivers, but Uber's "consumer" spin provides a simple out for the company. I interviewed Kofi in the fall of 2017. He drives for Uber and Lyft in Washington, DC, and he was formerly an assistant attorney for the government in his country of origin, Ethiopia. He responded to the provocation that drivers are actually consumers by accusing ridehail companies of operating in bad faith. He said, "The motive is to exclude the drivers from being in a worker or an employer relationship, or something like that. I will take it as more than a technology." By claiming to operate in a world of consumption rather than in a world of labor, Uber excuses itself from a series of obligations that it finds inconvenient. Kofi also objected to the idea that drivers have full autonomy to make entrepreneurial decisions; he cited the disciplinary actions that ridehail platforms take against drivers as evidence of the invisible authority they lord over their drivers (even while the company claims not to be an employer).

Kofi's criticisms highlight the fact that Uber confuses categories such as innovation and lawlessness, work and consumption, algorithms and managers, neutrality and control, sharing and employment. It does so with practical insistence on questionable facts, spinning tales about its business that directly contradict its actual operations. And the story doesn't stop when the ride ends: Uber's dealings with its drivers also reveal a much larger narrative about how technology is destabilizing and redefining relationships across society. By muddying the bright red lines that define traditionally distinct roles, like those of worker, entrepreneur, and consumer, Uber rewrites the rules of work surrounding algorithmic technology.

HOW I BECAME AN UBER SLEUTH

My quest to understand the inner workings of ridehailing has taken me into many worlds. I've encountered many of the major characters of Uberland over the years, including critics and advocates of the Uber

model, Uber employees seeking to improve the Uber driver experience, industry researchers, labor advocates, venture capitalists, civil rights groups, senators, regulators, students, and members of organizations from the World Bank, in my various capacities as an expert, a researcher, a writer, a passenger, and simply as a person who is of interest, or interested. Along the way, I've interviewed a handful of industry experts and one of Uber's cofounders, all of whom helped fill out some of the contours of Uberland. In this book, I endeavor to include the wide variety of experiences and observations I informally accumulated as a longtime observer in the gig economy, in addition to my formal ethnographic fieldwork. This work principally explores Uber in its immediate American backyard as a brainchild of Silicon Valley, though it is a global phenomenon.

One perk of my position as an outsider to the company but an insider in Uberland is that I detect early warning signs, like fractures of discontent, before they hit the front pages of newspapers or even the company's internal eyes and ears. Uber is so decentralized in its driver operations that sometimes I obtain information that directly contradicts what the company says from its headquarters, perhaps because various outposts of Uber's operations just do things differently. I think of the screenshots I capture from forums as digital muckraking, using proof of drivers' experiences to expose the difficult conditions of ride-hail labor platforms—similar to photojournalist Jacob Riis's use of photography to expose the squalid living conditions of New York City slums.[21] *Uberland* is a written account of what I have seen, read, heard and experienced among drivers online and offline and how their stories reflect the impact of technology on society.

My intense curiosity about even the most seemingly routine aspects of driving for Uber churns against my efforts to be unobtrusive as an ethnographer, but I hope my hunger for information isn't too sharply apparent in my interactions with drivers. Some of the more harrowing stories they confide wrap around me like an iron lung, controlling my breathing and bringing the immediacy of their experience into sus-

tained focus. Sometimes I get the feeling of whiplash, jumping from certain cities where Uber's arrival is exciting and imminent to others where the company is the subject of sustained protest. I have begun to measure my travels not according to the calendar but according to the most mundane features of the Uber cars I ride in: the absence of a phone holster or dashcam, for example, becomes a "tell" of which stage of the driver experience a particular driver, or city, is at. As I make observations in ride after ride, I draw on the rich scholarship around me to shape my ethnographic observations into more scholarly analysis. I'm so immersed in Uberland that I retell parts and parodies of the Uber experience in bedtime stories for my family.

MEET THE DRIVERS

Many of the drivers I meet (and whom you'll meet, too, throughout this book) are transplants from other states or provinces or even other countries. In Orlando, I met a group of drivers from New Jersey and New York. They moved to find affordable suburban homes with amenities and the possibility of a man cave. In French-speaking Quebec and nearby Ottawa, I met drivers from Francophone African and Caribbean countries, like Algeria, Senegal, the Congo, and Haiti. On the West Coast of the United States, I learned that many came from South America—Argentina, Bolivia, or Brazil. In New York, I meet many drivers from Pakistan and Bangladesh.

One dynamic that I frequently noticed in the cities I visited in the United States is that drivers who immigrated are sometimes hesitant to say where they are from, perhaps because it makes them more prone to discrimination, to claims that they do not belong in America. I spoke to a few from Muslim-majority countries, like Iraq or Egypt, who referred vaguely to "the Middle East." I often break the ice by confiding that I'm from somewhere else too—an immigrant from Canada. In the United States, many of the immigrants I met proudly announced that they were "American": being American is a desirable social status. In

select cities, like Atlanta or New Orleans, a lot of the drivers I met were local, born and raised there or nearby. In the Canadian context, which I'm more familiar with, drivers were more comfortable saying where they came from, perhaps because Canadians celebrate a "mosaic" model of cultural belonging. (In either country, however, the question "Where are you from?" can be an affront: the people inquiring position themselves as entitled to knowledge of your ethnic background, or they might be asking as a derisive comment on your place in the race ladder—or both).

Other cultural quirks stood out to me as I parachuted into different cities. In Salt Lake City, where half the population is Mormon,[22] many drivers told me, unprompted and often with a familiar apologetic note, "I'm not Mormon," as a means of introducing themselves as transplants. In Washington, DC, the previous occupations of drivers are striking: former political analysts at embassies and former interpreters in Afghanistan for the U.S. military are among them. In DC, I notice that you're allowed to ask people what they do for work, but if they are vague about it, you're not supposed to ask further (presumably) because they might work for one of the various government agencies, like the CIA. This cagey dynamic permeates my discussions with drivers, and I modify my style by talking more about what I do before I ask drivers about their work.

Drivers often demonstrate their awareness of their city's local culture by reciting common refrains. Ali, who moved to Montreal from Libya, punctuated some of his observations about driving for Uber in Montreal with the commonly accepted truth that "in Quebec, there are two seasons: winter and construction." In several cities, including Dallas, Salt Lake City, and Atlanta, drivers described their connection to driving for Uber within the context of a flourishing local technology scene or, as in Charleston, South Carolina, a revival of the city's industries and downtown core. However, in New York City, where Uber has operated since 2011, drivers tend to compare Uber to the taxi industry (which has deep roots in the city) rather than linking it to the rise of technology jobs. In New Orleans, drivers embrace the central role that

the service industry occupies in the city's economy, and Uber is an additional layer of that service industry. Drivers in New Orleans treated me as a peer, both in my capacity as a passenger and when I approached them as a researcher. They pointed out restaurants they had tried recently, or planned to go to, and made authoritative recommendations. In contrast, there might be a wide class divide between the restaurants that drivers and passengers in New York City can afford to dine at. All of these factors affected the dynamics of my interactions with drivers, and they gave me a sense of regional differences in Uberland.

Most of the drivers I've spoken with have found work with both Uber and Lyft where both are available. Strategically, I used multiple ridehail apps to speak with Uber drivers, which generally works because drivers often start with Uber before they go on to work for additional ridehail employers. Because Uber is a dominant market player, even drivers who have never worked for the company have some knowledge of it or experiences with it. I have also spoken with or interviewed some taxi drivers, especially in cities that are "pre-Uber." For years, I have also kept up with online forums for Uber drivers. I've spent hours nearly every single day for years reading the text of drivers' forum posts about their experiences, from anxieties and advice to warnings against passenger scams (like passengers who cancel a trip midway to their destination to try and score a free ride). These daily check-ins not only reveal the minutia of driving work but also give me an emotional connection to Uber's dispersed workforce. I have developed an intuition about Uber's relationship to its drivers from spending so much time on the forums, much as historians develop intuition about archival sources they spend a lot of time reading.

At times, however, I feel less like a historian and more like a moving target. Trying to study an international corporation—known for its ability to harvest data—has put me in the shoes of an almost-spy. I use an assortment of diversions to cover my tracks. To prevent Uber (and, to some extent, Lyft) from pinpointing the drivers I've interviewed, I hail rides from multiple accounts and phones, even purposely leaving

highly identifiable trails of my movements among drivers and cities on some accounts and services to obscure my forays into the field through alternate accounts and services in case I am being tracked. And not every ride involves an interview. In addition to being concerned about driver confidentiality, I operate with the general assumption that I am being surveilled. This is not just a misguided sense of paranoia: Uber demonstrated to a female journalist, Johana Bhuiyan, that they were tracking her whereabouts.[23] They also threatened the family of another female journalist, Sarah Lacy, and floated the idea of launching a million-dollar campaign to silence her.[24]

Although drivers from all around the world form groups online—some smaller, some larger—I primarily follow national and regional groups in the United States and Canada. By the time this book was nearing completion, I was following driver groups and chat boards with memberships that, though they range in size, together comprise about three hundred thousand members. Some have fewer than twenty members, while other memberships hover around sixteen thousand; most of them are English-language forums, and select ones are primarily for French- or Spanish-speaking drivers. (I can more or less keep up with the French ones, with some help from translation services, but I mostly note screenshots of the Uber app in languages I am less familiar with). Many forums function as virtual watercoolers,[25] although only a portion of those are highly active, and some forums are much more dynamic than others. An important side effect of this intersection of technology-mediated work and the social features that develop externally to it is that drivers are constantly comparing notes and identifying discrepancies in company practices and policies. This tension is somewhat inherent to technology-driven work on platforms, because Silicon Valley companies like Uber and Facebook are constantly experimenting on their users to assess the effectiveness of different practices. However, because drivers don't really expect to be the subjects of A/B testing, such as when the company tests one version of an app feature or pricing on some drivers and another version on other drivers to evaluate which

one performs better: the experimental practices that might work on everyday consumers on the Internet have different consequences in the workplace at Uber. Drivers can lose trust in their employer when they are subjected to iterative features and wage experiments.

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH UBER

Every so often, I'm asked what Uber thinks of my research or if I've had contact with them while researching their practices. For the duration of the fieldwork that this book relies on, I had sporadic communications with the company in an official capacity and a handful of meetings off the books. Most of the employees I have met appear to be, above all, *excited* by the challenges and promises they work toward. My first memorable encounter with a senior Uber employee was at a gathering of labor and technology scholars and advocates shortly after I published the article on Uber's "phantom cabs" (see chapter 3), which had gone viral.[26] Halfway through the group gathering, after the lunch period, an Uber representative invited me to sit with them and made reference to my "research" with the slight affectation of a person making air quotes. (The lightly dismissive tone of Uber's representatives has often spurred me to vindicate my findings with even *more* research and publications.) On at least three subsequent occasions—and probably more by the time this book comes out—I have asked former and active senior Uber employees for their thoughts on some of my research findings. My conversations have included pointed questions about the possibility that Uber was engaging in automated, low-level wage theft, at scale, for its drivers, through the technical design and affordances of its driver app. (They denied any intentional wage theft, but they did offer to investigate my findings with their internal teams.)

I am grateful for the doors they left open so that I could understand and address the implications of my findings with them outside of the public relations machine. Speaking with them didn't change my findings, but it did inform my sense of their logic and frameworks and made

me cognizant of gaps or limits in my own thinking or approach. Occasionally, I've run into senior Uber and Lyft employees at conferences and at hosted meetings that address the future of work. When we've sat down to chat, we've sifted through the details and debated the far-reaching implications of the rise of ridehail work. Meetings such as these have made it clear that there are unresolved tensions in how we understand the future of work: some thinkers study macroeconomic trends, others focus on the law, and some, like me, emphasize the social and cultural dynamics at stake.

When I was visiting San Francisco in 2016, I arranged a meeting with a senior Uber employee, one of a handful of senior employees I would meet over the years. Like everyone who entered their headquarters, I was prompted to sign a nondisclosure agreement at the electronic check-in kiosk of their San Francisco headquarters. I refused, and the secretary communicated this fact to the person I was coming to meet. We went to a "non-NDA café" across the street instead. I jokingly asked if they brought all of their non-NDA'ers to this café, and this person replied that this situation had never happened before. A non-NDA, neighborhood café became the template setting for my future meetings with specific Uber employees. On two occasions, the next senior employee I met brought along additional witnesses, junior employees, to observe and participate in the conversations. This move simultaneously suggested that our meeting was a teachable moment and that the witnesses made these informal meetings a little more official. On another occasion, in the spring of 2016, I and my coauthor, legal scholar Ryan Calo, presented our paper "The Taking Economy: Uber, Information, and Power" at the biggest conference of technology and privacy-law scholars in the United States. Our session was presided over by an active commissioner for the Federal Trade Commission. Uber sent one of their lawyers to listen, and she sat quietly while a packed room of leading scholars vocally piled onto the challenges we raised in our paper. Around that time, Uber also assigned two policy employees to communicate with me more consistently, and these two

have been remarkably responsive to the queries and concerns that I have raised (or blogged about). Outside of official channels, I have had limited encounters with Uber stakeholders, including one of Uber's cofounders. He and I bonded over a common interest in the ripple effects of technology and inequity on society, and in the regional differences evident in the impact of Uber's business model.

Outside of my communications with Uber's senior employees, Uber's PR reps remained in touch with me or made themselves available for me to contact. After I published the article discussing Uber's misleading "phantom cabs" phenomenon, their senior PR rep insisted it was false and tried to persuade me to take it back. Uber widely repeated this message to the media—that my finding was wrong—before adjusting the company's statement, affirming that my finding was true but stating that they had good reasons to hide the true locations of, and misrepresent the number of, cars in the street through the passenger app. I later learned that the senior PR rep who contacted me had departed from Uber. This became a pattern. I did not have a consistent point person to speak with among the communications or policy staff until the two employees mentioned above were finally assigned as my "handlers." This inconsistency may have resulted partly from the fact that, in several cases, Uber employees sought new employment within months of their contact with me.

One of the oddest moments on my research journey was when Uber tried to hire me. On a rare sunny day in rainy Vancouver in the spring of 2017, I looked at my email inbox and found two adjacent messages. One was from a book publisher offering me a contract. The other, sitting beneath it, was a job offer from Uber, or the beginnings of one. This moment says a lot about what happens to experts: once they know enough to be a threat, the companies they study will try to absorb them. I was sorely tempted, and even waited for a phone conversation with the senior employee who offered to hire me, before accepting the book offer I had been seeking. At that point, I had spent over three years studying this behemoth; and going inside, to the heart of the lion, and studying

the experiences of its drivers was a leap I wanted to make. That conversation was delayed, which was fateful timing: I accepted the book offer.

I continued conversations with some of Uber's senior employees on what this sort of job could look like, but I held firm on one point: full independence to write. I'm not a purist, but my intellectual curiosity about information, coupled with my sense of fear and risk, convinced me that whatever insights I had would be quashed if I did not have the freedom to publish. As my mentor advised me when I called her from San Francisco's busy airport to get her thoughts, you can't study the company you work for. While writing this book, I occasionally had Uber's senior employees in mind, many of whom have voracious intellectual appetites of their own. I think they will find this book interesting; while undoubtedly they will disagree with some of it, they may find it reveals certain insights that they sensed but hadn't necessarily seen from the perspective of the drivers.

LET'S TAKE A RIDE

As a technology company in the ridehail business, Uber has an employment model that is changing the nature of work. The company promised to leverage its technology to provide mass entrepreneurship to independent workers. At Uber, algorithms manage how much drivers are paid, where and when they work, and the eligibility requirements for their employment. But the power of algorithmic management is obscured from view, hidden within the black box of the app's design. While speaking with hundreds of drivers, culling thousands of forum posts online, and working together with scholars across disciplines to suss out the implications of what I've observed, I've found that the technology practices Uber implements (such as algorithms) significantly shape and control how drivers behave at work. This finding is a lightning rod in debates over whether drivers are misclassified as independent contractors rather than as employees, but this book is not focused on questions of labor history or labor law.

Instead, *Uberland* is an exploration of how Uber and other corporate giants in Silicon Valley are redefining everything we know about work in the twenty-first century through subtle changes ushered in by technology. Chapter 1 traces the rise of Uber in the context of a new sharing economy. In the midst of declining economic conditions and class mobility at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, technological innovations sparked the rise of companies like Uber, TaskRabbit, and Airbnb, sparking rapid changes for American workers in the process.

Against this backdrop, chapter 2 explores Uber's success in constructing a mass workforce by examining the kinds of workers who decide to drive with the platform and exploring their motivation. Given that each group of drivers—full-timers, part-timers, and hobbyists—has unique needs, Uber has found ways to maximize its profits by pitting drivers against each other.

Chapter 3 then examines the storytelling that Uber relies upon to expand its empire. Entrepreneurship has a noble heritage in the United States, a fact that Uber makes use of when recruiting its drivers. Despite the company's grandiose promises, however, the experience that Uber delivers to its drivers is a far cry from actual entrepreneurship. Uber's pay structure, information asymmetries, and management controls are indicators that ridehail work is not the entrepreneurial endeavor the company makes it out to be.

A lingering question—can we trust Uber to be a fair and honest broker?—is the subject of chapter 4. When we think about tech-mediated transactions, the technology part sounds pretty neutral—it's just an engine that works behind the scenes. But in the age of Uber, "technology" isn't as innocent as it sounds. Uber's algorithms aren't neutral: they broker transactions according to a set of company rules that may have built-in biases in favor of the company's own bottom line.

Based on reports, leaks, studies, and firsthand accounts of drivers and passengers, we know that Uber collects a vast amount of information (ranging from the battery level on a user's device to the likelihood that a client is willing to pay a higher rate), potentially using these data

points to play both drivers and passengers. Chapter 5 builds on questions of fairness by exploring some of the tools Uber uses to rule by algorithm, including the rating system and a seemingly robotic customer service system.

Uber is more than just a ridehail company. Like other Silicon Valley companies with global aspirations, such as Google or Facebook, Uber crafts public policy initiatives to brand its business operations with positive social contributions to society. Uber has actively enhanced its brand on the public stage by, for example, supporting criminal justice reform or allying with Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Going beyond drivers and passengers, chapter 6 explores the alliances Uber makes between competing stakeholders to accomplish its goals, and what emerges is often a form of doublespeak. On the one hand, Uber tells cities that it creates the equivalent of full-time jobs, and on the other hand, it argues that drivers are ineligible for many of the employment rights associated with full-time work, like the minimum wage. There is often a vast gap in Uberland between high-level debates about Uber's impact on society and the downstream effects of its alliances on drivers. Nonetheless, drivers can become unwitting participants in the battle lines that Uber draws for its competing stakeholders.

Finally, a brief conclusion chapter examines Uber in light of the social changes it has sparked and accelerated. Increasingly, we must come to grips with the reality that as platform companies experiment on us, they may also be exploiting us. This may already trouble users of consumer platforms like Google or Facebook, but the stakes are raised higher when workers rely on platforms like Uber for their livelihoods. These parallels also demonstrate that even if Uber were to disappear tomorrow, it would leave behind a legacy of important shifts that will shape the worlds of labor, technology, and law for years to come. In that sense, although Uber is the primary focus of this book, it is representative of what is happening in the larger society as well.