Xing on Hua and Ray, ‘Spent Behind the Wheel: Drivers' Labor in the Uber Economy’

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Right from the beginning, Julietta Hua and Kasturi Ray’s new book, *Spent behind the Wheel: Labor in the Uber Economy,* represents the authors’ desire to provide an innovative but timely analysis of the nature of the gig economy represented by Uber. They write: “The innovations of the gig economy are in the potential to capitalize the fact of life, to convert the simple fact that a human life exists into capital value by transforming ‘life processes’ into an unlimited resource, a mine of endless ore in the form of data” (p. 3). To achieve this aim, the book transcends the apparent boundary between the conventional taxi industry and the innovative ride-hail industry in the mainstream discourse shaped by platform firms such as Uber and Lyft. It goes one step further to argue that professional passenger driving, like slavery work and domestic labor, should be seen as a mechanism through which workers’ values are thoroughly exploited, but hidden and downplayed.

Based on the case of both taxi drivers and ride-hail drivers in San Francisco and New York City, in the United States, the book narrates the organizing tactics of taxi unions and ride-hail workers and analyzes how driving acts “as a form of reproductive labor that naturalizes the racial, biopolitical equations that value some lives for themselves while other lives are valued insofar as they attend to lives-for-themselves” (p. 22). They look in particular at the following aspects: debt and ownership, insurance, ticketing and criminalization, and competing and aligned disability claims.

Regarding the structure of the book, each chapter illustrates one particular aspect of the work, life, and institution of professional passenger driving. Such different aspects together render driving a form of reproductive labor, the exploitation of which is invisible, ignored, and presented as benign.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the historical background of professional passenger driving, and provides an overview of the regulations on the industry. One major, well-known, shared feature of the conventional taxi industry and ride-hail is the emphasis on granting drivers the freedom (in terms of time and right) to drive. In the taxi industry in San Francisco and New York, this is mainly manifested by the distribution of medallions, the license to operate passenger rides for hire; while in ride-hail, it is mainly manifested by the slogans and arrangements around the theme of “being your own boss.” Hua and Ray argue that such common emphasis on drivers’ rights, freedom, and ownership of time and work can, paradoxically, create a continuous situation of indebtedness for drivers. Such emphases and the corresponding feelings of indebtedness among drivers “naturalize the social, historical processes” that put drivers under gendered, racialized, disadvantaged, and
criminalized positions, and in turn erode their life chances (p. 22).

Chapter 2 leverages an empirical issue of compensation and unemployment insurance to present the theoretical framework of the book. Hua and Ray correlate drivers’ fights for their compensation and insurance with the history of slavery in the United States. They point out that insurance, just like slavery, is a way to naturalize and justify the binary between productive labor and reproductive labor, in which the former is categorized as having its intrinsic value whereas the latter is rendered as only valuable when they attend to the former, or to “lives-for-themselves.”

While slavery devalues reproductive labor through ascribed racial or gendered meanings as well as the legal structure of the state, insurance adopt an additional tool—actuarial science—to explicitly calculate human life value. Such a devaluation is clearly present in the case of the taxi industry, where drivers’ ability to be covered by insurance was predicated only on the physical presence of a passenger; in other words, drivers’ lives deserve protection only when they attend to other lives (when providing passenger services). This is also manifested in ride-hail during the COVID-19 pandemic, when drivers were not able to protect themselves because of the impossibility of social distancing and the increased exposure caused by the growing demand for Uber’s food delivery service. They still struggled to find compensation and insurance. In summary, the struggles around insurance show that drivers are forced to degrade their vitalities through all kinds of racialized and gendered mechanisms ranging from slavery and laws to insurance for the benefit of investors and the nation.

Chapter 3 and chapter 4 together address the influence of structured antagonism—the conflict and even hatred between passengers, taxi drivers, and ride-hail drivers shaped by the industry’s regulatory framework. In chapter 3, Hua and Ray discuss the criminalization of drivers as a widely used tool of racial power and segregation. With the case of several Jane Doe cases where Lyft and Uber drivers were accused of sexual assault, Hua and Ray reveal that the segregation and antagonism between passengers and drivers are deliberately designed by industry organizers as a basis for the accumulation of the industry: passengers and drivers usually face common risks; to avoid such they are forced into positions that are antagonistic toward each other. Similarly, chapter 4 focuses on the controversy around disability justice by looking at cases in which both taxi and ride-hail drivers hesitate to accept and accommodate disabled passengers. Hua and Ray reveal that the legal design and lawsuits surrounding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) affirm the antagonism between disabled passengers and drivers on the one hand, but show the common systematic debilitating effect of capitalism on both disabled passengers and drivers on the other hand. Then how can they overcome such antagonism? In both chapters, the authors offer solutions emphasizing solidarity, interdependency, and liveliness.

In the concluding chapter, the authors engage with the importance of worker organization and interdependency by looking at the controversy over California’s assembly bill AB5, which treats ride-hail drivers as employers of platforms rather than independent contractors. The chapter also reiterates the major theoretical argument of the book, that taxi and ride-hail work should be categorized into and analyzed within the framework of reproductive labor, in which workers’ lives are systematically downplayed by the gender and racial structure as only valuable “insofar as they attend to lives-for-themselves” (p. 22).
Spent behind the Wheel demonstrates both theoretical and methodological innovativeness. Theoretically, it applies feminist and racial theories to the seemingly unfamiliar empirical settings of taxi and ride-hail, and argues that various types of gig work should be put into the same analytical framework of typical reproductive labor such as domestic labor. It is theoretically inspirational in the sense that it reminds scholars to deeply and critically think about the politics and structural inequalities behind the boundary of production and reproduction.

Correspondingly, in terms of methodology, the authors collect their empirical data from unfamiliar but important aspects of drivers' work and lives, including licensing, compensation, insurance, experience related to insecurity and crime, and interaction with disabled passengers. It provides an exemplar of how labor studies can expand the empirical scope of analysis in a way that helps broaden their theoretical horizons (into feminist and racial theories).

In summary, Spent behind the Wheel is an outstanding work that bridges the studies of flexible and algorithm-dominated labor organizations with studies of feminist and racial theories and topics. On the one hand, it is suitable for scholars and students in labor studies, platform economy studies, and science and technology studies to broaden their theoretical horizons and expand their objects of empirical investigation. On the other hand, it is also a critical tool for scholars and students in gender studies and racial studies to think about the deeper and broader implications of their theories related to digital automation and contemporary capitalism.


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