The Sharing Economy:
The Production, Consumption, and Regulation of Community in the Digital Economy

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Introduction

The question of whether or not a particular business, economic, or financial trend is “new” is an alluring and deceiving one. For whenever we look at what it is that is being called “new,” what we can often recognize – as David Harvey points out – is merely a new manifestation of the same fundamental, baseline logic of capitalist accumulation. The inherent contradictions of capital are such that, when the economy reaches its saturation point, it in fact must innovate so as to keep the dialectical tensions at its core in motion. Therefore, on the one hand, the answer to this question is almost always, predictable, “no,” the business, economic, or financial model that you have identified is not now. Capitalism still functions, just as before.

However, if we return to Harvey, we see that we do not necessarily need to discount this question just on these grounds. In fact, one of Harvey’s key questions is not asking whether – yes or no – the thing that he observes is “new,” but rather what are the defining corners, pivots, and modifications that characterize the path that capitalism takes over time? Moreover, how can these transitional moments create or open up the space for different modes of accumulation that, without changing the base level of capitalism, do affect the way people experience themselves and their worlds?

It is not my aim to prove whether or not the “sharing economy” is “new.” In fact, I would like to clarify from the very beginning that these companies do definitively fit within Marx’s logic of capitalism. Both companies rely on the private ownership of resources, the compression of space and time, and the extraction of surplus value from labor in order to accumulate massive amounts of capital. In fact, two of the five founders of the companies I will be analyzing have made billions of dollars through founding and running sharing economy companies, and the other three have made in the hundreds of
millions. Therefore, the more useful and elucidating questions are, how do these companies claim to be new or different from their traditional capitalist counterparts? What are the grounds on which these companies make these claims? And what are the potential implications of the shifting perceptions of and approaches to labor and consumption today?

I will be tackling these questions at three levels: the micro, the macro, and the theoretical. At the micro level, I will analyze why and how Airbnb and Lyft claim to be both companies and the facilitators of larger, community movements. As I will demonstrate, the tension between Airbnb and Lyft’s neoliberal and communal objectives - informed by their cultural context as Silicon Valley startups - work in dialectical opposition with each other. By pursuing the movement of this dialectic, I will show how these contradictory goals shape the way these companies represent themselves, understand their products, and organize their labor forces. Through this analysis at the micro level, I will ask the larger, macro level question of how the internet and social media have changed the ways in which specifically Americans conceive of and do consumption and production. We will see that Airbnb and Lyft’s preoccupation with “community” is not merely ideological, but rather reflects the newly flexible mode of accumulation possible in the digital economy. Finally, in order to perform these analyses, I will frequently refer back to the theoretical question of how the claims that these companies make relate to their goals and actions. As we will see, although their claims can obscure some of these companies’ hidden profit motives, I will challenge the assumption that when a company’s claims do not directly and explicitly tie into their profit motives, they are necessarily being deceitful. On the other hand, I will explore the
ways in which these claims can simultaneously obscure, diminish, contradict, reinforce, legitimate, and/or make space for these companies’ ambitions and strategies.

Structure

I have broken my analysis into five sections. The first two chapters provide the necessary context for situating Airbnb and Lyft. In Chapter One we will review the literature on the internet and Web 2.0, the digital economy, and branding. Although initially these themes may appear disparate, their intersection forms the foundation of my analysis. In Chapter Two, we will look at the sharing economy as an economic movement, and analyze some of its defining characteristics. Although the sharing economy is a relatively recent movement, it nevertheless has specific, defined characteristics. We will look at the sharing economy’s ideology, and how it fits within the broader Californian Ideology that it emerges out of. It is here that we will first see the dialectical tension between neoliberalism and communalism that inform the Californian Ideology, the sharing economy ideology, and Airbnb and Lyft, as Silicon Valley, sharing economy startups.

In Chapter Three through Five I will hone in on Airbnb and Lyft as two specific examples of companies within the sharing economy. I will begin my analysis of these companies in Chapter Three by examining their identities, and the ways they mediate the dialectical tension within their identity. By employing ‘thick description,’ I will ground my analysis in the visual objects that both companies use to represent themselves as companies and also communities. In Chapter Four I will shift my focus from these companies’ identities to the actual products they sell. Though I will base my analysis primarily on branding and marketing material, we will see how Airbnb and
Lyft’s commodities reveal the dialectical tension at the core of their own identity through attempting to be simultaneously commodities and interpersonal, meaningful experiences. Finally, in Chapter Five, I will examine labor and the production of the Airbnb and Lyft experiences. In this chapter we will see how Airbnb and Lyft attempt to translate the business models of internet companies such as Facebook and Google offline. Through doing so, not only do they reach an incredible degree of flexibility, but they also attempt to change the way people conceive of labor.

Methodology

Data

Since my objects of study are two technology-based companies, I have collected the majority of my data from these companies’ web and mobile platforms. Since the users of these products interface with these companies’ virtually, I have approached Airbnb and Lyft’s web and mobile applications as representations of their selves. Within these applications, I have analyzed both these companies’ discourses through their blog posts, tweets, and other written forms of content, as well as the imaginaries they represent vis-à-vis their color scheme, design choices, images, and videos. Through studying these virtual representations, I have been able to understand how Airbnb and Lyft understand themselves, their product, and their laborers.

In order to supplement these heavily crafted, targeted representations, I have also read and watched dozens of interviews with the key decision makers in these companies, which include company founders and high-level executives. Through these interviews, I have been able to weave in the personal narratives and cultural contexts of the people that produce the companies I examine, as well as complicate the
representations of their companies, which are largely produced by their marketing teams and design agencies.

Additionally, to understand the broader context of the sharing economy, I have read the majority of articles on the sharing economy published by major news, media, and tech sites since January of 2014. While I include data from a variety of media sites in this project, I focus primarily on the tech sites that are the most influential within the Silicon Valley community. These sites include Mashable, Tech Crunch, Wired, Gigaom, and Fast Company. I have placed a special emphasis on these sites because they provide insight into the reception of Airbnb and Lyft within their own cultural contexts, Silicon Valley. Since start-up journalists serve an important function in crafting the dominant narrative within Silicon Valley, I employ these journalists’ interpretations and receptions of the sharing economy in order to culturally contextualize the movement.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this project is the lack of ethnographic data. I made the decision to focus on the virtual data on these companies and the sharing economy for several reasons. First, given the broad range of experiences of people using the site, and the limited sample size I would have access to given my time and resources, I was concerned that this data could not represent the breadth of experiences of the people using these sites. Moreover, identifying informants would have been a significant challenge without participating in the service myself (which, unfortunately, I was unable to do with neither a car nor home). If this sample size were not a concern, I still would not have been able to acquire informants outside of my own personal network. Therefore, the only option would have been to find and reach out to informants through
Airbnb and Lyft’s platforms, which is strictly prohibited, since both companies prohibit using their internal messaging platform to discuss anything but potential transactions. Although I have been able to extract important and elucidating data from these companies’ virtual presences, it is important to remember that this project lacks individual experiences to corroborate some of the claims that both these companies’, and I, make.

Method

A significant portion of this project consists of examining the ideologies and brands of these companies, as depicted through the content I have collected from their own websites, blogs, and interviews. To analyze these ideologies and brands, I will draw both from Renato Rosaldo. Applying Rosaldo’s approach, my aim is not to “demystify” the ideologies of these companies and expose them as the “fictions” they are, but rather to “dismantle” these ideologies. For Rosaldo, “Although such demystifying approaches have proven their value, they all too often short-circuit their analyses by rushing to reveal the "real" interest involved and failing to show how ideology convinces those caught in its thrall” (Rosaldo 110). On the contrary, Rosaldo presents an alternative approach to analyzing ideologies, dismantling. “The dismantling occurs by giving voice to the ideologies, even at their most persuasive, and allowing them, as the analysis proceeds, to fall under their own weight as the inconsistencies within and between voices become apparent” (ibid.). Not only will I apply Rosaldo’s method to the ideologies of these companies, but also - and perhaps even more importantly -to the branding and marketing content that constitutes a significant portion of this project. Rather than immediately write off these materials as deceitful, manipulative, or fake, I
will deconstruct and examine the strategies that render the marketing strategies emotional, hip, affective, and effective. With these goals in mind, I will do my best to represent these ideologies and marketing content in their attractive allure in order to demonstrate the work they do.
Chapter 1: The Internet, the Digital Economy, and Branding

I. The Internet and the Virtual

While the internet in its current iteration is well over 20 years old, there has been surprisingly little written on it within Anthropology and Sociology (Wilson 2003). Within this niche of academic works, we can identify two thematic trends. The first is the theme of virtual ontology and virtual community, as studied through avatar, gaming, online virtual worlds (VL), and multi-user domains (MUDS) that characterized many internet interactions up until the mid 2000's (Rheingold 1993, Turkle 2011, Dibbell 1998, Markham 1998, Harraway 1991). Additionally, there has also been a wave of anthropological and sociological scholarship that focuses on internet subcultures such as the open-source movement, internet piracy, hacker culture, and cyber libertarianism (Coleman and Golub 2008, Nissenbaum 2004, Thomas 2002, Brabham 2012, Lerner and Tirole 2005).

The Internet and the Real

The first wave of scholarly literature on the internet is primarily concerned with perceived breakdown of structural distinctions, the most striking of which being the virtual versus the real. In her groundbreaking article, “A Rape in Cyberspace,” Julian Dibbell recounts the true story of Mr. Bungle, an internet user participating in a MUD along with Dibbell and several other characters, who usurped user control over several users in the chat in order to rape other users (1998). Dibbell examines the visceral responses many of the users experienced, and the ways in which this “virtual” experience affected users’ “real” selves and bodies in vivid ways. Scholars such as Sherry Turkle, Annette Markham and Howard Rheingold approach the virtual world
with a similar intimacy and sympathy that serves to complicate our divide between the virtual and real by exposing the rich confusion at the boundary.

Markham in particular has pursued the problematic relationship between the virtual and the real as it is experienced ontologically. The primary question for scholars like Markham becomes differentiating between the experience of avatar embodiment versus “real world” embodiment. In Markham’s work *Life Online*, she explores the nature of maneuvering through MUD’s and the effect it has on people’s offline lives (1998). Through this analysis, she draws the conclusion that, in many ways, the deeper users delve into their virtual bodies, the more aware they are of their own, offline, physical bodies. Boellstorff builds on Markham’s analysis by asking how offline people relate to their online embodiment(s) (2011). By defining virtual worlds on the internet as “places” in which bodies can exist in, Boellstroff suggests we expand our existing juncture between the physical place and the physical body existing in it to the virtual place and, therefore, the potential for a virtual body to exist there.

One of the most well-renowned attempts to grapple with these questions is Donna Harraway’s work on the cyborg (1991). Although *A Cyborg Manifesto* preceded the complex internet that Boellstroff observes, Harraway’s frameworks have nonetheless been crucial to understanding the internet in postmodernity. The cyborg, Harraway posits, “is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation.” For Harraway, the rise of the internet and postmodernism have “made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial mind-body...Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.”
The Internet and The Social

Another theme we see within this literature is the perception that the internet changes the way we interact with people. In the late 1980’s to early 1990’s thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan and Howard Rheingold saw the internet as an opportunity to connect people in unprecedented ways. However, as the internet has evolved, academics have become increasingly cynical regarding the internet’s potential for creating an intimate, socially connected world. Sherry Turkle, for example, identifies the same desire for intimacy that Rheingold and McLuhan expressed in people today, however questions whether the internet actually provides the intimacy we are hoping it does (2012). To the contrary, she argues technology has exacerbated our sensations of loneliness by tapping into our somewhat perverse desire for instant gratification and affirmation, while simultaneously distancing us from the meaning and depth that fulfills us. Turkle explores this irony, positing, “As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection” (2012:12).

Sociologists such as Parigi and Henson (2014) study the ways in which internet and what Parigi and Henson refers to as “new social media” (NSM) lead to social isolation in the modern American context. For these sociologists, there are two key features of internet usage that change the way we interact with others and, therefore, feel more isolated. The first is time as a finite resource. With people spending more hours per day interacting via the internet, they spend fewer times engaging with face-to-face interactions. These observations implicitly accept Turkle’s theory that interacting online is qualitatively different from interacting in face-to-face settings.
The other feature of the internet that these sociologists - especially Constant et. all (1996), Kirk and Schill (2000), and Bearman and Paris (2004) - identify is its capacity to expand our connections and networks. With the internet we have unprecedented access to not only people all over the world, but those people we are connected to via “weak ties.” However, these sociologists observe that the increased number of weak ties we have on the internet “does not necessarily produce more meaning and can potentially increase the cognitive costs of maintaining relationships to a point of creating isolation” (Parigi and Henson 2014:163).

II. The Internet and Digital Labor

In addition to the growing literature on people’s identities, social relations, and ontologies as experienced on the internet, we can also see a growing interest in the way in which capitalism functions in the virtual world. These scholars examine the nature of work on the internet, beginning with the nature of value extraction and virtual, tech companies’ regimes of accumulation. For these theorists the inherent contradiction of the internet is that it is privately owned space, since for-profit companies own the web domains - Boellerstoff’s “places” - that internet users can visit and be in. These companies, such as Google and Facebook, must therefore extract “rent” from the users using their private possessions (Beverungen et. all 2013, Fuchs 2015, Scholz 2011). Companies extract this rent by monetizing click actions and appropriating freely produced content of their users. Google monetizes every Google search and Facebook monetizes every status update or message by sending these click actions and information about their respective users to advertising companies. Likewise, Huffington
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Post and AOL both repost content produced by unpaid bloggers and can then extract value from increased web traffic.

The dilemma with digital labor, however, is that it does not feel like work. Facebook and Google users, as well as unpaid bloggers, see their actions on the internet as leisure and play, hence why some scholars refer to digital labor as "playbor" (Scholz 2012). The more commonly used term, however, is "prosumption," a term originally coined by Alvin Toffler in 1960 to refer to TV audiences who produce value for television companies by consuming their products. On the internet, the "prosumer" refers to the internet users who understand their actions as consumption, but yet are unknowingly producing for free.

In many ways, we can see digital labor as an extension of David Harvey's theory of flexible accumulation (1991). For Harvey, flexible accumulation is the postmodern regime of accumulation that, "rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation" (1991:147). Although Harvey is writing before Web 2.0 and the rise of the companies that critical media scholars analyze, his framework is nonetheless useful. First of all, the regimes of accumulation of internet companies like Google and Facebook rely on the unprecedented compression of space-time that the internet allows for. With a nearly zero marginal cost for gaining new users (who, as we have explained, are both the producers and consumers of the Google and Facebook product), Google and Facebook are instantly and constantly accessible from nearly
anywhere around the world. Additionally, their regimes of accumulation are so flexible that the laborers producing surplus value do not even see their labor as work.

II. Brand Culture

While brand culture may initially appear to be unrelated to digital labor and the internet more broadly, it is their point of intersection that my project will focus on. Therefore, it is important to provide some background on the specific forms of branding I will be analyzing. The trend most relevant to my analysis here is “hip consumerism,” a term coined by Thomas Frank in 1998. “Hip consumerism” refers to the shift in advertising and management theory that occurred in the 1960’s in response to youth countercultural movements. Instead of running against the non-conformity and rebelliousness of the younger generations at the time, Frank identifies how these companies absorbed these young peoples’ values into itself. In order to absorb these movements, companies changed their tune from one of conformity to one of being hip, individual, and unique. This discovery “marked the consolidation of a new species of hip consumerism, a cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheel of consumption” (1998:31). As we will see, elements of “hip consumerism,” as well as the contradictions Frank identifies within it, contribute to the branding of both the sharing economy as well as the ideologues supporting it.

In addition to Frank’s conceptualization of “hip consumerism” I will use Robert Foster’s work on brands (2008). For Frank, brands are no longer just about tapping into one’s psychological or emotional desires, as were the brands to which Stewart Ewen and other sociologists and historians refer. On the other hand, he sees a shift, in which
brands are increasingly about building relationships between the things they sell and the people who consume them. For Foster, this is not just a new move in the advertising world to advertise better, but in fact a new mode of extracting surplus value. Today, the capitalist’s need to secure competitive advantage “is solved not by changing the means of production, but by changing how meaning is produced, and how the relationship between persons and things is constructed and managed” (2008:10). Looking at Coca-Cola’s brand, he demonstrates how it is not enough for people to want to drink Coca-Cola. Now “the brand must be associated with people’s emotional experiences” (2008:11). They must, in a sense, feel love for the brand and object.

Within this framework, the consumer’s emotional response to and engagement with the brand becomes a crucial component of the product’s value. In other words, surplus value is now created by the “unpaid work of consumers” whose emotional attachment to and engagement with the product is the source of its surplus value. Not only do these consumers put this work into the brands but, Foster argues, “consumers transfer control over aspects of their persons to corporate owners of the brand, who defend their brands legally as protected intellectual property” (2008:15). Unlike Daniel Miller (1987) who sees this consumption work as an opportunity for people to make commodities theirs, Foster is wary of how this work is appropriated. Although consumers may get “creative” with their identification with brands, the real value of this consumption work goes back to the brand owners. Additionally, this love for a brand further obfuscates the hidden supply chains that create its products.

As Sarah Banet-Weiser points out in her work, AuthenticTM: The Politics and Ambivalence of Brand Culture, the notion of “authenticity” has been at the heart of branding and commercialization since advertising emerged in the early twentieth
century (2012). According to Banet-Weiser there are two “camps” of scholars with respect to brands. In one camp are scholars such as Naomi Klein (2009), Thomas Frank (2008), and Michael Serazio (2013) who “expose advertising as an elaborate hoax” and beseech consumers to resist the allure of advertising (2012:11). The other camp includes scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2008) and Yochai Benkler (2007) who argue that branding can, and should, be a more dynamic process in which the consumer is an active participant in the creation of brands. For these scholars, “consumers and advertisers co-exist” (2012:11).

In all of these arguments, Banet-Weiser recommends a dichotomy that persists throughout the vast majority of scholarship on branding: the dichotomy between the commercial and inauthentic, and the non-commercial and authentic. Although Jameson decried the authentic/inauthentic dichotomy as outdated in 1992, it persists nevertheless when we discuss commoditized, commercial branding versus “authentic” culture. However, since branding is increasingly about building meaningful, affective, and powerful relationships with consumers, Banet-Weiser argues that the authentic/inauthentic dichotomy no longer – if it ever, in fact, did – holds up. “Explaining brand culture as corporate appropriation keeps intact the idea that corporate culture exists outside – indeed in opposition to- “authentic” culture” (2012:8). On the other hand, Banet-Weiser argues we must account for the “authentic” relationships consumers can, and increasingly do, have with these brands. There is no longer a cause-effect relationship between the authentic, original culture and the commoditized, commercialized brand, but rather a dynamic exchange that occurs between culture and brand so that the lines between them are unclear at best. While we must read these
exchanges as fundamentally unequal – as Robert Foster establishes earlier – we must also account for their dynamism and the ambiguity of who produces what.

Branding on the Internet

The majority of work on branding on the internet and social media platforms is done within the field of business and marketing studies. Nonetheless, this literature does provide some useful insights that can help us think about the shifting nature of branding today. These writers believe that the emergence of social media and user-generated content has radically changed the nature of branding from a top-down model to a more dynamic and responsive engagement with consumers (also see Atkin 2005 and Vargo and Lusch 2004). With sites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook branding has shifted from an authoritative dictation, to a conversation that requires companies to be more deeply tuned into the experiences of their consumers.

IV. Conclusion

While labor, branding, and the internet are disparate concepts, we will see throughout this project the new ways in which they are beginning to intersect within the context of the sharing economy. Increasingly, branding relies on unpaid consumption work that has translated increasingly into unpaid digital labor in the form of tweeting about companies, featuring them on blogs, and “liking” them on Facebook. On the internet, these brands can extract unprecedented value from “consumption work” by transforming that consumption work into directly monetizable digital labor. Moreover, the ways in which we perceive ourselves and social relations on the internet affect how we understand our own work and relationships with brands and communities. These
themes will prove key to unpacking the nature of the sharing economy on the internet today.
Chapter 2: The Sharing Economy Ideology

I. What is the Sharing Economy?

History and Definition

The sharing economy is a growing movement of businesses and thought leaders that claim to represent a new alternative to the traditional capitalist business model. While definitions of the sharing economy vary, I will define the sharing economy as a group of companies that share the following four characteristics: first, they are for-profit companies whose business model is brokering the exchanges of “under-utilized assets” through a peer-to-peer platform; second, they are tech companies that situate these exchanges on websites or mobile applications; third, they employ independent contractors, not employees; and fourth, they self-identify as members of the sharing economy and therefore ascribe to the sharing economy ideology.1

The sharing economy emerged as a concept in the mid 2000’s along with other terms such as “P2P economy,” “collaborative consumption,” and “trust economy” (Schor 2014). These categorizations followed the rise of companies such as Craigslist and eBay in the mid 1990’s, whose business models all relied on the peer-to-peer exchange of resources. I have decided to use the term, “sharing economy” as opposed to “collaborative consumption” or “P2P economy” for two reasons. First, since early 2014, when the sharing economy emerged as a mainstream phenomenon, media sources and thought leaders have begun using the term with increasing consistency.2 Most

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1 While there are broader definitions of the sharing economy, I have chosen this definition because it most aptly reflects the characteristics of the key players in the sharing economy to date.
2 According to Google Trends, the term “Sharing Economy” is the only one of these terms that has increased in popularity from January 2014 - April 2015, and is already more commonly searched than “p2p,” “peer-to-peer,” and “collaborative consumption.”
importantly, however, is that the companies within this movement self identify as participants in the sharing economy.

According to Google Trends, the sharing economy as an idea started gaining widespread popularity in the summer of 2013, when self-identified sharing economy companies such as Airbnb, RelayRides, TaskRabbit, and Lyft emerged on the main stage. Since then, the sharing economy has become increasingly popular, and is frequently covered in major news platforms such as Forbes, The New York Times, CNN, and MSNBC. Although the movement is still in its early stages, the companies grouped within the sharing economy have been growing rapidly, quickly becoming viable competitors within their own markets. For example, one of the sharing economy companies I will focus on, Airbnb – a short-term accommodation rental service – is already valued higher than major hotel operators such as Wyndham Worldwide Cup. For these reasons, the sharing economy has increasingly gained the attention of some of the most prestigious investors within Silicon Valley, including Andreessen Horowitz, Sequoia Capital, and Google Ventures.

Key Players

Companies that self identify as members of the sharing economy range from on-demand massage services to peer loaning platforms. Although which companies are included within different people’s and organization’s interpretation of the sharing economy can vary greatly, Airbnb, Lyft, RelayRides, DogVacay, Task Rabbit, and Sidecar are the companies that “thought leaders” (the self-identifying term used by individuals perceived to have authority over specific topics), bloggers, and journalists refer to with the greatest frequency. Not only are these some of the most financially
successful companies in the sharing economy, but they also all follow a similar “broker” model in which they broker or mediate the peer-to-peer exchanges of goods or services.

II. Sharing Economy Ideology

Not only are Airbnb and Lyft shining examples of the potential of the sharing economy, but they are also reinforce and perpetuate the sharing economy’s own ideology. Companies within the sharing economy claim that they are not just about dog-sitting or car rentals, but rather that their businesses are contributing to a larger, transformative human movement. These services frame themselves as communities that have the power to re-humanize our economy, and society more broadly. While we will see specifically how companies in the sharing economy frame these visions and their role in achieving them in the next few chapters, I would like to first analyze the narrative all of these companies refer back to when defining themselves and their visions. When these companies, the journalists covering them, and even some research institutions discuss the sharing economy they do so in the form of a specific myth with surprising consistency. In an effort to accurately characterize the nature of this story, I will rely on the premises, assumptions, and language that the sharing economy uses in my own retelling.

From Villages to the Industrial Revolution: The Story of the Sharing Economy

According to the sharing economy, the story of humanity begins in our village origins in which we all interacted together in harmonious communities, or gemeinschaften. All of humanity lived stable, present, idyllic lives in our intimate village communities. During these pre-industrial, pre-modern, village times, “we used to take
belonging for granted. Cities used to be villages. Everyone knew each other, and everyone had a place to call home” (Airbnb 2014). “Citizens built tight-knit relationships over the course of many years” (Tanz, Wired 2014). We knew each other, and so trusted each other. When we traded it was not with strangers or inhuman corporations, but with our friends, family, and neighbors” (Petersmeyer 2014). In these days, ordinary people powered the economy (Airbnb 2014). Our human story begins in this era of pre-industrial gemeinschaften in which our economic transactions functioned as the fabric that wove our local, tight-knit communities together.

However, suddenly, something happened. Humanity was abruptly torn from our idyllic gemeinschaft by the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution was a spontaneous, drastic, traumatic event that immediately follows our pre-modern village days. According to Tanz, our society “started to change around the mid 19th century... Suddenly people couldn’t rely on interpersonal relationships or on cultural norms” (Wired 2014). Industrial capitalism thrust us into gesellschaft by centralizing all power and authority, and forcing us to start working for and exchanging vis-à-vis large, abstract corporations. We became isolated, lonely, and unable to trust each other. As Rachel Botsman writes, we “constructed fences to establish our hyper-individualism” and found ourselves alone (2010). Not only are we lonely, but we now work unfulfilling jobs and are weighed down by rigid hierarchies, unforgiving regulations, and the new need to consume excessively (Zimmer 2014). After an entire human history of unfettered, communal, egalitarian, economic exchange, the Industrial Revolution destroyed it all.

3 Even the one account that attempts to break down the history of humanity into a time line jumps from “friend-to-friend” commerce in 50,000 BC to “neighbor-to-neighbor” in 8000 BC to “currency” in 1200 BC to “paper money” in 650 AD, to – suddenly – “person-to-company” in the 1800’s.
For the sharing economy, our village communities and the Industrial Revolution form a binary opposition. The village community is the utopic ideal; the sharing economy’s good reacting against the existing evil. In these days, we produced of our own accord, consumed of our own accord, and in these interpersonal, unmediated transactions we experienced authentic *gemeinschaft*. The Industrial Revolution is not only the exact inverse of this utopia, but is the villain responsible for its demise. The Industrial Revolution forced us into mediated and excessive production and consumption, thereby destroying the very fabric that wove together our *gemeinschaft*.

It is worth momentarily looking into specifically why the production and consumption that occurs in *gesellschaft* contradicts the sharing economy’s values so strongly. First the Industrial Revolution prevents us from being “micro-entrepreneurs” who can produce and exchange on our own terms (Chesky 2013). On the contrary we are forced to produce as the company tells us, when they company tells us, preventing any creativity or innovation. We don’t like operating, “within a specific framework…that is undergirded and supported by regulations that go back to the industrial revolution” (Tanz 2014). Moreover, the Industrial Revolution forces us into consumption. In the introduction to a report on the “prosumer” by consulting firm Havas Worldwide, they write:

> Many of us have grown tired of overconsumption. We simply are not getting the pleasure hits we once did from shopping. Instead of excitement, we feel anxiety over unpaid bills. Instead of enjoying the instant gratification of a glittery find, we worry about the effects of our consumption choices on the planet. And many of us feel constrained by all the “things” we have amassed – purchases that are physically filling our homes and garages and psychologically weighing us down (2014).

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4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yPfxcqEXhE
The sharing economy's characterization of consumption reminds us of Jameson's own observations about the nature of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* today (2000). Jameson connects the, "denunciations of individualism and the atomization of society, corroding traditional social groups" to over-consumption. In other words, there is *Gesellschaft* versus *Gemeinschaft*, with impersonal, modern society undermining older families, clans, villages, and 'organic' forms. The argument, then, might be that consumption itself individualizes and atomizes, that its logic tears through what is so often metaphorized as the fabric of daily life (*ibid.*).

**The Sharing Economy as the Answer**

The sharing economy arose almost as abruptly as did the Industrial Revolution to restore society to its original formation. However, unlike the Industrial Revolution, which happened to us, the sharing economy emerges from humanity's own demand for a return to our natural state (Botsman 2010). The sharing economy, as a peer-to-peer economic exchange, will allow consumers and producers to interact of their own accord without regulations, restrictions, or abstract corporations. These peer-to-peer interactions empower us to be the micro-entrepreneurs we once were, and will re-create the fabric that once held us together. As opposed to "nine-to-five" desk jobs, the sharing economy provides us the opportunity to pursue our passions. Workers in the sharing economy have "income portfolios," comprised of a variety of different jobs, which renders our loves more flexible, interesting, and fulfilling (Clark 2014).

The sharing economy also promises to change the way we consume. No more filling our lives with meaningless things we buy from strangers, and allowing the over-consumption of *gesellschaft* to prevent us from meaningful interactions. Instead, the sharing economy promotes leanness, and access over ownership (Colao, *Forbes* 2012).
You can make money doing what you love through a contracting service like TaskRabbit or Uber, you can borrow goods you would like to have but do not need to own, and you can rent out the “stuff” that otherwise is nothing but clutter. The Economist goes as far as to describe the sharing economy as “a post-crisis antidote to materialism and overconsumption” (2013).

Although the peer-to-peer economy emerged before the sharing economy and includes companies that do not identify as sharing economy companies, the principles of peer-to-peer exchange and open-source have strongly impacted the sharing economy (for more background on the history of open-source see Brabham 2012). In the peer-to-peer model there are very few regulations or restrictions coming from any centralized authority, in this case the company, brokering the exchanges. Therefore, the sharing economy claims that it shifts the locus of the economy away from the corporation, onto the people: “People are at the heart of the Sharing Economy; It’s a People’s Economy, meaning that people are active citizens and participants of their communities and the wider society” (Matofsa 2014). For the sharing economy, this peer-to-peer model both requires and creates trust, a crucial theme of the sharing economy. The peer-to-peer model will serve as the foundation of our newly interconnected community because we will have to learn to trust and do business with each other, without the safeguard of a corporate mediator or industrial-era regulations. As one journalist for The Week writes, “Markets throw people together, and in that sense they’ve been a force for pluralism, tolerance, and diversity” (Spross 2015). Tanz makes this clear by explaining what makes the sharing economy new for him: “We are entrusting complete strangers with our most valuable possessions, our personal experiences – and our very lives. In the process, we are entering a new era of Internet-enabled intimacy” (Wired, 2014).
Not only is this intimacy a product of the peer-to-peer model, but is at the heart of why the sharing economy has emerged in the first place. As Rachel Botsman writes, “we suddenly start to realize we miss socializing – and we need it” (2010). The Industrial Revolution left us longing for the interconnectedness of our human days, and our natural state of community. The CEO of Lyft reiterates this notion of naturalness, saying, “I think people are craving real human interaction – it’s like an instinct” (Tanz, Wired 2014). By attempting to bring back the economic models of the village communities of our past, the sharing economy proposes to restore gemeinschaft, and therefore meaning and interconnectedness, to our society today.

III. The Sharing Economy Story as a Legitimizing Narrative

The Barter Myth in Economics

The question we must ask ourselves now is what work does this narrative do for the sharing economy, and how does it do that work. We can begin with the prevalence of glaring historical inaccuracies that characterize the myth. In an almost comical fashion, this narrative deletes the vast majority of human history and essentializes the idea of a village society into a singular, stable moment in human history. Also, while the Industrial Revolution was undoubtedly an important moment in history, it was in no way a “sudden” shift, let alone the sudden shift that imposed bureaucracy and hierarchy onto our ancestors. However, as I mentioned in my introduction, my aim is not to show how this narrative is inaccurate, but what work these specific – perhaps even strategic – inaccuracies do for the companies, journalists, and thought leaders who cling to them, in spite of their obvious falseness.5

5 When I reviewed the sources each article, blog, or interview referred to, I saw two sources repeated over and over: the sharing economy “bible,” What’s Mine is Yours by sharing economy
To help us understand interpret these inaccuracies as strategies, I will turn to David Graeber’s deconstruction of the barter myth in economics (Graeber 2012). While the barter myth does differ from the sharing economy’s origin story, we will see a number of parallels, most notably the use of the village myth. For Graeber, the idea of the pre-modern village is crucial to the story of economics. However, Graeber challenges the idea of a single, stable “village” that we all, as humans, emerged from by asking which village? Which villages in human history performed the barter exchanges that Adam Smith and the generations of economists that followed would refer to so consistently? Graeber tries to apply the barter story to several, real village communities - for example, the Nambikwara band and a Scottish pastoral village - to expose how seriously the myth of “the” pre-modern village only makes sense in the abstract. Once you try to map it onto specific communities in specific eras, the myth falls apart. From this – in addition to the various anthropological and archeological accounts that corroborate his observations - Graber concludes that this myth is purely an imaginary, abstract concept.

What fascinates Graeber is not the fact that the barter myth is not true, but rather how economists have continued to rely on it in spite of the conclusive evidence stacked against it. Graeber proposes that economists do so because the myth is too important to the project of economics as a way of knowing the world. The barter myth “proves” that in our most primal state, trade and the market were natural. In the words of Adam Smith himself, there is a, “certain propensity in human nature… the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another” (Smith 1776:25). A crucial part of economics’

guru Rachel Botsman, and an article from tech journalism site Wired - the “bible of the ‘virtual class,’ as Richard Barbrook refers to it - “How Airbnb and Lyft Finally Got Americans to Trust Each Other”
own legitimacy rests on the unexamined assumption that in our most instinctual state, humans are economic agents.

The Sharing Economy Origin Story and the Barter Myth

Like economics' barter myth, the sharing economy's origin story relies on the village myth, and runs against the substantive evidence that this myth is not substantiated by any data. Given these parallels, we can interpret the sharing economy's origin story as a legitimizing narrative. Both narratives use the myth of the village to make claims as to how humanity essentially is in its most natural state. For the sharing economy, our natural state is unregulated exchanges within communities of micro-entrepreneurs. Living and exchanging in a community is the most natural way for humans to exist. Index Ventures, a venture capital firm that funds sharing economic companies writes, “Humans grew up in villages and we are instinctually drawn to communal life, practices, and values (2014).” Just as the myth of the barter is essential for naturalizing - and therefore legitimizing - economics, the myth of our village instincts naturalizes and legitimizes the notion of peer-to-peer exchange, trust, and human interconnectedness.

It is at this point that the sharing economy myth departs from economics' barter myth. As Graeber explains, economists use the barter myth to justify the path of capitalism. With our natural propensities to exchange goods as rationally calculating beings, our history has been the story of people devising new and better ways to exchange these goods. In this narrative, the industrial revolution is a logical, even necessary, step in the human narrative. Our propensity for exchange led us to develop a currency system, which led to a more developed financial system, which allowed us to finance and scale industrialization. Industrialization follows logically from the barter
myth. However, the sharing economy’s version of this myth performs the exact opposite task. The sharing economy uses this myth to de-legitimize the Industrial Revolution, portraying it as antithetical to our village existence. In village times we were connected, but the Industrial Revolution isolated us. In our villages we could all trade equally, yet the Industrial Revolution imposed harsh regulations and hierarchies that prevented us from being the economic agents we so instinctually desire to be. Despite their opposing interpretations of the Industrial Revolution, however, both economics and the sharing economy are able to ground their current projects in this particular narrative.

Interestingly, we see the sharing economy’s myth do something similar with regards to Toennies’ gemeinschaft / gesellschaft binary. For Toennies, gemeinschaft is a collective community in which the individuals see themselves as part of a greater whole, and therefore act on behalf of that larger body. For the sharing economy, however, what made these villages intimate and communal was that they functioned as unregulated micro-economies. Without regulations or capitalist corporations controlling labor, these micro-entrepreneurs were free to absolutely pursue their individual economic interests, and consume and produce how they chose. Interestingly, in Toennies’ analysis, one of the defining features of gesellschaft is that, unlike gemeinschaft, in gesellschaft people act with their own best interest in mind, not with the interest of the larger whole. Therefore, while the village community that the sharing economy describes evokes the ethos of gemeinschaft, it operates on the principles of gesellschaft.

IV. The Sharing Economy’s Vision

The sharing economy’s fundamental value proposition is to return humanity to the way our world is supposed to be; to restore gemeinschaft in light of the
individualized, regulated, and impersonal world we live in. In fact, we see the prefix, “re-” again and again throughout the sharing economy’s discourse. The sharing economy is a “return to,” a “re-creation of.” It is “re-emerging” and “re-humanizing.” However, these idyllic, village times - as I have established - never existed in the first place. And as such, the simulation of these village times precedes any historic facts, and creates a simulacrum, an even more real version of the theoretical original on which the sharing economy is based. With the insight that the sharing economy claims to return us to a time that never existed in the first place, we must ask what is being obfuscated through this very claim.

We can begin with the paradoxical method the sharing economy claims to use in order to perform this returning. The sharing economy proposes to return us to our village ways of yesterday through technology and innovation. Powered by technology,” the sharing economy is not just a, “recreation of neighborly interactions”, but a “digital re-creation…except that now our neighbor is anyone with a Facebook account (Tanz, *Wired* 2014).” It is important to recognize here that technology is not merely an element of the sharing economy; rather it is at the crux. Based in Silicon Valley startup world, the sharing economy values progress, innovation, and disruption, vis-à-vis technology. Sharing economy companies’ founders such as Nathan Blecharczyk, Brian Chesky, and John Zimmer all emphasize the centrality of technology to their products. Without the technological infrastructure, these peer-to-peer communities would never be possible.

There is a deep irony here. In the story of the sharing economy the internet is the new medium of peer-to-peer and communal expression, the new site of *gemeinschaft* in the twenty-first century. The sharing economy is powered by the unprecedented connectivity of the internet. But who powers the internet? In order to create these spaces
of supposed global, egalitarian communities, the internet relies on the “global division of labor in which ‘rare earth’ minerals like Coltan are appropriated through warfare and forced labor; in which portable tablet computers and smartphones are manufactured in sweatshops” (Beverungen, Böhm and Land 2012:3). In other words, the technological innovation that makes it possible for the sharing economy to break away from the rigidity and regulated hierarchies of industrial capitalism relies on the continued labor of industrial workers. Moreover, through this example we can already identify some of the boundaries that delimit the universal community the sharing economy is attempting to “recreate.”

V. The Culture of the Sharing Economy: Silicon Valley and The Californian Ideology

The paradox here between community and technological efficiency is a tension that in many ways characterizes the identity of the sharing economy, and especially the two companies I will analyze over the next few chapters. To better understand this tension, we will examine the context in which the sharing economy emerged: Silicon Valley. Every major player in the sharing economy was founded, piloted, and funded in Silicon Valley, with the exception of TaskRabbit and RelayRides, which were founded in Boston, which happens to be referred to as the “Silicon Valley of the East” (Kim, Inc. 2014). Given these companies’ and their respective founders’ deep ties to Silicon Valley, it is worth exploring the cultural context in which they are operating.

The Californian Ideology

Though much has been written on Silicon Valley and Californian Ideology, the foundational text is Barbrook and Cameron’s essay, “The Californian Ideology” (1995).
Barbrook and Cameron’s argument is that the “new faith” of tech start-ups budding up in Silicon Valley during the 1990’s, “emerged from a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley.” Californian Ideology is the unlikely “amalgamation of opposites” that emerged in large part due to the geographic proximity of Silicon Valley and San Francisco, and the radical appeal of the internet to both the “New Left” and the “New Right.” The Northern Californian “hippies” that Barbrook and Cameron describe, “dreamt of ‘ecotopia’: a future California where cars had disappeared, industrial production was ecologically viable, sexual relationships were egalitarian and daily life was lived in community groups.” When the internet emerged, these groups saw in it the possibility of an, “electronic agora – a virtual place where everyone would be able to express their opinions without fear of censorship.” According to Barbrook and Cameron, these hippies saw the internet as the ideal mechanism to actualize their utopia, since it can, “abolish spatial dimension,” and allow us to create egalitarian, decentralized global communities to rival the hierarchical big businesses and governments organizing life today.

Merely a few miles away from these hippie communities were the neoliberal techies tooting quite a different horn. These entrepreneurs also saw the internet as a groundbreaking tool with incredible potential. However, for these entrepreneurs, the internet was not a tool for creating community, but the realization of a neoliberal, hyper-individualized utopia. Unsympathetic towards the government, big business, or large structures of power, these “cyber-libertarians” believed, “Existing social, political and legal power structures will wither away to be replaced by unfettered interactions between autonomous individuals and their software.” Moreover, Barbrook and Cameron suggest that these entrepreneurs saw them as the new pioneers of America’s
next frontier: the digital. And with the power of the internet behind them, these technological pioneers will finally actualize the vision of America. “The twenty-first century information age will be the realization of the eighteenth century liberal ideals of Thomas Jefferson: ‘...the...creation of a new civilisation, founded in the eternal truths of the American Idea.” With the internet, we can all finally engage in the unadulterated, free market exchange; an exchange that will truly equalize everyone’s access to opportunities and create a world in which every individual can build their own future.

Despite how radically different these ideologies appear – and, really, are – Barbrook and Cameron identify the crucial similarities that permit their unlikely overlap. First, both the hippies and the neoliberals shared a deep contempt for big business and the government, if for radically different reasons, and therefore both parties shared the desire to redistribute power. But the second, and arguably more important, similarity was their deep belief in the potential of the internet. “This amalgamation of opposites has been achieved through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies. In the digital utopia, everybody will be both hip and rich.” The dialectical tension at the heart of the Californian Ideology between neoliberalism and communalism is never overcome or reconciled, but rather continues moving in opposition into the present day.

The Sharing Economy and the Californian Ideology

With Barbrook and Cameron’s explanation of Californian Ideology we can return to the tensions between efficiency and community we identified earlier in the sharing economy origin myth. In fact, as we will see throughout this and the following chapters, the sharing economy – as a product of Silicon Valley – is constantly attempting to
negotiate its status as a movement of for-profit technology companies with its communal vision. We can see a particularly strong example of this tension in a quote from Rachel Botsman. She asserts that, “collaborative consumption” – her now out-of-date term for the sharing economy – should, “lean more toward hip.com than the tie-dyed communalism of the sixties.” Even though Botsman attempts to reconcile this tension by suggesting the sharing economy create an efficient form of community, we can nevertheless read the palpable conflict between the two ideologies.

The Sharing Economy Ideology In Action

The Californian Ideology and the Culture of Silicon Valley

Up to this point, we have reviewed the discourse and myth of the sharing economy, as well as the ideological context in which it is situated. However, we have not yet seen how, or even whether, the ideology we have discussed exists anywhere outside tech journals, South by Southwest panels, or the books of public intellectuals. I would therefore like to take the opportunity to begin discussing – as I will continue to do for the next few chapters – specifically why these ideologies are not just buzzwords or even branding strategies tossed around at conferences and happy hours. On the contrary, they reflect the values and culture of the people perpetuating them.

In her ethnography of Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs, Alice Marwick realizes that the Californian Ideology is not just an abstract idea, but rather the lived cultural experience of people in the Valley (2013). “The idealism of Web 2.0’s countercultural roots, the belief in meritocracy embedded in engineering culture, and the neoliberal ethic of work-life integration and relentless self-marketing have created a strange mish-mash of wealth and privilege framed as pious self-improvement, all taking place in
public” (2013:78-79). She argues that these entrepreneurs have internalized the Californian Ideology, and now use the values within it to determine status and social capital within the Silicon Valley community. Although Marwick studies the social media tech scene, which she identifies as a niche within Silicon Valley, we will be able to identify a number of parallels between her observations, and the language and ideals of Airbnb and Lyft’s founders.

Uber: A Counter Example

To demonstrate how important this ideology has become for the sharing economy, I will use the story of the only company to have been publicly excommunicated from the sharing economy classification: Uber. Out of all the companies grouped under at least one of the many sharing economy umbrellas, Uber has by far been the most economically successful. Currently operating in 57 countries with a $40 billion valuation, the company has been one of the fastest growing start-ups in Silicon Valley for the past three years (Crunchbase 2015c). Uber began in 2012 as UberCar, an on-demand, black car service. You could download the app for free, and use it to request a ride. Within fifteen minutes, a professional driver in a black SUV would pull up to take you to wherever you needed to be. An Uber ride generally cost about twice as much as a regular taxi. While Uber was undoubtedly successful with this model, everything changed when Uber released UberX in the summer of 2012 (coincidentally two months after Lyft launched the same product). UberX, like Lyft, is a peer-to-peer ridesharing service in which your driver is not a “trained” or professional driver, just someone with a license and a vehicle manufactured within the past 10 years.
By the summer of 2012, leading tech media sites such as *Wired*, *Tech Crunch*, *Gigaom*, *Vice* and *Fast Company* all began to use Uber as their shining example of what the sharing economy could be. The media continue to praise Uber to such a degree that British news site, *The Week* released the article, “The Uberification of Everything: The Sharing Economy is Here to Stay (Lush, *The Week* 2014).” However, in the summer of 2014, we see a shift in the representation of Uber. Now worth hundreds of millions of dollars and growing at a “meteoric” rate, Uber has dropped all pretensions of sharing (Lapowsky 2015). Uber surged the prices of rides to meet demand during several natural disasters and a bomb threat (Vinik 2014). Uber began a vicious war with competitor Lyft that involved a “sabotage playbook,” which was leaked to the public (Newton 2014). Uber CEO Travis Kalanick even once joked in an interview that his success had made him such a chick magnet that he has considered renaming the company “Boo-b-er” (Rushe 2014). Now a company whose valuation rivals some of San Francisco’s most successful companies, Uber and its CEO have made their objectives clear: money, growth, and – apparently – boobs.

In light of this, the very sources that in 2012 hailed Uber as the pinnacle of social innovation now beseech us, to “stop staying Uber is part of the sharing economy” (Meelen and Frenken 2015). In fact, the sharing economy’s rejection of Uber is so strong, supporters will occasionally group Uber with “Wal-Mart” and the traditional, corporate companies they stand against. What the tale of Uber reveals is the centrality of the sharing economy ideology to the companies’ reputations. Although UberX has almost the same logistical business model as Lyft, it has refused to participate in the culture of the sharing economy or perpetuate the ideology surrounding it. Consequently, although

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it would have been – by the numbers – the most successful company in the sharing economy, Uber’s unabashedly aggressive tactics, its unapologetic irreverence, and stated objective to continue growing at the expense of their competitors have barred it from the sharing economy.

VII. Conclusion

We have seen not only how the sharing economy ideology relies on a particular, artificial narrative of human history, but what work this ideology does for the sharing economy at large. By perpetuating this ideology, the sharing economy can legitimize itself as the necessary reconciliation following the traumatic century and a half we have spent under Industrial Capitalism. While clearly this ideology is important for the branding and images of these companies, it does more work than that. First of all, we have seen how the sharing economy’s ideology parallels the Californian Ideology, which as Marwick explains, is less a brand and more a lifestyle and identity that defines the entrepreneurs, journalists, and investors operating within Silicon Valley. Second, we have seen how a company’s refusal to abide by these value systems and cultural practices is consequently rejected by the sharing economy at large. Both of these examples suggest that the ideology of the sharing economy, and the Californian Ideology in which the sharing economy is situated, both carry significant weight within the community of entrepreneurs, investors, and journalists themselves.

In the next three chapters I will zoom into two specific examples of the sharing economy, Airbnb and Lyft, that both incorporate this ideology into their branding, image, and actions. With this understanding of the sharing economy ideology, its relationship with the Californian Ideology, and the tensions that characterize it, we can
examine the specific actions taken by the companies, and how these actions relate back to the ideology that frames them.
Chapter 3: The Corporate Identity and Self-Representations

Out of all the companies within the sharing economy, Airbnb and Lyft stand out as two of the most successful and widely recognized. News sites from Forbes, Wired, New York Times, The Guardian, and Huffington Post have all grouped the two together as the exemplars of the sharing economy “revolution” (Arthur, The Guardian 2014). In fact, a new generation of sharing economy services now refer to themselves as “the Airbnb of” something, or “the Lyft of” something else. Not only are these companies the most successful in terms of media representation and social influence, but they are also worth significantly more than their peer companies. Whereas most companies in the sharing economy are valued in the millions or tens of millions, Airbnb and Lyft brag valuations of $10 and $2 billion respectively (Crunchbase 2015a,b). Due to their popularity and financial success, Airbnb and Lyft both see – and actually refer to - themselves as protagonists in the sharing economy (Airbnb 2012). For these reasons, I will focus my analysis on these two companies for the remainder of this thesis.

Airbnb and Lyft share many of the sharing economy’s visions, most notably the sharing economy’s goal to recreate the communities we have lost. Championing this cause, Airbnb and Lyft actually identify as communities or movements more so than they identify as for-profit enterprises. As we will see, Airbnb and Lyft attempt to inhabit both the categories of company and community, and thereby reconcile the dialectical tension between cyber-libertarianism and hippie communalism that characterizes the Californian Ideology. In this chapter we will see how these tensions shape Airbnb and

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7 These companies’ valuations are strong indicators of their specialness for two reasons. First, high valuation usually correlates with a company’s to-date success. But almost more importantly, a high valuation in Silicon Valley demonstrates to those within the community that your company has “succeed” by its standards. After this point, high-profile investors, partners, and journalists are more inclined to validate, and therefore build, your company.
Sparks 40

Lyft’s representations of themselves, their values, and the communities they claim to create through their platforms.

To do so, I will focus primarily on the messaging and content that constitutes Airbnb and Lyft’s “brands.” As we will see, the digital agencies responsible for Airbnb and Lyft’s branding - DesignStudio for Airbnb and Eleven, Inc. for Lyft - both apply many of the branding strategies that Foster and Frank both analyze. The brands of both companies are hip, cool, and young. Moreover, through these brands, Airbnb and Lyft try to build the deep passion and emotional connection that Robert Foster discusses in his analyses of brands. However, although Airbnb and Lyft use tactics that aesthetically resemble those that Frank and Foster analyze, this does not necessarily signify that they use these tactics to the same effect. Instead, due to Airbnb and Lyft’s identity-based struggle to be both companies as well as communities, we will see that these same strategies do more work than merely inspire brand loyalty among consumers.

It is important to note before I begin my analysis that in this and the following chapters, I will treat Airbnb and Lyft as subjects, though, when possible, I will specify the specific agents behind different projects and claims. Although Airbnb and Lyft are both organizations comprised of the collective, differentiated labor and input of hundreds of individuals, I have chosen to refer to them as singular subjects. We must remember that, in many ways, this is a deceiving move and will not fully represent the intricacies of who created the words and images we will analyze, how, and under what conditions. While I am cognizant and wary of these limitations, I have chosen to refer to these companies as subjects because the actors who do the work of representing these companies do so with a perceived, imaginary idea of a fixed entity that they create. Both companies have style guides that lay out explicitly the tone and voice of all the
companies' content. The marketing teams in both companies have devised a set of key words - likely in an SEO (search engine optimization) spreadsheet - that all producers of content (be they blog posts, tweets, or general resource) must use. Therefore, these agents do produce a preconceived, crafted "Airbnb" or "Lyft" that takes on an identifiable and defined (however loosely) form. These are the subjects to which I will refer throughout the rest of this thesis.

Finally throughout this thesis, I will be using the term, "community" frequently. I would like to clarify that when I do so, I am, with few exceptions, referring to the abstract, and undefined concept of community that Airbnb and Lyft employ throughout their own content. This notion of community, as we will see, is vague, contradictory, and at times unproductive. What Airbnb and Lyft mean by facilitating and creating space for "communities" is a question we will be able to answer more rigorously after we have analyzed the situations in which Airbnb and Lyft use the term, "community," how, and to what ends. Until that point, we should be skeptical of its ambiguity, and its potential as an ambiguous concept that evokes a particularly strong emotional response amongst the urban, primarily middle and upper-middle class consumers of the content and branding we will analyze throughout the remainder of this project.

I. An Overview of Lyft

Business Model and History

Like the majority of companies in the sharing economy, Lyft was founded by a group of men in their twenties in Silicon Valley. When co-founders Logan Green and John Zimmer tell the story of how Lyft started, they emphasize the two visions they shared: the first was to maximize the occupancy of car seats on the road at any given
time to create a more efficient transportation network, and the second was to use ride-
sharing as a catalyst for connecting people. With these dreams in mind, Logan Green
and John Zimmer launched Lyft in the summer of 2012 in San Francisco. Lyft is an on-
demand, ridesharing app that connects people looking for a ride with people offering
rides, in exchange for a fare. Lyft drivers are not professionals and have no taxi
certifications; rather they are “regular people” with a car and a license who can drive
around and pick people up whenever they choose. Lyft runs through a mobile app for
both drivers and passengers.

A passenger requests a Lyft by opening the free mobile app available for iPhones
and Android phones, verifying their location, and hitting the “Request Lyft” button.
Nearby drivers are notified, and the first to accept the ride will drive to the location
specified by the passenger. Both the driver and passenger receive a photo of each other,
as well as their name, hometown, favorite music, and a brief bio. Once the driver arrives,
the passenger gets into the front seat of the car, and they drive to the destination. Fees
are automatically charged to the passenger’s credit card that is stored on file, in addition
to a tip the passenger specifies after the ride. Lyft’s sole revenue stream is the 20%
commission it takes off these fees, which do not include the tip. At the end of each ride,
both the passenger and driver rate each other, and can write a comment if they choose.
The default rating is 5 stars, and the convention is to only rate downwards if there were
serious problems, something I will examine more thoroughly in Chapter 4. If you rate
someone 3 stars or lower, you will never be paired with them again. If anyone’s average
rating sinks to lower than 4.6 stars, they risk being terminated from Lyft’s platform. As a
result, it is very rare that anyone gets or gives ratings below five stars. Since 2012, Lyft
has been growing rapidly in 59 cities across the country.
Core Values and Identity

While this is how Lyft works, these logistics do little to speak to Lyft as the “weird,” “creative,” “friendly,” “innovative” movement that has become the apple of Silicon Valley’s eye. Although, technically, Lyft is a transportation company, it insists that it is far more than that. According to Lyft, it is a movement defined by two core values: friendship and freedom. Through the Lyft rides that drivers and producers exchange on Lyft’s peer-to-peer platform, Lyft claims to be reconnecting communities, creating the space for new friendships, increasing freedom through mobility, and inspiring people to be their quirky weird selves. In the following chapters I will explore specifically how these values play out in the actual production and consumption Lyft ride, however for now it useful to know that these are Lyft’s two missions, and the values that it claims to live by.

We can see the first value, community, most clearly in Lyft’s slogan, “Your Friend with a Car.” This is a strange slogan for a multi-billion dollar company, and yet it aptly captures the identity that Lyft attempts to represent. Not only does it emphasize the communal nature of Lyft, but specifically the idea of friendship. More than just a community of drivers and passengers, Lyft is a community of friends. By placing “friend” in the subject of its tagline - while only alluding to the notion that these “friends” are paid drivers that generate revenue for Lyft as a company - Lyft suggests that it is a community first, and a company second. The significance of this tagline is even clearer when we compare it with Uber’s, which is “Everyone’s Private Driver.” Through juxtaposing Lyft’s tagline against Uber – a company that provides the same logistical service – Lyft’s comparable warmth and friendliness becomes clear.
While Lyft does engage with the themes of freedom and individuality through the materials it sends to laborers, as well as through video campaigns such as, "Community Solutions: Everyday Freedom," Lyft more commonly engages with freedom as the freedom to express yourself as the unique, quirky, fun individual that you are. Lyft’s interpretation of freedom is, therefore, bold, young, and irreverent. Lyft’s version of freedom is sticking your head out of the car window and letting your hair fly in the wind, and transforming your Lyft ride into a karaoke game show because you wanted to, and did not have any other outlet to do so.

The quirkiness that runs through these displays of freedom is another important feature of the Lyft identity. In fact, from its inception, Green and Zimmer have sought ways to make Lyft a fun, weird experience, claiming it would be a useful way to both encourage drivers to be themselves, and to break the ice between strangers (Lawler, TechCrunch 2014). Therefore from the beginning, a Lyft ride has come with two quirky features: Lyft cars wear bright pink mustaches, and Lyft drivers inaugurate each ride with a fist bump.

Beginning with the pilot launch of Lyft in 2012, Lyft has given its drivers huge, fuzzy, hot pink mustaches to place on the front of their cars. Though Lyft eventually switched
to the “glow-stache,” which is a neon glowing mustache that rests on the dashboard of a drivers’ car, he mustache has remained central to Lyft’s identity. In an interview with *Business Insider*, Zimmer explains that he and Green wanted to both inspire drivers to be their unique, quirky selves while also standardizing the Lyft experience (Carleson 2014). According to Zimmer, this is how they decided to use the pink mustache. He explains, “you smile when you see it, the passenger smiles, the driver smiles, it breaks the ice.” It also serves as an identifiable icon, and definitive indicator that the experience is supposed to be different, weird, and fun. The other strategy Lyft uses is the “ritual fist bump,” which drivers give passengers to inaugurate each ride (Lynley, *Business Insider* 2012). While I will go into greater detail on the fist bump in the next chapter, it is important to mention that this gesture also demonstrates the quirky and communal vibe Lyft has attempted to foster.

The Lyft Imaginary

While the fist bump and the “‘stache” set the stage for the quirky, friendly identity Lyft has created, the content and images that Lyft produces will help us deepen our understanding of Lyft’s vision for this quirky, unique, and friendly community it hopes to facilitate. The first observation I had about the Lyft brand was its brightness. The Lyft colors are unabashedly fun, whacky hues of magenta and mint green, that Zimmer explains are intended to be both “friendly and bold” (Lagorio-Chafkin, *Inc.* 2015). In fact, according to *Inc.*’s interview with Zimmer and coverage of Lyft’s brand, Zimmer and Green chose these colors to stand out against Uber’s exclusively grey-scale color palate, as well as to appeal to the feminine audience that Uber may have excluded through its notably more masculine branding strategies (Lagorio-Chafkin 2015).
Lyft’s website features drivers and passengers in fun, exciting videos that evoke whimsy, happiness, and youth. The drivers and passengers are almost always young adults (seemingly in their early to mid twenties), well dressed, colorful, and the archetypes of “hip.” These videos only rarely actually show these people driving, instead portraying them dancing, chatting, running on the beach, overlooking the ocean, or twirling sparklers. When they are in a car together, however, it is all fist bumps and smiles. The tone of Lyft’s website is carefree, fun, and not the tone you might expect from a company of its size and value. Lyft uses phrases like “smellin’ fresh,” “rock the ‘stache” and “let’s roll” throughout its messaging.

With this general overview of Lyft’s visual style and some of its defining characteristics, we can now turn to specific examples of Lyft’s representations of its community. In the over 100 videos that Lyft has created and uploaded to its YouTube channel, Lyft features drivers, introduces new products, releases quick (under one minute) videos that do nothing more than visualize its brand, and shows what happens at the parties it hosts for its community. In particular I will look at a series of videos titled, #LyftLove, in which Lyft drivers share their most memorable experiences connecting with a driver or passenger through a Lyft ride. One of the videos in this series, “What’s Your Favorite #LyftLove Story,” is a montage of interviews with Lyft passengers (Lyft 2015). In this, as well as the majority of Lyft’s videos, the shots never last for more than a few seconds, resulting in a hodge-podge of funny, charming, fleeting moments. The following is a brief excerpt from one of these videos:

Person #7: “...It was like an F-150, like a crew cab, with horns, like bull horns, on the front...”
Person #3: “...I get in the front seat and this guy is playing funky music...”
Person #4: “...And I just found out that she had started a small business making empanadas...”
Person #8: “...Her whole dashboard had...like hula girls, like, shaking...”
Person #5: “...And I told him, Hawaiian reggae. That’s my jam” (Lyft 2015)

What is fascinating about this video – and a number of other similar videos on Lyft’s site – is the way in which these rapid vignettes fold in and out of each other, and are only specific enough so as to be unique. These signifiers are totally stripped from their context, giving us only enough information to assure us that these moments were cool, interesting, and worth remembering. In a sense, the fleeting, quick nature of the way in which Lyft presents these special moments of human interconnectedness parallels the nature of the Lyft ride. Rather than featuring narratives, or following long processes over which people became deeply intimate, Lyft emphasizes the fun, meaningful interactions people can have in brief chunks of time that are once here and then gone.

We can identify this format of presenting the Lyft community as an amalgamation of moments in Lyft’s blog. Each month, Lyft posts a “Happiest Tweets of [the month]” blog post, in which it curates tweets from its community about their Lyft experiences. Here are a few examples of the tweets that Lyft reposted:

![Twitter tweet](image-url)
As with the #LyftLove videos, these tweets are decontextualized and placed together in montage format to represent moments of friendship and fun experienced within Lyft. Where these tweets diverge from the #LyftLove video, however, is that these tweets carry a different degree of authenticity. Whereas the #LyftLove video is an obviously crafted and produced piece of work, these tweets appear to be Lyft community members’ unsolicited, spontaneous reactions to the experiences they had with Lyft. Coming “organically” from the community, these tweets appear more genuine and authentic. Through these posts, Lyft implies that it is not the authoritative voice on its community. That voice is Alana Hendreson - cellist, singer, and songwriter with 1,949 followers on Twitter - and the other users like her, creating the Lyft brand. In fact, it is in this series of blog posts, as well as Lyft’s engagement with social media more
broadly, that we can see most clearly Lyft’s attempt to behave and function like the facilitator of a community, as opposed to a company.

Of course, Robert Foster would caution us here from attributing too much creativity to these users. Lyft purchased the services of a design agency, Eleven, Inc., whose very specialty is inspiring love and passion in a company’s community, which complicates the cause and effect relationship between the brand and the experiences of its audience (Eleven, Inc. 2015). Moreover, even though these stories and tweets may come from the lived experiences of Lyft user’s, Lyft’s subsequent curation of them is not a neutral process. Lyft must choose which stories and community members it represents and how. At the same time, I will invoke Sarah Banet-Weiser to make the claim that, while Lyft’s brand is manufactured - not to mention unequal both in terms of authority over creation and in terms of surplus value gained - we should not immediately discount Alana Hendresson and Taylor Bernal’s experiences as inauthentic or fake. Our aim, instead, is to understand how Lyft uses the emotional responses of it produces in its Lyft users.

II. An Overview of Airbnb

Business Model and History

Airbnb, like Lyft, was founded by a group of young, white men in their twenties in Silicon Valley, Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia, and Nate Blecharczyk. The story of how Airbnb began has become a staple entrepreneurial narrative within the business community, with one journalist even remarking how he has, “read it in so many places, it’s practically an origin myth by now” (Thompson, The Atlantic 2015). According to the story the co-founders tell and retell, the idea for Airbnb came in 2008 when Chesky and
Gebbia were looking for money to pay rent - an essential plot point for the zero-to-hero trajectory of the narrative - and decided to rent out their room to travelers, offering them a place to sleep - specifically three airbeds - in addition to good company and breakfast. Inspired by the experience, they reached out to Blecharczyk and founded AirBedandBreakfast, which they would later shorten to Airbnb. After a long four years of living off cereal, running themselves into debt, and failing at every turn, the trio, with the guidance of famous Silicon Valley mentor Paul Graham, finally had their day.

Since its inception, the business model for Airbnb has remained fairly constant. It is an online marketplace for people to list and book accommodations around the world. To list your accommodations on Airbnb, you must provide your Facebook account, at least one photo of your listing, a basic description, a title, and your availability to host. While Airbnb prohibits illegal listings on the site, it places the responsibility of determining whether or not your listing is “illegal” on the hosts themselves. To book a listing, all you need is a Facebook account and a credit card on file. The connected Facebook accounts function as a way to verify identities, operating on the reputation system to create trust. Airbnb is the digital platform on which these guests and hosts can connect, the messaging interface for their connections, and the broker of their transactions. Airbnb asserts no direct control over how or when hosts run their listings, allowing hosts to describe the space however they want, include whichever pictures they want, choose their availability, and name their asking price.

As an Airbnb guest, you can scroll through the marketplace of potential listings on Airbnb.com, which shows a photo of each listing, its title, the name and photo of the host, its asking price, its average rating, and the number of reviews it has received. After identifying a potential listing, the guest can contact the host through Airbnb’s messaging
platform to decide if they should book the accommodation. If both parties agree, the guest books the room by paying Airbnb, who holds the payment until the stay is successfully completed. After the guest leaves, Airbnb transfers the payment to the host, and both the host and the guest rate each other. Since hosts are more likely to refuse reservation requests from guests with low ratings, and low-rated listings are more likely to show up at the bottom of search results, there is a strong incentive to receive as high a rating as possible.

The majority of Airbnb’s revenue comes from the commission and fees it takes from these transactions. It takes a 6 to 12% fee from each guest booking and a 3% commission fee from the host for each transaction. Therefore if a host charges $100 for one night and I book one night at their listing, I will be charged anywhere from $106-$112, the host will receive $97 from hosting me, and Airbnb makes $9 - $15. Airbnb will not release definitive data on its secondary revenue streams, which come from integrating with other platforms and partners such as Facebook, Craigslist, and Vayable (Thomas, Business Insider 2014).

Core Values and Identity

As with Lyft, the technical operations of Airbnb are only the foundation of Airbnb’s identity, though unlike Lyft Airbnb did not have this vision from the start. In fact, it was not until 2011, four years after Chesky, Gebbia, and Blecharczyk first had the idea for Airbnb that they realized the “social connections” and the “real spaces and real people” have been the unanticipated “secret sauce behind Airbnb (Gebbia 2012)” As Brian Chesky explains in a message he emailed to Airbnb users, “You know, when Joe, Nate, and I started Airbnb six years ago, it was just a way to book a room around the
world. But today, you’ve told us it’s so much more. And our vision is that we want to bring the world together (Airbnb 2014)” Since Airbnb’s rebranding in 2014, when this message was released, community and universalism have become the two crucial values that have shaped Airbnb’s image.

According to the high-level decision makers behind Airbnb, such as Brian Chesky, Joe Gebbia, and Douglas Atkin, community is central to Airbnb. Atkin, Airbnb’s Global Head of Community explains, “Community is at the very heart of what we do” (Atkin 2014). Chesky reinforces Atkin’s claim, writing, “We are committed to fostering and strengthening community” as a, “community-powered economy (Chesky 2014). As Atkin explains, community as Airbnb understands it is an idealistic vision of the way the world should be. This vision is to create a global community in which “all seven billion people can #BelongAnywhere.” In order for Airbnb to actualize this vision, it must tackle the “one obstacle in [their] way, and that is strangers (Airbnb 2014)” In order for Airbnb to create this global community that unites us despite geo-political, national, cultural, and social barriers, Airbnb seeks to eliminate the stranger and - implicitly - strangeness. For Airbnb, the only difference between a stranger and a friend, is that a stranger is a friend you have not yet met.

Airbnb can make this claim about the stranger on the basis of its own radically universal and essentialized perspective on humanity. Airbnb frequently claims there to be fundamental, universal experiences, perspectives, and feelings that all humanity shares by virtue of being human. In the video that introduces the Bélo, we read the following story: “The world is full of cities and towns constantly growing larger. But the people within them are less connected. Yet we are all yearning for a place. We are all seeking to Belong. We all want to connect and share. To feel accepted and safe” (Airbnb
Airbnb echoes these sentiments throughout its content and messaging, referring to the “common human bond that connects us” (Airbnb 2014). Through these statements, Airbnb presents a radically universal interpretation of humanity. According to these grandiose and totalizing statements, there is, in fact, an essential humanity and these essential elements render us all, to some degree, similar to each other.

Not only does Airbnb assert this baseline universality that connects us all as people, but also claims it has the power to further destabilize the boundaries presumably separating us. Airbnb has the power to actually transcend even the apparent differences between people, such as race, language, religion, ethnicity, etc. In the video at the bottom of Airbnb’s webpage, the middle-aged Indian, male host reflects on his experiences with Airbnb, musing, “After hosting hundreds of guests I realize how I am connected to these people that come from a different culture, different country, and different background... Transcending boundaries of different countries, different genders, different race [sic.], this has not been possible before” (Airbnb 2014). Not only does this host claim to be “a part of a global community,” but he suggests that Airbnb has in fact diminished the racial, cultural, and gender barriers that had previously separated this host from the larger, global community. By mitigating these barriers, Airbnb can make the claim that the only “obstacle” in the way of creating a world in which “all seven billion of us can #BelongAnywhere” is “the stranger” (Airbnb 2014).

The Airbnb Imaginary

Where Lyft’s identity is fun, young, and playful, Airbnb’s completely revamped brand and identity is warm and comparably subdued. Like Lyft, Airbnb’s color is also pink, “rausch” to be precise. Unlike Lyft’s hot pink, however, Airbnb’s coral pink is less
fun and quirky than it is welcoming. Airbnb videos and images feature a notable
diversity of age ranges and races, often featuring children and the elderly, though these
characters are all exceptionally well-dressed, fit, and physically able. Where Lyft videos
often include shots entirely comprised of people’s faces, Airbnb’s videos are more
zoomed out, showing the intimate space of the home that serves as the setting for nearly
every Airbnb shot.

We can see an example of Airbnb’s aesthetic – as well as a visual representation
of Airbnb’s desire to break down geographic and cultural boundaries in the welcome
video written by Airbnb and designed by experimental animation house, CIRKUS. In
“Welcome to Airbnb,” CIRKUS reconstructed miniature, physical renditions of the
listings on Airbnb, and filmed a train’s journey through these listings without any use of
CGI or animation (Airbnb 2014). As the train travels along its journey, the different
places literally unfold in front of you, presenting the viewer with a seamless transition
from a castle to a bungalow to a tree house in the forest. The video melts boundaries
between snow-tipped mountains and the rainforest, home interiors and wide
landscapes, and urban and rural spaces, as the narrator implores us to, “look at out at
the world, isn’t it wonderful? And see all the places we call home...on Airbnb.com you
can book and stay in any one you like (ibid.).” In the video dedicated to the “Behind the
Scenes” of this video, Matthias Schuecking, Airbnb’s Head of Marketing, explains,
“What made the concept attractive to us was the handmade feel and the love for detail,
and the part of making the world a smaller place is what Airbnb stands for” (ibid.). This
video is therefore a literal actualization of Airbnb’s desire to “make the world a smaller
place” by mitigating geographic and cultural boundaries.
What is particularly interesting about this video is that it visualizes the compression of space that Airbnb seeks to facilitate through its product. Through Airbnb we can actualize McLuhan’s global village offline. We are no longer just connected to this global community virtually via electronic cables and satellites, because now with Airbnb our physical bodies can transcend the spaces and geographies previously only transcended by the media. Moreover, we can even transcend the cultural, social, geopolitical, and national boundaries that complicate these spaces by “belonging” in the Airbnb homes across the world.

III. Airbnb and Lyft: Companies or Communities?

Although Airbnb and Lyft differ significantly in their values, histories, brands, and representations of their communities, they share some key similarities. The most important similarity is that they both must negotiate their identities as both companies and communities. On the one hand, they are for-profit companies that use the same legal business model of the corporations they lambast. Like these companies, Airbnb and Lyft both have clear hierarchical orders within their companies that determine decision making power and salary, and both companies are responsible to a board of managers each quarter. However, on the other hand, Airbnb and Lyft present themselves as the mere facilitators of dynamic, vibrant communities of people passionate about sharing moments of intimacy and friendship, which diverges fundamentally from the bureaucratic, centralized, rigid, purely economic relations between industrial capitalists and their consumers and producers. Given the centrality of community to their brand images – and, as we will see shortly, to their strategies –
Airbnb and Lyft not only refer to community frequently, but actually use two rhetorical devices to destabilize their identities as either companies or communities.

Airbnb and Lyft's Self-Representation as Communities

The first strategy I will explore is Airbnb and Lyft’s use of the pronouns “we” and “our.” As you have seen throughout the chapter, these are the pronouns that appear again and again throughout Airbnb and Lyft’s messaging. However, this “we” slips between a variety of meanings. Sometimes “we” refers to Airbnb’s employees who work at their headquarters and make decisions legally on behalf of Airbnb, Inc. For example, “we make it easy to get to know hosts like Mina” (Airbnb 2015). Sometimes “we” refers to everyone performing paid work for the company, which includes the aforementioned legal employees, as well as hosts or guests respectively. For example, “Here at Lyft we believe in making someone’s day a little bit better” (Lyft 2015). Sometimes “we” refers to everyone who uses the product. Throughout both companies’ branding and messaging, we see the meanings behind this “we” fluctuate almost as seamlessly as the shifting geographies in Airbnb’s videos and Lyft’s hodge-podge of quirky vignettes.

These slippages help destabilize the structures and hierarchies within Airbnb and Lyft. In an interview about Airbnb’s rebranding, Brian Chesky says, “Everything about what we do needs to blur the lines between our internal community, the employees, and the external community, what we call ‘community’” (DesignStudio 2014). By intentionally obscuring and confusing the vertical distinctions between the high-level executives, the employees, the laborers, and the consumers, Airbnb and Lyft attempt to flatten out the perception of hierarchies within their “communities.” Not the evil, capitalist, centralized companies of industrial capitalism, the employees – let alone
the high-level executives - of Airbnb and Lyft are at times indistinguishable from those who use their products. To further confuse this structure, the co-founders of both companies frequently work as hosts and guests. All three Airbnb co-founders use Airbnb exclusively when traveling, but also host guests in their own apartments frequently throughout the year. Both John Zimmer and Logan Green turn on “driver mode” on their way to and from work at least several days of the week to pick up passengers (Lawler, TechCrunch. 2014). These intentional, spectacular actions - which all the aforementioned founders frequently refer to in interviews – demonstrate Airbnb and Lyft’s desires to destabilize at least the appearance of the hierarchies within their communities.

In addition, both companies use a particular syntactical formula when they describe what their companies do. When Airbnb or Lyft describe themselves, they explain their technical product offering, but quickly explain that they are “more than” just that, they are something greater. For example, Airbnb writes in a blog, “At Airbnb we are more than just a way to find an list places to stay. What we actually provide is a unique kind of hospitality – a sense of belonging, [my emphasis]” (Airbnb 2015). On Lyft’s home page it says, “From the moment you hop in the car, you’ll see that Lyft is more than a ride. [my emphasis].” This “more than” formula allows these companies to admit to their economic function, while still emphasizing their “real” priorities: their communities. While neither these companies’ uses of “we” or “more than” IV. Conclusion

While it is tempting to read the aforementioned strategies and representations of the Airbnb and Lyft communities more broadly as tactics intended to dupe consumers, I
propose we use a more complex framework to analyze these strategies. As we saw in the previous chapter, the vision to create and foster community is actually a vision that runs deeply through the ideology of the cultural context of both Airbnb and Lyft. To clarify this point, we can use an example of how Airbnb has used its identity as a community not just for branding, but actually to lobby local regulators threatening to ban Airbnb from operating in their cities. In response to these threats, Airbnb mobilized more than 6,000 hosts and guests to sign petitions, write content, and attend rallies to convince their local governments to legalize Airbnb in their cities. In Douglas Atkin’s words, “we basically drenched lawmakers with our community” (Atkin 2014).

Although we do not know what motivated these hosts and guests to lobby their local officials—dependence on Airbnb for income and passion for home-sharing as a larger movement are examples of potential motivating factors—of the citywide organizers for Airbnb explained that the only way Airbnb could have mobilized this quantity of hosts and guests is because people believed that Airbnb was more than just a company. “I don’t think you could imagine Macy’s running...or, activating their shoppers to reach out to policy makers, but on the other hand you have Airbnb hosts and guests who...are ready and willing to advocate for what they want to see” (Sparks 2015). Regardless of the individual motivating factors of these hosts and guests, this Airbnb employee suggests that it was only through Airbnb’s position as more than just a company that they could mobilize this level of community response.

From this anecdote, we can see how Airbnb was able to inspire a movement of people at least in part due to its representation of itself as more than a company.

Although the dialectical tensions between these companies’ identities as companies and communities are, and will remain, unreconciled, through the representations that we
have analyzed in this chapter, we can begin to understand the complex relationship between what Airbnb and Lyft claim to do, and what happens in actuality. Rather than seeing these two as necessarily in opposition, we can identify some of the ways in which these claims obscure, reflect, perpetuate, and strengthen these companies’ goals simultaneously.
Chapter 4: The Product

Now that we have analyzed the identities of both Airbnb and Lyft as companies, and the ways in which both companies apply branding strategies and the idea of "community" into their identities, we can turn to the actual products both companies produce. It is through these products that both companies claim to, "make the world smaller," and "create a world in which all seven billion of us can Belong Anywhere." On the one hand the products that Lyft and Airbnb offer are service commodities, just on-demand and cheaper than their traditional counterparts. Lyft is a transportation service that provides means of getting from one place to another, and Airbnb connects people with temporary living conditions. In this sense, neither company is producing anything new. However, at the same time both companies claim that through the Lyft and Airbnb experiences, strangers are transformed into friends, travelers can experience belonging, and communities emerge. In this chapter we will examine the premises on which these companies claim that their products have the unique abilities to create the foundations for community. Once understanding these premises, we can ask whether and how the claims Airbnb and Lyft make about their services translate to the actual products themselves.

I. Airbnb and Lyft’s Representations of Their Products

Airbnb’s Product: Belong Anywhere

According to Airbnb, staying on Airbnb is an experience of belonging, intimacy, and locality. The ethos and motto of Airbnb is “Belong Anywhere,” and the company has done its utmost to reflect this ethos every time it portrays an Airbnb stay. Airbnb’s logic goes as follows: because guests stay in the private homes of people who are not hotel owners, but “real people” just like you, guests will be able to belong in the home
they stay in, belong to the family of that home, and belong to the local community surrounding it.

Airbnb best visualizes these different characteristics of belonging through its video, “Never a Stranger” (Airbnb 2015). In this video, a young, white, beautiful, and well-dressed woman dictates a thank you note she is writing to her host. Quickly into her dictation we realize that she is not writing to one host in particular, but rather to whichever host is/was hosting her in the different homes we see her pass through. As the “you” she refers to slips between different identities of hosts, her surroundings melt from one setting to another. “Dear Stranger... this morning a city I’ve never been to felt like home,” the protagonist says as we see her walk out the door of an apartment onto the streets of Paris. She continues, “Everyone in your neighborhood was so warm and friendly,” as she chats with people on the street, smiling. After walking into a plant store and into the jungles of Mexico, we see her lie down on the beach, only to sit up in the streets of Tokyo, surrounded by young people. Immediately she is dancing and laughing with them, as she says, “Oh, and then I met your friends. They reminded me of my friends. I felt like I had known them for years.” As she walks away, her setting becomes Rio de Janeiro where she is at what appears to be a large family gathering. She continues, “It was almost like family. I just wanted to thank you for sharing your world with me. It felt like home.”

I have taken the time to outline this video in detail because it services as the most concise representation of how Airbnb presents its product. The most immediately striking theme we can recognize in this video is that of the global/local. The protagonist travels seamlessly across the world from Paris to Mexico to Tokyo to Rio without hesitation or hassle. The world literally unfolds around her as she meanders through the
scenes. While her travels are global, in each location she has an intensely local experience. In Paris we see her wave and stop to chat with a passerby on the street. In Japan we see her leading a group of young people into a club where, situated in the middle of her host’s friends, she holds the microphone and sings. Although these scenes are seconds long, Airbnb emphasizes the immediacy, depth, and local specificity of her belonging in each moment and each place. Airbnb’s claim to provide the uniquely local across the world is one of the visions behind its slogan, “Belong Anywhere,” and serves as a common theme throughout its messaging.

In addition to the global/local, Airbnb emphasizes the intensely personal intimate belonging that the narrator experiences immediately. We do not see any work or time put into building the relationships shown between the protagonist and her Japanese host’s friends or the family in Rio. On the contrary, these relationships unfold as readily and seamlessly as the places themselves. Upon entering Paris, Tokyo, and Rio the protagonist is already connected to the families and friends she is surrounded by. Through these interactions, Airbnb reinforces its notion that a stranger is a friend you haven not yet met. In this video, Airbnb represents what mobility looks like when this young, white, and abled woman can travel to any place around the world and instantaneously, presumably with no effort at all, be intimately connected to the people around her.

Lyft’s Product: Your Friend with a Car

Lyft describes its product as “Your Friend with a Car, On Demand.” To characterize the Lyft ride, I will draw one of the videos Lyft posted titled, Ride and Seek: Nashville” (Lyft 2014). The premise of this video is that Megan Neuringer, a young, white, quirky, and actress, decides to explore Nashville through Lyft rides. Throughout
the video, Megan takes four separate Lyft rides with Kim, Puddin, Aubryn, and James. Each of these drivers fist bumps Megan to inaugurate the ride, and introduces themselves with large, excited smiles. All four drivers immediately engage Megan in conversation, making jokes, and sharing stories from the moment that Megan steps into the car. The drivers each share their passions with Megan, whether they be about the Titans, country music, or Othello, highlighting their own quirky, individual, personalities.

While this description alone would characterize the standard Lyft ride, this video is particularly special, since in each ride Megan proposes that she and the Lyft driver do something fun together. She and Kim decide to stop at a tag sale, where she and Kim learn how to haggle together. She asks her second driver, Puddin, to take her to a live music venue where the two of them country-dance. She and Aubryn go shopping together at a vintage store called, Ranch Dressing. And finally, she and James grab a bite at Pinewood Social before going bowling to end her day. In each of these instances, her Lyft driver casually and almost automatically obliges, implying that Megan’s propositions are par for the course within the Lyft community.

I have chosen this video to represent the ideal Lyft ride for several reasons. First of all, in this video we see the ideal Lyft community members represented: young, hip, urban creative individuals who are social and value the notion of expressing themselves. Although Lyft does not release demographic data for either its drivers or passengers, Lyft’s visual representations of itself consistently rely on the bodies of young, abled, fit, hip urbanites. Additionally, her drivers appeared almost naturally friendly, immediately engaging with her as a friend, as opposed to a passenger. The interactions we watch are not awkward, but feel natural, as if Megan’s drivers were already her friends. Perhaps
most importantly, Lyft’s ideal representation of Lyft rides does not prioritize logistics, efficiency, or even destinations. On the other hand, Megan uses Lyft almost explicitly as a means of meeting people and getting to know Nashville, not for getting from point a to point b. We can see this most clearly in the fact that Megan and her drivers’ interactions actually extend past the confines of the ride itself. As Lyft claims to do, in this video the interactions between Megan and her driver were so immediately rich and intimate that they both agree to continue spending time together dancing, bowling, shopping, or eating. Consequently, Lyft challenges the very notion that Lyft’s purpose is to provide transportation, instead suggesting that Lyft is a platform that connects the people who use it to each other and also to their local surroundings.

II. What Defines the Airbnb and Lyft Experiences: Locality and Particularity

With these product representations in mind, it is important to unpack the defining characteristics that Airbnb and Lyft both choose to highlight in these video representations of their products. Looking at these, we can identify several key features that Airbnb and Lyft both implicitly – and occasionally explicitly – claim differentiate them from the “industrial capitalist” service experiences (hotels and taxis). By using privately held under-utilized assets as their means of production, as well as by employing “real people” as opposed to employees, Airbnb and Lyft claim that they provide the grounds on which their users can create and experience community, friendship, and belonging.

The Local and Particular

For both Airbnb and Lyft, a key aspect of their products is that their products are local, unique, and particular. We can understand the significance of these characteristics
negatively, by juxtaposing them with the characteristics of the hotel and taxi company that Lyft and Airbnb differentiate themselves from. In the *PandoMonthly* Fireside Chat with Brian Chesky, Chesky explains, "What the Industrial Revolution created was a multi-hundred year, like, world where everything was the same. Mass production. Everything was the same. And so we live in a world where we have three television shows, where we consume the same physical products. Even the hotel room is a mass produced room... Even Conrad Hilton... [exported] the American travel experience around the world" (Lacey, *PandoMonthly* 2013). While we have already looked at the sharing economy ideology in Chapter 2, I have drawn our attention to Chesky's quote to point out his specific criticism of the sameness and mass production in industrial capitalism. John Zimmer echoes Chesky's description here by describing taxi services as often "anonymous" experiences in which you could be in any taxi and - in the United States at least - in almost any city and have a nearly identical experience (Bhuiyan, *BuzzFeed* 2015).

Both Zimmer and Chesky's descriptions of the alternative, "industrial capitalist" versions of their products, parallel Auge's notion of "non-places." According to Auge, non-places are the spaces in our era of supermodernity that facilitate the, "accelerated circulation of passengers and goods" (Auge 2009:102). Non-places are taxis, airports, freeways, hotels, supermarket. Non-places are spaces that all feel the same. They are lonely spaces we enter and leave anonymously, not as a collection of subjects but en masse. Serving purely utilitarian functions, these spaces and their "users," as Auge refers to them, engage in "contractual relations" totally disjoined from culture, society, or geography (ibid.:103). In fact, these spaces, by Auge's definition, are not geographically or culturally specific at all, instead looking and feeling practically the
same anywhere. Due to these factors, “the space of non-places creates neither singular identity nor relations, only solitude and similitude (ibid.).”

Through the theory of the non-place, we can identify the specific type of space Lyft and Airbnb claim to be reacting against. Where the hotel and taxi are anonymous, same, and mass-produced, Lyft cars and Airbnb accommodations are necessarily unique, particular, local, and necessarily not mass-produced (Chesky 2014). I say these products are necessarily not mass-produced because Airbnb and Lyft do not own the means of production in their businesses. With the exception of legality and basic safety standards for Lyft cars, neither Lyft nor Airbnb assert any direct control over what types of cars or accommodations are on their sites because they are owned by the drivers and hosts themselves. Because they are brokering the exchange of these under-utilized resources, both companies can assert a special, particular, uniqueness to the sites of their experiences that could not occur in the non-places described above. Airbnb listings are not mass-produced for you, the consumer, to consume and leave so the next consumer can take your place. They are people’s homes that they let you into. Lyft cars are not taxicabs produced and used solely to generate revenue. On the other hand, they are people’s private cars, which these people use first and foremost for their own lives, friends, and family. On these grounds, Airbnb and Lyft can claim that their experiences are necessarily, inherently local and particular.

Strategically Creating and Using the Local Through the Home

It is not merely that Airbnb and Lyft claim that the sites of their transactions are particular and local, and that these themes of locality are frequent in their messaging. To the contrary these companies leverage the local and the particular as key aspects of their business model. Although the site of the personal car is clearly an important component
of Lyft - one journalist remarks how, "The structure of Lyft, where drivers use their own cars, also lends itself to a more personal approach. Lyft drivers are letting customers inside their lives" - the significance and function of the home are particularly meaningful in the context of Airbnb (Ramos and Acevedo, Fusion 2015). As we will see, Airbnb leverages the home as a particular and local space not just as a branding strategy, but in fact as a crucial technology in the production of the Airbnb experience.

In the blog post that launched Airbnb's rebranding in 2014, Brian Chesky explains that he, Gebbia, and Blecharczyk all sat down together to figure out what it was that Airbnb was “about.” Although, Chesky explains, they started the company as, “just a way to book a room. You’ve told us it’s so much more than that” (Airbnb 2014). What they realized through this “soul-searching,” was that, “Airbnb is not in the business of houses. We’re in the business of homes.” Since this moment, the idea of “home” has defined Airbnb and pervades its images, videos, messaging, and - as I will argue - strategy more broadly. In order to understand what Airbnb - and, specifically the high-level decision makers such as Chesky and Douglas Atkin who define “home” for Airbnb - means by the term “home”, we must analyze how Airbnb uses this term, and investigate the particular values and assumptions they uphold while doing so. Chesky elaborates, “You see, a house is just a space, but a home is where you belong” (Airbnb 2014). Elsewhere throughout Airbnb’s content, Airbnb describes the home as “intimate,” “sacrosanct” and a place where you feel comfortable. In one blog post, Airbnb goes as far as to describe the home as the, “physical manifestation of comfort and belonging” (Airbnb 2014).

We can see these notions of the home in the video I described in the beginning of the chapter. While the protagonist has exciting, fun adventures with her hosts and their
friends in public spaces (the street and a club), when she is within the homes that she stays in, she is utterly comfortable and at peace. She locks the door of her apartment in Paris with hardly even looking at her lock, as if she has already done so hundreds of times. While in Mexico we see her walk out to the backyard – which, in this case, is the beach – and lie down in the sand. Her face evokes total serenity and peacefulness. When she is with the family in Rio, she is laughing with elderly family members, playing patty cake with toddlers, and cannon balling into the pool with who we can assume are the cousins as if she were already a member of the family. Though the places shift around her, what remains constant throughout the video is that she remains at home in each location.

Perhaps an even clearer example of this phenomenon is the home page of Airbnb.com. The first thing a visitor of Airbnb.com sees upon visiting the site is a video of a sleeping woman in a large bed with white, fluffy sheets. In the middle of this moving picture is the large caption in white, all caps letters, “WELCOME HOME.” If you hover over the video for long enough, the image switches to another photo, and begins to cycle through intimate moments between people. We see a woman and child walking out of the house with what appear to be picnic blankets and baskets. We see two young women sitting close together in a kitchenette, chatting over breakfast. There is an image of two people standing around a washing machine, with coffee, talking. While each of these images is intimate and particular, it is also ephemeral. As these moments blend into each other, the caption WELCOME HOME remains fixed, central, and bright. While the specific places of “home” can vary, Airbnb insists on an essential space of home that characterizes each of these locations.
For Airbnb, this essential idea of home transcends cultures, geographies, spaces, and times. Of course, the home is not an essential, singular thing. The meaning of “home” is culturally, geographically, nationally, socio-economically, and historically defined, and constantly evolves as these different factors intersect. Moreover, the particular idea of the home that these notably white, upper-class, men in power assert as essential is gendered, and perpetuates the home as a space of domestic non-work, thereby rendering invisible the so-called “feminine” labor often performed by women. However, Airbnb actively attempts to diminish or downplay any potential variants on “home” through the blurring of geographic and cultural barriers we have seen in the two Airbnb videos referenced in this chapter. Therefore, while we must keep the deletion of cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic interpretations of “home” in mind, the question we will pursue here is what this ethno-centric, socio-economically specific, and patriarchal concept of the home does for Airbnb.

The Home as Strategy

Douglas Atkin provides the clearest outline of Airbnb’s strategic use of home in a speech he gave at the CMX Summit in 2014. As Airbnb’s Global Head of Community, Atkin is an important character in the story of Airbnb. Throughout Atkin’s long career, he has studied and worked with huge internet brands such as MeetUp and Purpose, focusing on the brands that induce such a strong emotional response that it changes the ways in which people relate to each other and their communities. Through this pursuit, he became especially interested in cults, and the strategies that cult-leaders use to create the level of dedication and fervency. Inspired, he wrote the now bestselling book, The Culting of Brands: Turn Your Customers into True Believers. With this background, Atkin
came to Airbnb to lead their “grassroots organizing” and “create communities that scale and take action.”

In his speech, Atkin claims that the foundation of Airbnb’s community is in the home. For Atkin, the home is sacrosanct, a space we reserve only for those we care most about (Atkin 2014). Here Atkin’s depiction of the home parallels Goffman’s notion of the “back region” as a space reserved only for those we trust and know well enough. Before we can bring someone into this sacred space, we must get to know them. Atkin refers to this as the, “normal social arc” (ibid.) You meet another person in a public space – Atkin suggests the office or a party – and then you decide to meet again at a restaurant or a bar, which are still public spaces, but have a more private dimension to them. Then, after a few weeks of interactions in the public sphere, you feel comfortable taking this person, now a friend, into your home. Now, welcome in the space of your home, you have reached a new, deep level of intimacy with your friend (ibid.).

However, what is interesting about Atkin’s account is his description of the moment in which your new friend enters into the private space of your home. For Atkin, crossing the barrier between the outside public space and the inside private space is not merely symbolic of your newfound intimacy with another person. On the contrary, the act of “crossing the threshold” has a transformative power in itself (ibid.). For Atkin this threshold is so powerful that it can do the work of creating intimacy between you and another person completely on its own. What Atkin implies in this account is that the essential intimacy of the home is so powerful and constant that anyone can cross any home’s threshold owned by any person in any place of the world and they will be instantly transformed from strangers into intimate friends, necessarily.
When we return to the video referenced above, we can in fact see this threshold visualized. The guest inaugurates the switching of each scene, and therefore her movement from home to home, with thresholds. She goes from her home in New York to Paris by opening her door in New York, crossing through it, and entering into Paris on the other side. She then walks into a plant shop in Paris and pushes through the leafy plants that become the foliage outside the home she stays in in Mexico. In Tokyo, she travels down into a train station, and as soon as he crosses the gate, she is walking into the backyard of her house in Rio. Hence she not only instantly belongs in each of these places, but is in fact inaugurated into belonging in each of these homes by crossing these thresholds.

III. What Defines the Airbnb and Lyft Experiences: Personality and Authenticity

Not only are the sites of Airbnb and Lyft experiences necessarily local and particular, but Lyft and Airbnb both emphasize how the people producing these experiences are unique, authentic individuals. In a blog post titled, "More than a Ride," Lyft sets out to explain what exactly it is that makes Lyft so special (Lyft 2014). Lyft highlights six drivers as the people that make Lyft the crazy, fun, interesting experience that it is. In each of these drivers' features, Lyft digitally edits the photos of their cars so that the insides appear to be materially constituted by these drivers' passions. For example Olympic swimmer Tony's car is lined with swimming racing lines. The bumper of pastry chef Niki's car is made up of cakes and cupcakes. Through an admittedly strange tactic, Lyft symbolically claims that even at the most material level - the car - the Lyft ride is different than a traditional taxi or limousine service because the unique personality of the driver is inextricable from the product itself. Lyft cannot be just an
anonymous ride from some anonymous workers, since here Lyft embeds the personalities and subjectivities of these drivers into its representation of their cars. Inextricable from their service is the uniqueness of the people who drive for Lyft, a theme we will pursue in greater depth in the following chapter.

As with the home and particular spaces as the sites of Airbnb and Lyft experiences, we can understand the significance of these drivers’ and hosts’ individuality by placing it in contrast with taxis and hotel companies. In the article *How Airbnb and Lyft Finally Got Americans to Trust Each Other*, Jason Tanz explains that what is new about the sharing economy, and these companies in particular, is that, through them, we are no longer trusting businesses. On the contrary, we are trusting our peers and neighbors. He concedes, “Of course, we engage in commerce with total strangers every day. We hand our credit cards to shop clerks, get into the backseat of taxis driven by cabbies we’ve never met, ingest food prepared in closed kitchens, and ignore the fact that hotel workers with master keys could sneak into our rooms while we sleep” (2014). However, for him these are not entirely interactions, since, “each of those transactions is undergirded and supported by a complicated series of regulations, backstops, and assurances that go back to the Industrial Revolution” (*ibid.*).

While Tanz’s analysis may be over-generalized, his observations are nonetheless useful. To investigate it further, we can turn to Anthony Giddens who, himself, comes to similar conclusions in his own analysis of the nature of modernity fifteen years earlier (1991). For Giddens, there are at least two forms of trust: interpersonal trust and trusting an abstract system. Interpersonal trust is the trust that we engage in with a friend or someone on the street. In interpersonal trust both parties accept risk and must actively work to trust and be trusted. Trusting an agent working on behalf of an abstract system
is an entirely different experience. Here Giddens, in fact, agrees with Tanz. When we take a taxi, hand our credit cards to shop clerks, and eat food prepared by a kitchen, we are not really “trusting” people, according to Giddens’ definition of the word. First of all, the individuals we are “trusting” are working on behalf of a larger, abstract system that defines their code of conduct and how they can and cannot behave. Moreover, we do not “trust” these institutions as much as have faith that they will do what they say they will. Trust requires risk and a dynamic relationship, neither of which are necessary when going to a restaurant or staying in a hotel.

For Giddens, trust in an abstract system is an essential component of modernity, however, it does come at a cost. Although “trust in abstract systems provides for the security of day-to-day reliability… its very nature cannot supply either the mutuality or intimacy which personal trust relations can.” For Giddens, these modern institutions “have taken over large areas of social life and drained them of the meaningful content they once had” (1991:82). While these institutions are useful and important to the modern mode of life, Giddens suggests that they come at the expense of intimacy and meaningful social connections, which – incidentally – is similar to the very conclusion Tanz makes in his aforementioned article.

What Airbnb and Lyft attempt to create, therefore, is an exchange network not of agents operating on behalf of abstract systems, but individuals engaging in peer-to-peer exchanges of interpersonal trust. In fact, as we will see in greater depth in the next chapter, Airbnb and Lyft frequently insist that their producers are not economically motivated – or even laborers – at all, but rather just people. When these individuals interact as individuals as opposed to agents, Airbnb and Lyft imply that the nature of their interaction will no longer be purely utilitarian or economic, but rather will become
personal. We can see this move in both companies' use of the words, "authentic" and "real." When Blecharczyk describes a recent Airbnb stay in an interview, he tells the story of how he had the opportunity to sit in on a "real family moment" in which the Norwegian family he was staying with watched a game of soccer together. Reflecting on the experience, he explains, "that moment was so authentic" (Airbnb 2014).

Blecharczyk's choice to describe this experience as "authentic" reflects a broader trend within both Airbnb and Lyft. One of Airbnb's ads reads, "UNIQUE, AMAZING PLACES TO STAY - HOSTED BY REAL PEOPLE," Lyft frequently refers to its drivers as "real people," and these are only two of the many examples.

The choice to use the adjectives, "authentic" and "real" to describe their workers is an interesting one, and one worth pursuing, since Airbnb and Lyft would not assert their workers' "realness" and authenticity if these descriptors were not contested, or contestable. In her book, Authenticity™, Sarah Banet-Weiser looks at brand culture in the twenty-first century and asks why the problem of authenticity both appears so
frequently in reference to commodities, but also goes largely unquestioned. For Banet-Weiser, authenticity has become an increasingly important concept for us, given the “postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial” to which I would add the pervasiveness of the surface and the rise of simulacrum, as new features that draw into question objects’ originality and sincerity (Banet-Weiser 2012:15). In light of these forces, Banet-Weiser hypothesizes that we have come more or less to define authenticity negatively as that which is not commercial, manufactured, or staged (ibid.:10). However, as she points out, this insistent binary is a fallacy that ignores the multiple layers of “authenticity” in every relation between subjects, objects, and places that deconstruct the very potential for an authentic-inauthentic binary.

The authentic / inauthentic binary that Lyft and Airbnb reproduce is not just erroneous, but revealingly so. The consistency with which they insist upon their workers’ authenticity suggests they either ascribe to or feel the pressure to reach against the perceived contradiction between the economic / the produced and the “authentic.” Their laborers are not just anonymous laborers, but individual subjects with particular, full personalities. These drivers and hosts are not just workers, but “real people” with whom you can engage authentically. And because you can engage with them authentically, you can engage with them meaningfully and intimately.

The Fist Bump as the Physical Verification of Intimacy and Realness

We can see Lyft apply these ideas of intimacy, particularity, and realness in a tactic that the company required until 2015, and now strongly recommends. This tactic is the much loved, much hated, but nevertheless well renowned Lyft fist bump. Lyft

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8 For more on deconstructing the layers behind the authentic / inauthentic binary see Goffman 1959 and Jameson 1991 and work on the anthropology of tourism, specifically Dean MacCannell
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strongly encourages each driver to inaugurate every Lyft ride by fist bumping the passenger. Although this is not the place for an in-depth cultural history - or histories, given the fist bump’s strongly contested origins - of the fist bump, it is worth mentioning its cultural significance. The gesture only rose to mainstream popularity in 2008 after President Obama’s famous fist bump to his wife (St. Fleur 2014). Though it is more popular than it once was, the fist bump still remains the most popular among young men. While sources vary, some claim that the fist bump is most common in lower-income, urban communities. The fist bump is a unique gesture, since it implies a friendly degree of intimacy and proximity. More intimate and casual than a handshake, but less intimate than a hug, the fist bump is the kind of gesture you can perform with an acquaintance or friend. Moreover, according to Anthropologist David Givens, the fist bump is an equal gesture. “You could do it with President Obama, and you’d both be equals at that time” (St. Fleur 2014). Givens explains that the logistics of the fist bump eliminate any form of competition. You are less likely to miss, as in a high-five, and you can’t grip harder, as in a handshake. While he does not account for the possibility of one person hitting the other’s knuckles harder, we can appreciate his point that the fist bump is comparably less competitive.

Lyft has not elaborated much on why they chose the fist bump as the gesture that kicks off every Lyft ride. However, in the training video they send to Lyft mentors, they do describe the fist bump as, “a core part of the Lyft experience. It’s light, simple, and human” (Lyft 2015). That Lyft chooses to describe this gesture as “human” deserves further consideration. The Lyft driver is not the anonymous taxi driver whose identity is inextricably tied up in the economic function he performs for you, represented only by the licenses and governmental verifications of realness taped to the back of their seat.
This driver is the operator behind the “non-place,” the agent working on behalf of an abstract system; a general, distant figure. By mandating a “human” gesture between two people to begin each economic experience, Lyft precludes this anonymity. Moreover, through the fist bump, the Lyft driver can assure the passenger that this is, in fact a real, authentic experience.

In a sense, the fist bump provides a parallel function to that of the home in Airbnb. Fist bumps are intimate gestures that we reserve for those we know and care about. So much so, in fact, that Lyft has received vociferous pushback from reporters who have lambasted the fist bump as too awkward or strange. In fact, the criticisms were so widespread that Lyft actually had to change the fist bump from being obligatory to strongly encouraged. While the purpose of this project is to examine how these products are represented and structured, as opposed to experienced, it is worth considering whether the visceral responses critics had to Lyft’s, “socially awkward rituals” were grounded in the perception that the fist bump as a gesture would, in fact, change the nature of interactions between two people in a way that prevented the same degree of anonymity and strangeness previously expected in a paid ride service (Bilton, The New York Times 2014).

IV. What Defines the Airbnb and Lyft Experiences: Invisibility of the Transaction

One of the themes we have seen throughout the preceding analyses of locality, particularity, and intimacy has been Airbnb and Lyft’s ambivalence towards the economic components of its product. Both companies cling to the sites of the home and the personal car as sites traditionally outside the market, and refer emphatically to their workers’ individual personalities and authenticity, two characteristics a regular,
industrial capitalist employee could not have access to. They use a third strategy to
mitigate the tensions between their social vision and the fundamentally economic nature
of their product: the cashless transaction. By “cashless transaction” I am referring to the
payment method that Airbnb and Lyft both use to charge the consumer and pay the
producer. As we will see, Lyft and Airbnb have both set up these cashless transactional
model in a way that both renders invisible any financial evidence, and actually displaces
any type of economic transaction from the product experience itself.

When a guest books a room on Airbnb, they pay the reservation fee to Airbnb
before their stay. After the stay has been successfully completed, Airbnb transfers these
funds to the host. In Lyft the payment is even more seamless since it is automatically
calculated based on time and distance, and then the passengers is automatically charged
for the ride through the credit or debit card they have on file. Only after the passenger
has left the car does a screen appear asking if they would like to include an additional
tip for the driver. In both of these payment structures, the transactions occur outside the
moment of the interactions. In a talk on the history of Airbnb, Joe Gebbia sheds light on
why Airbnb chose to switch to their current payment structure (Gebbia 2012). He
explains that in the early days, guests paid for their reservations by writing checks for
hosts during their stay. However, when the founders went out to observe their hosts in
2011, they realized, “it’s extremely awkward to exchange money in person. We were
having a great experience with our host and then suddenly the conversation turned to,
‘where’s my money?’ (Gebbia 2012).” At this point in his speech, the entire crowd
breaks out into laughter. Chuckling himself, Gebbia continues, “And we were like, uh,
gosh, that feels so wrong” (ibid.) Consequently, Airbnb developed its cashless payment
system. As Airbnb says on its Trust and Safety page, “We handle the money so you don’t have to” (Airbnb 2015).

These cashless transactions contribute to an illusion that the exchange of service is not transactional at all, but is the interpersonal interaction that both companies depict in their images and branding. As Jason Tanz writes,

In the sharing economy, the commerce feels almost secondary, an afterthought to the human connection that undergirds the entire experience. (This is due in part to the fact that the payment itself so often happens electronically and invisibly.) (Wired 2014)

Here Tanz directly connects the “human connection” that the sharing economy provides with the invisible, electronic nature of the commercial component of the sharing economy. To understand this reaction, as well as the payment structure more broadly, we can turn to Bourdieu’s work on gift exchanges within the Kabyle (1998). Bourdieu recognizes that participants in the gift exchange must both convince those around them as well as themselves that they are, “inclined through the whole work of socialization to enter, without intention or calculation of profit, generous exchange.”

Due to this imperative, Bourdieu observes a, “taboo of making things explicit (whose form par excellence is price)” (96:1998). Through these observations, Bourdieu concludes that the gift economy is built on multiple levels of deceit. Every participant in the gift exchange must deceive themselves and those they exchange with that the exchange of gifts is voluntary, generous, and social, even though he recognizes the underlying logic of power that organizes the entire economy. Although, of course, Airbnb and Lyft are far from gift economies, we can see similarities in their payment structure. Airbnb and Lyft both delay the actual exchange of capital until after the exchange of service, creating an impression that the service is performed generously. Additionally both the delay and the invisible, and for Lyft automatic, nature of the exchange help sustain, “the taboo of
making things explicit.” As a result of these payment structures, you can take a Lyft ride or stay in an Airbnb host without ever being forced to remember that the entire interaction is grounded in the exchange of capital.

V. The Airbnb and Lyft Experiences as Commodities

Throughout this chapter I have followed the logic and messaging of both Airbnb and Lyft, and the ways they use particular strategies to not only represent their products but actually create them. However, through doing so I have, like Airbnb and Lyft, treated their products as if they were experiences. Of course, the problem with this approach is that Lyft and Airbnb’s experiences are, fundamentally, commodities. Therefore in this section we will shift our vantage point from analyzing these products as communities, to analyzing them through the lens of their production, consumption, and exchange value. All the while, following the lead of Banet-Weiser, we will remain cautious as to making claims about whether or not these experiences as commodities detract from the intimacy they propose to – and very well may – create among their users.

When we approach the Lyft and Airbnb experiences as commodities, however, we run into a problem. What, precisely, constitutes the Airbnb and Lyft experiences? Both companies sell services, for Lyft this is transportation and for Airbnb it is hospitality. However, both Airbnb and Lyft insist that their experiences are so much greater than just a service. The question, then, is whether the emotional and affective aspects of the Lyft and Airbnb experiences constitute these experiences as commodities? Or are they supplementary to the Lyft and Airbnb products at best, and mere branding strategies at worst? I will propose from the start that these emotional and affective
aspects are not just branding, though they do contribute to branding. If the emotional components of Lyft and Airbnb were just branding strategies, they could be extricable from the product itself. For example, even though Apple and Nike’s users are passionate and “cult-like,” to borrow from Atkin, and even though both brands’ add considerable value to their respective companies, these brands are extricable form their products. The constitution of Apple computers and Nike shoes would not change if their brand did.

However, Airbnb and Lyft present a more challenging situation. Airbnb insists that it is not in the business of houses, but in the business of “homes,” and we have, in fact, seen how the “home” does work for Airbnb that a house could not. Likewise, Lyft claims that it is not about logistics but about creating meaningful, friendly connections, and the fist bump helps them do so. Consequently, I propose the following preliminary analysis: Airbnb and Lyft are selling logistical commodities that either provide a place to stay or a ride from one point to another, but they are also endeavoring to sell the experiences of friendship and belonging as produced immaterially and emotionally by their workers. While we will pursue this hypothesis, and its implications, much further in the following chapter, we can now examine what happens when Lyft and Airbnb attempt to produce and sell friendship, community, and belonging as commodities.

The Consumption of Belonging and Friendship

When Airbnb actually defines “belonging” in one of its blog posts, it defines belonging as, “the desire to feel welcome, respected, and appreciated for who you are, no matter where you might be” (Airbnb 2014). This definition of belonging differs from more common understandings of belonging. Belonging is a specific relationship or connection you have to a group of people or place who share something with you,
whether that is geographic location, identity, or a history of emotional work dedicated to creating that belonging. Airbnb’s definition, however, is individualistic. In fact it is so individualistic that, arguably, its definition of belonging does not describe belonging at all. On the contrary, it describes the sensation that one feels when one experiences belonging. Airbnb defines belonging not as a relationship or connection, but as a sensation. This distinction is crucial. When you do engage in the emotional, social, and personal work of belonging to a place or a group, you can experience welcomeness, respect, and appreciation. What Airbnb proposes is to eliminate the emotional work, and instead sell the welcomenes, respect, and appreciation. Subordinated to the forces of the market, Airbnb’s belonging is flattened and diluted of significant depth, intimacy, and meaning.

Although neither Lyft nor the executives with decision-making power explicitly define “friendship,” we can read their interpretation through the ways they display their community through their blog, Twitter feed, and videos. In all three mediums, Lyft portrays their community through collages of brief, fleeting, heterogeneous moments. We read these tweets and brief snippets monadically, without any context. These friendships are not the intimate emotional projects we work on over time. On the contrary they are simulacra, signifiers of friendship unhinged from any signifiers.

The Optimization of Belonging

Now understanding belonging as a commodity to be a surface-level sensation – as opposed to an interpersonal connection worked toward over time - we should revisit Airbnb’s production of this connection, best outlined by Douglas Atkin in his aforementioned speech. Atkin’s focus is on the “threshold” of the house and its capacity
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to transform even a stranger into someone intimately connected to you. But a key
dimension of this threshold, for Atkin, is efficiency. It is not only that the threshold is the
scalable, standardized, essential component of the Airbnb listing that transforms
strangers into community member, but it is that this threshold optimizes that
transformation. Atkin explains, “what we [Airbnb] do when someone crosses the
threshold, you know a tourist comes into someone’s home, the normal social arc of a
stranger becoming a friend is compressed from a matter of seconds from what can take
weeks” (Atkin 2014). Atkin, in fact goes as far as to say that Airbnb’s project is,
“hothousing community down to a few seconds” (ibid.)

What Atkin implies here is that Airbnb’s mission is not to build community as
much as it is to scale, monetize, and optimize it. In fact, when we contextualize these
statements within Atkin’s own career, we see that he is not just interested in the abstract
notions of community and intimacy, but specifically the influence that a cult-like
consumer base can have on a company’s surplus value. With surplus value as the
ultimate end-goal for both Atkin and Airbnb more broadly, Atkin’s goal to “hothouse
community” seems completely appropriate. With this interpretation we can read the
home as a machine that Airbnb puts to work to produce intimacy quicker and more
flexibly than ever before.

VI. Conclusion

In the Airbnb blog post, “Belong Anywhere” Chesky writes, “Like us, you may
have started out thinking you were just renting out a room to help pay the bills. Or
maybe you were just booking a bed for a night on an unexpected layover. However we
first entered this community, we all know that getting in isn’t a transaction. It’s a
connection that can last a lifetime. That’s because the rewards you get from Airbnb aren’t just financial—they’re personal—for hosts and guests alike” (Airbnb 2014).

Throughout this chapter, we have explored how Airbnb and Lyft present their products as experiences, and how these representations can be destabilized and problematized when we shift our vantage point and view them as service commodities. “Belong Anywhere” and “Your Friend with a Car” are not merely branding mechanisms designed to increase consumption work and therefore the surplus value that Airbnb and Lyft as brands can extract from it. On the contrary, Airbnb and Lyft actively attempt to make belonging and friendship inextricable features of the commodities they sell. And it is in fact this very strategy that raises the questions we will examine in more depth in the next chapter. When Airbnb and Lyft insist upon using emotional labor not just to enhance a consumer’s connection to the product, but as the fabric that constitutes the product itself, what happens to the nature of labor and the relationships between the producers of these experiences and the companies themselves?
Chapter 5: Labor

In the past two chapters we have analyzed the ways in which Airbnb and Lyft have applied branding strategies to both their identities and products, claiming to be facilitators of affective, emotional communities that are connected by their organic shared passions. We have also seen Airbnb and Lyft extend these strategies to the nature of their products themselves, and some of the implications that arise as a result. In this final chapter, we will turn our attention to how Airbnb and Lyft use these same branding strategies and rhetoric with relation to their workforce. We will see how these branding strategies and contradictory value systems shape Airbnb and Lyft’s labor models. To understand how Airbnb and Lyft organize their laborers, I have broken this chapter into two sections. The first half is devoted to the economic structure of Airbnb and Lyft, their modes of accumulation, and how they are able to optimize their uniquely flexible workforce. Although the sharing economy lauds the independent contractor as a liberated worker who is free to work however and whenever they please, we will see how Airbnb and Lyft use technology to invisibly discipline and optimize their workers. In the second section, we will then turn to the affective and emotional components of work in the sharing economy, and how Lyft both secures emotional work from its laborers, and uses these emotional components to propose a new approach to labor.

I. Work in the Sharing Economy

The Ideology of Work

Before we delve into the specifics labor practices of Lyft and Airbnb, we will begin with the broader nature of labor in the sharing economy. According to advocates of the sharing economy, we as a society are no longer satisfied with being the
“Organization Man,” and having boring desk jobs imposed on us by industrial capitalism. Instead, we desire the opportunities to pursue our passions and have fun on our own time (Botsman 2010). Specifically, and both Zimmer and Chesky reiterate this, we want the freedom to work how and when we please, doing what we please.

According to Shelby Clark, founder of RelayRides and current CEO of Peers, the sharing economy labor organization, the future of labor is one in which we can all perform the tasks we are passionate about performing, when and how we want to perform them (Clark 2014). With an “income portfolio” you are no longer stuck in a nine to five job, or even one career (ibid.). On the contrary, you can explore your interests and be your own boss. Airbnb refers to this emerging model as, “micro-entrepreneurship.” As Brian Chesky says, the sharing economy is creating a world where, “in sixty seconds, anyone can be a micro-entrepreneur” (Colbert 2014).

Although the sharing economy approaches this vision of a flexible labor market through the lens of neoliberalism - everyone as their own boss, unleashing their human potential - there is a notable parallel here to Karl Marx’s own vision of the nature of labor under communism:

“For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in a communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wises, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic. This fixation of social control, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power about us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now (Marx 1846).
The parallels between the two models are striking. Both Marx and the sharing economy identify the “fixation of social control” and the forces of powers beyond individuals’ control as exploitative features of the labor market under industrial capitalism. Moreover, both Marx and the sharing economy envision a future in which we can pursue our passions at will. However, where Marx and the sharing economy diverge – and we will see later in the chapter that this a crucial divergence – is that Marx laments the consolidation of capital and private property by those in power. Although the advocates of the sharing economy are not outspoken in regards to the consolidation of capital, we can assume that, since the key advocates of the sharing economy are entrepreneurs themselves who have been consolidating capital throughout their particularly lucrative careers, they would not agree with Marx’s fundamental critique.

The Independent Contractor Model

The labor model that best reflects Shelby Clark’s, and the sharing economy’s vision is the independent contractor model. Not only do Airbnb and Lyft employ their hosts and drivers respectively as independent contractors, but every sharing economy company I have encountered does so as well. The independent contractor differs from the employee in several key ways. First, the independent contractor is paid per accomplished task, as opposed to a fixed salary. For Lyft, this means that drivers are paid for every ride they successfully complete, not for every hour they are logged into “driver mode.” Second, independent contractors have relative liberty over when and how they accomplish their tasks, and are relatively less accountable to a central authority figure. Third, independent contractors are responsible for supplying their own resources to accomplish their tasks, as opposed to an employee, who is supplied these
resources by the company. Fourth and finally, independent contractors do not receive employment benefits of any kind.

The independent contractor is a fluid and flexible mode of work, and is, in fact, mentioned by David Harvey as one of the modes of labor post-Fordist companies employ as part of their new flexible regimes of accumulation (1991). Not working entirely for themselves, or entirely for another company, the independent contractor is not only a flexible category, but an ambivalent one. This ambivalent status creates both obstacles and opportunities for Lyft and Airbnb. On the one hand, Lyft and Airbnb cannot regulate their workers with direct, active force. At the same time, this model also opens up the space for Airbnb and Lyft to represent and interact with their workers as both workers and non-workers, or, to be specific, community members.

II. Lyft and Airbnb as Virtual Companies

The Means of Production Under The Regime of Flexible Accumulation

The question for Airbnb and Lyft is how, given the independent contractor model that they use, do they optimize their extraction of surplus value from their laborers? To answer this question, we must understand their modes of accumulating capital, the legal restrictions they face with regards to the independent contractor model established above, and the disciplinary mechanisms they have devised to optimize their labor force will we be able to recognize how Airbnb and Lyft applies its ideal representations of Lyft drivers strategically.

As brokers of under-utilized resources, Airbnb and Lyft do not own the under-utilized resources being exchanged on their platforms. These physical assets – people’s spaces and cars – belong to the laborers themselves. The question therefore arises, if
Airbnb and Lyft workers own the means of production, how do these labor models fit into a Marxian analysis? On the one hand, Lyft and Airbnb's models appear similar to the proto-industrial capitalist models that Marx analyzes in what would have been the sixth chapter in *Capital Volume One*. Therefore, in a sense, Lyft and Airbnb do recreate proto-industrial capital means of production. However, on the other hand, this analysis ignores an important, arguably the most important, means of production for both Airbnb and Lyft: technology. Lyft drivers and Airbnb hosts do own some of the means of production, their cars and living spaces respectively. However, they do not own the technological platform through which these exchanges take place. And this platform is both the virtual private property of the capitalist as well as the central engine behind these companies' modes of production.

We can make sense of this model with some assistance from David Harvey, and his theory of flexible accumulation (1991). As I mentioned in the first chapter, flexible accumulation is characterized by the more flexible strategies the capitalist can now use in order to accumulate wealth. These strategies involve the accumulation of labor, as we have mentioned, but also flexibilizing production systems. In the age of the internet, we have seen how internet companies such as Google and Facebook have pioneered new modes of flexible accumulation (Scholz 2012). Both companies rely on the extraction of surplus values from "prosumption,” of the actions performed when users consume their products that Google and Facebook both monetize.

Airbnb and Lyft are applying these frameworks to tangible, material goods. In fact, in an interview with *PandoMonthly*, Chesky remarks, “You know, I think Airbnb is the physical manifestation of Facebook, or one of these other internet sites” (Lacey, *PandoMonthly* 2013). While Chesky was only referring to the vigor of audience
participation on both Facebook and Airbnb, we can in fact see a number of striking parallels between both companies' models. Like these internet companies, what Airbnb and Lyft own are the internet technologies and the full-time labor necessary to enable them to function as web applications. For the labor and resources that actually power their product, they rely on the participation of their users. However, unlike Facebook, the "participation" that Airbnb and Lyft seek to inspire is the exchange of tangible goods, as opposed to intangible click actions. By applying this virtual model to an offline market, Airbnb and Lyft have achieved an unprecedented degree of flexibility with respect to their means of production, scalability, and risk.

Since Airbnb and Lyft rely on the "participation" of their community - which, in the offline context, refers to the labor and privately owned resources of these laborers - neither company needs to invest capital into purchasing equipment, building infrastructure, or maintaining their means of production. Moreover, this remains true with each new city they launch in, which vastly reduces the marginal cost of scaling. Additionally, they have succeeded in completely eliminating turnover time, since both companies only pay for labor and resources when they are being used productively. Finally, both companies have the flexibility to pivot at any point without accepting significant costs. Should Lyft decide tomorrow that it will only accept vehicles from 2008 or earlier, as opposed to 2005, it is at no cost to Lyft, but rather to the Lyft drivers that will be automatically deactivated.

Technology as a Disciplinary Mechanism

The logistical model I just outlined is an important foundation, but it is not enough on its own to accumulate capital at Airbnb and Lyft's current rates. In order to
reach valuations in the billions, Airbnb and Lyft must be optimizing their extraction of surplus value. For both companies, their primary sources of revenue are the commission fees they take from the successfully completed transactions on their platform. Therefore, the more successfully completed transactions that occur, the more surplus value for Airbnb and Lyft. However, Airbnb and Lyft cannot mandate the optimized extraction of this surplus value. Since their producers are independent contractors, Airbnb and Lyft cannot assert the same level active, direct control over their workers, that they could over regular employees. They cannot force their laborers to work during optimal times in the optimal places in the optimal ways. However, Lyft and Airbnb have devised a number of disciplinary mechanisms that organize and optimize their labor force without obviously compromising the independent contractor models they use, or their identities as communities.

The key disciplinary mechanism that Airbnb and Lyft use is technology. Since both companies operate through mobile and web applications, their laborers interface almost exclusively with screens, and the technology that powers them. Drivers interface with the Lyft app on their smartphones, which – when driving – is mounted to their dashboards, and Airbnb hosts interface with either the mobile or web version of Airbnb.com. Therefore, with very few exceptions, Lyft drivers and Airbnb hosts only interact with their employers vis-à-vis the screens of their smartphones, tablets, or computers. As we will see, interacting with screens and technologies is different from face-to-face interactions, and a number of scholars agree that we process information on a screen, and internet technologies more broadly, differently than we do other information.9 On-screen data and the algorithms that generate feel objective, and neutral

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(Lash 2007). By mediating their engagements with laborers through the interface of the screen, Airbnb and Lyft can optimize their laborers without any explicit, authoritative commands or rules.

**Technology as a Disciplinary Mechanism: Lyft and the On-Screen Market**

The first example we will look at is Lyft and the Lyft driver app. As we know, Lyft does not assign drivers to certain schedules or zones. However, this does not mean Lyft has no means of nudging its drivers to drive at certain times in certain locations. On the “driver mode” screen on their Lyft app is a real-time, responsive map of their city. Not only does this map show the geography of the city, but also a “heat map,” that indicates the areas with highest demands and lowest supply. The most heavily shaded areas of the map are the areas most likely to be in “Prime Time.” When demand for rides in a certain area “greatly outnumbers” the drivers nearby, Lyft automatically implements Prime Time pricing, which adds an incremental percent increase to each ride.
As a result of this on-screen market, and the incentive structures that the map visualizes, Lyft drivers optimize their own labor. When discussing this with Lyft driver, Carlos, he explained the following:

If you’re working like 6 hours a day, and then certain times are the best times to make money, it’s like them [Lyft] dictating...well it’s not them dictating, it’s like the community, the people dictating your hours...is it really that flexible? Maybe not. It just gives them [drivers] the sense of being flexible, because no one’s really telling them what to do (Sparks 2015).

What is most interesting about Carlos’s reflection is that he initially points to Lyft as the actor, but then hesitates, and instead points to “the community” and “the people.” Although Carlos’s inclination was to identify Lyft as the authority determining when he should work, because of the objective fact that “there are specific times” that are the best time to drive, it cannot really be Lyft doing that “dictating.” Because these drivers interface with a screen, and can actually watch “the market” happen on the screen in front of them, Lyft’s own roles as the producer of these technologies, the decision maker behind Prime Time, and the designer of the heat maps are all obscured.

Technology as a Disciplinary Mechanism: Airbnb and the Algorithm

Likewise, although Airbnb does not have any explicit control over how hosts price their listing, it nonetheless incentivizes the hosts on its site to do so optimally. Since Airbnb receives a percent commission, as opposed to a flat rate, Airbnb has a vested interest in encouraging hosts to ask for the highest feasible price point. Airbnb therefore nudges hosts to do so by including price as a factor in its search results ranking. Airbnb curates the order of listings for each location through a “complex algorithm” What is important to note here is that as the algorithm is a unique type of technology. According to Scott Lash, algorithms are particularly powerful because we
do not actively encounter them (2007). They are hidden, generative rules that create the content and interfaces we perceive as fixed surfaces (ibid.). The algorithm, therefore, takes on a neutral and objective status in our perception. Not only is the algorithm often perceived as "agent-less," but since engineers often code algorithms to be responsive and automatically adjust for new factors, algorithms do make decisions without the involvement of subjective agents.

Airbnb uses the algorithm to order its search results. Where a host’s listing appears within the Airbnb search results has a direct impact on volume of booking requests. The farther down your listing is on the search ranking, the more like that a guest will find and book someone else’s listing before even seeing yours. Therefore, Airbnb hosts have an interest in optimizing their own position within the search results ranking for their local city. Although Airbnb will not release the specific factors that affect a listing’s ranking, in a page on its website titled, “How Are Search Results Determined?” (note the use of passive voice in this title) Airbnb includes several factors that its algorithm, not Airbnb, considers in determining the search results ranking (Airbnb 2015). Some of the factors that Airbnb mentions include competitive pricing, attractive description, and high quality photo taken from a diagonal, downward angle.

While Airbnb as an authority never forces hosts to price their listings competitively, or feature specific types of photos of their spaces, due to both the importance and perceived objectivity of the algorithm, Airbnb hosts, like the Lyft drivers mentioned earlier, optimize their own labor. In fact, for every city I have searched on Airbnb, the vast majority of listings are depicted with surprising consistency: the photos are all taken from downward, diagonal angles of well-lit rooms. This standardization reflects
III. The Ideal Identities of Lyft Drivers

Up to this point, we have examined the economic structure of Airbnb and Lyft as companies, and the ways in which they optimize their laborers so as to maximize the extraction of surplus value. However, this is only half the story. While these mechanisms are necessary for optimizing labor, they do not account for the affective, emotional dimensions of the Lyft and Airbnb commodities examined in Chapter 4. Therefore, we must now ask how Airbnb and Lyft as virtual, flexible companies not only optimize their labor, but also attempt to ensure that these transactions retain the interpersonal, communal characteristics that Lyft and Airbnb emphasize so consistently. For the remainder of the chapter, we will see how Lyft, and to a lesser extent Airbnb leverage their networks of users as well as the ideal standards they set for their laborers through visual representation in order to not just optimize their labor force, but, “to ensure only the best experiences” (Lyft 2015).

For the second half of this chapter, I have chosen to focus almost exclusively on Lyft, including a few examples from Airbnb when relevant. I have done so primarily because Lyft’s labor model raises the more pressing questions in terms of digital labor and the internet. First, in Airbnb’s model, hosts can list spaces that they themselves do not live in, or only list their homes when they are not there. Therefore, these hosts are not required to do any of the emotional work of engaging with guests that stay in their homes. Additionally, many hosts include a cleaning fee with the cost of rental, which they use to hire a cleaning person. Therefore, not only do many hosts avoid performing
emotional labor, but also the manual labor of cleaning and preparing the listing.

However, in addition to these factors, Lyft’s model represents the form of sharing economy labor that has become increasingly popular through growing sharing economy services such as Postmates, Shyp, Alfred, and TaskRabbit. All of these companies are platform services that rely on independent contractors to perform tasks like delivery, pick-ups, and cleaning. Therefore specifically Lyft’s model and its interactions with its workers can help us begin to ask broader questions about the relationship between “community-building,” precarious labor, and virtual companies today.

The Casual Driver

For Lyft the key characteristic of the Lyft drivers is that the Lyft driver is not a driver at all. The Lyft driver is a “regular” “ordinary” person who happens to have some spare time and a car. The casual driver drives fewer than 30 hours per week, and drives when they choose for as long as they choose. For these drivers, Lyft is not their primary source of income, but a supplement. We can see Lyft’s representation of the “casual driver” in its blog post, “More than a Ride.” In this post, Lyft seeks to answer the question, who are Lyft drivers?”

“Who are Lyft drivers? Well, we could go on for hours. The short version is that they’re Olympians, kindergarten teachers, indie-rock keyboardists, tornado chasers, and everything in between — each with their own story, just like our passengers.”

What is immediately striking about this description of Lyft drivers is that Lyft describes its drivers by referring to their possessions and hobbies outside of Lyft. Rather than provide backgrounds, qualifications, or even characteristics that make for an effective driver, Lyft exclusively refers to the driver’s profession and the driver’s hobbies.

http://blog.lyft.com/posts/2014/8/7/more-than-a-ride
Lyft does not just represent casual drivers, but specific types of casual drivers. The Lyft drivers represented are not just drivers, but are interesting, quirky, and friendly people. As we saw in the “What’s Your Favorite #LyftLove Story?” video, Lyft drivers are the types of people who will have a ukulele in the backseat ready for you to play, or who can chat about the particle physics experiment they are currently working on. Additionally, Lyft consistently represents these drivers as not just social and friendly, but inherently so. Lyft drivers are, “the friendliest people you’ll meet all day” (Lyft 2015). Zimmer builds on this in an interview from only three months after Lyft launched explaining, “we try to find aspirational, friendly people, and when you take a ride with a person, you think ‘hey, that could be me’” (Olanoff, TechCrunch 2012). Three years later in an interview with Kara Wampler, she says, Lyft is aiming to target “social optimists” (Bhuiyan, BuzzFeed 2015). Therefore the casual drivers are not merely interesting people with time on their hand, but more specifically a community of “inherently social,” friendly individuals (Carleson, Business Insider 2013).

IV. The Ideal Laborers’ Motivations for Working

If Lyft drivers are, in fact, casual laborers we can next investigate why they have chosen to drive for Lyft. We see two motivations that recur consistently in both Lyft and Airbnb’s messaging: the first is the opportunity to express yourself and be truly, genuinely passionate and individualistic. The second is the opportunity to meet new people and build meaningful connections and relationships within a community. It is worth noting that the two motives Airbnb and Lyft focus on – expressing your unique individuality and building community – reflect the dialectical tension within the Californian Ideology that we have seen repeatedly throughout both companies’ models.
To Express Themselves and Pursue their Passions

As we established earlier in this chapter, the sharing economy at large emphasizes the freedom that working as an independent contractor for sharing economy services can provide. Lyft and Airbnb strongly reinforce this narrative, especially since their laborers have control over their cars and homes as well. In Lyft’s training video for driver applicants, Lyft says, “You choose when and how much you drive. You choose your breaks and vacations. You’re your own boss” (Lyft 2015). Likewise, Airbnb emphasizes the freedom that Airbnb hosts have to host when they want, for as many people as they want, and for the price they deem appropriate. Interestingly, for both companies this freedom is not just the freedom to choose your own schedule, but actually the freedom for drivers to be themselves and pursue their passions in a way they had not been able to before. With no boss telling them how to work, and by driving their own car, Lyft drivers have the opportunity to be themselves.

Zimmer and Green both validate this claim by pointing to the number of Lyft drivers that have taken advantage of this opportunity, specifically the group of drivers in Lyft Creatives. Lyft launched Lyft creative in order to showcase, “the drivers who are really passionate about things outside of Lyft that they can bring and recreate in their cars” (Lyft 2014). Some of the Lyft Creatives include Deco Carter, the driver behind Hip Hop Lyft, Amanda Schrader the driver behind Harry Potter Lyft, and Chris Biggs, the driver behind Cookie Wars Lyft.

The Lyft Creatives are particularly emblematic of the ideal Lyft driver. The Lyft drivers are passionate about Lyft, and in their featured videos and blog posts on Lyft, they often talk about their desire to help build a strong, vibrant Lyft community. While
they are passionate about Lyft, they do not depend on Lyft for their primary source of revenue. On the other hand, they are casual drivers, and therefore drive “for fun.” Additionally, they exemplify the quirkiness and uniqueness that Lyft claims to inspire in drivers through its labor practices. Not only do they exemplify this freedom, but they identify Lyft as the agent that made it possible for them to express themselves like never before. In a video Lyft created to feature these drivers, Christina Hardman, the driver behind Gratitude Lyft, says, “Everyone has a unique talent, and Lyft really encourages that. And they’ve inspired me to inspire others” (Lyft 2014). Steve Peters, who dresses up like “The Dude” from the film, The Big Lebowski when he drives, builds on this saying, “So many people have their story to tell, so many people have their art to express. This [Lyft] is just a win-win for everybody” (ibid.). For these reasons, the Lyft Creatives represent the ideal drivers that Lyft attempts to create.

Airbnb also reinforces a similar version of this narrative in the Stories section of its website. Out of the thirteen stories about hosts on the Stories page, three share the same trope: man who was overly engaged in the public, economic sphere must spend more time in the private sphere (due to a family tragedy or economic crisis). He starts hosting on Airbnb and consequently realizes both his creative genius and potential as a father. For example, “Jonathan” was a single dada living in Los Angeles (Airbnb and Leela Cyd 2014). Like the other men featured, “for years he worked 50-80 hour weeks at a job that was unfulfilling” (ibid.) With the corporate world controlling him and his life, his dreams of pursuing ceramics “[fell] by the wayside” and he had no time for his family. When his hours were cut, he decided to list an extra room on Airbnb. Jonathan remarks, “This was the change that made it all possible.” Hosting, “allowed him to be more available to his family...[and] paved the way for Jonathan to pursue his work as a
ceramicist.” He now claims to be happier than ever, with his lamps currently being sold at Los Angeles boutiques, Urban Outfitters, and Anthropologie (ibid.).

As with Lyft drivers, Jonathan and the other featured men were stuck in the corporate grind before using Airbnb or Lyft. Airbnb and Lyft claim that it was through using their platforms that the Lyft Creatives and the men featured on Airbnb Stories were able to unearth the creative geniuses hidden inside themselves. Lyft and Airbnb are therefore not just platforms for expressing your unique, creative self in a way that was not possible through traditional forms of work. On the other hand, Lyft and Airbnb are opportunities to be yourself in a way that rigid structures, corporations, and older modes of labor did not allow.

It is important to place Lyft and Airbnb’s claims to the “freedom” of their workers to express themselves in dialogue with the technological mechanisms we explored in the beginning of the chapter, as these mechanisms challenge the notion that the drivers and hosts are actually “free” to work as they choose. On the contrary, Lyft and Airbnb employ a similar tactic used by companies that similarly rely on the labor of independent contractors. These employers often emphasize the “freedom” of these laborers in order to mitigate conflict or pushback from the workers.11

To Make Friends and Meet New People

While the opportunity to express yourself through Lyft is a common narrative, the more common one is the opportunity to meet new people, make the world smaller, and build communities. We have seen Lyft’s emphasis on community throughout this thesis, but it is worth specifying that Lyft not only applies this discourse to the passengers it features, but to the drivers as well. For example, in the video, Lyft Love in

11 For more on the independent contractor model, see Osnowitz (2010) and Barley and Kunda (2004)
Seattle, Lyft interviews six drivers, and five of them cite “community” as the reason they decided to drive for Lyft. While many drivers that Lyft features refer to Lyft as an opportunity to make new friends and meet new people, some specifically frame their involvement in the Lyft community as altruistic. These drivers claim Lyft to be a force for good that provides their community better, safer, cheaper transportation, as well as the potential for stronger neighborly connections. One driver in the Lyft Love in Seattle video calls Lyft, “a cure for the passengers” (Lyft 2013). Zimmer and Wampler both emphasize the “altruism” of their drivers by referring to stories of drivers who help with passengers’ groceries, offer a phone charger, or even rush a passenger in labor to the hospital. For Zimmer especially, these stories demonstrate how deeply Lyft’s ethos are embedded in the Lyft community.

Airbnb follows similar tropes in its own presentations of hosts. In the tens of videos that feature Airbnb hosts, hosts remark how they, “love making new friends around the world (Airbnb 2015). More specifically, in the Airbnb Stories that feature female hosts – as opposed to creative male geniuses referenced earlier – the featured hosts emphasize the communal and intimate aspects of hosting on Airbnb. All four of the female hosts featured are unable to leave their homes due to old age or an illness. No longer able to take part in the public sphere in the same way, these women were trapped inside and alone. Airbnb gave them the opportunity to connect with people once again and “contribute” to the world in a meaningful way. One of the women, Judith, remarks, “I am really crazy about all the richness that has come into my life, and the opportunity to be of service” (Airbnb, Castle, and BFD Productions 2014). In addition to the striking gender binary these stories reinforce between the immobile, helpless woman stuck in the private sphere, and the overproducing, creative man stuck in the public sphere, these
stories demonstrate the social, interpersonal, and even service-oriented motivations of Airbnb hosts.

The Emotional Production of Friendship and Community

Lyft and Airbnb’s characterizations of their ideal laborers are not just idealistic visions. On the contrary they actually shape how Lyft interacts with its workforce, how Lyft drivers interact with each other, and how Lyft passengers engage with and rate their drivers. We must therefore interpret Lyft’s representations of its drivers not as a marketing strategy aimed to encourage passengers to use, or continue using, its product. Rather, we must investigate the intentional choices that Lyft has made in these representations, and ask why. Lyft has chosen to repeatedly emphasize certain key features of the ideal Lyft driver: quirky, fun, individual, and social. It has also chosen to represent them as explicitly non-economic actors. The ideal Lyft driver does not drive for money, but because they want to, or even because they feel it is a good service to perform for their communities. As we will see in the next section these characteristics and values function as actual expectations and standards that Lyft places on its community through a variety of mechanisms. By treating Lyft drivers as friends, and requiring a high level of emotional labor from its drivers, we will see how Lyft is actually attempting to establish a new mode of interacting with a labor force.

Emotional Labor and Your Friend with a Car

While we introduced this labor in the last chapter, it is worth returning to now that we have analyzed Lyft’s representations of its ideal driver. In every description of the ideal Lyft driver, Lyft describes them not as manual laborers but as “authentic,” interesting, caring people. Although, on the one hand, Lyft drivers are encouraged to
“be themselves” they are simultaneously instructed on which “selves” they should be. Since Lyft drivers are rated by passengers – and, beginning in April of 2015 they are rated on different categories that include “friendliness” – and Lyft drivers are vetted for being “friendly,” “personable,” and “easy to talk to,” by their mentor that determines whether or not the mentee driver “should join the Lyft community,” Lyft places considerable – though diffused – pressure on its drivers to act as “your friend with a car.” In order to do so, these Lyft drivers must engage in emotional labor, a concept most notably coined by Artie Russell Hochschild in her analysis of flight attendants (1983). Emotional labor, Hochschild explains, is, “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (1983:4). However, not only must these laborers perform emotional labor, but Hochschild observes that these drivers must authentically internalize their warmth and understanding towards their consumer (1983:90).

While we cannot assert definitively how Hochschild’s analysis would apply to the Lyft driver, we can identify a number of parallels between both models. The Lyft driver, like the flight attendants, cannot just be warm, but most be spontaneously so. When a Lyft driver offers a passenger donuts, coffee, or a phone charger, this action must appear to come from an authentic, spontaneous place in the Lyft driver as a person. Additionally, like the flight attendants, Lyft specifically instruct drivers on how to be the optimal “friends” to passengers. In the Lyft driver portal article, “Creating the Best Lyft experience,” Lyft writes, “Being perceptive is the first step. Happiness means different things for different people at different times. Read your passengers’ mood when they first get in your car — if they’re higher energy, strike up a conversation. If they’re on the quiet side, it’s okay to respect their privacy” (Lyft 2015). While this article
is not the rigorous training that the flight attendants undergo, it nonetheless asks drivers to engage in deep emotional labor when driving.

Lyft - Driver Interactions

Not only does Lyft place the clear expectation on drivers to behave as “friends with a car,” but Lyft as their employer treats them as such. Lyft’s interactions with its drivers are casual and resemble the interactions between friends more than they do interactions between a boss and their workers. Moreover, the content of these interactions only rarely concerns logistics or economics. Instead, when interacting with drivers, Lyft focuses almost exclusively on social anecdotes and the broader Lyft vision. We can see this at work in the mandatory training video all drivers must watch before their mentor rides. Lyft begins this video by asking, “What if you discovered a new friend every day? What if fist bumps replaced handshakes as hello?” (Lyft 2013).

Throughout the rest of these training videos, Lyft spends the majority of its time focusing on the “cool people” you will meet as a Lyft driver, as well as Lyft’s grand visions to create, “a world where cities feel smaller and more connected.” When a Lyft driver who I know was accepted as a Lyft driver, he received an email with a photo in the body that read, “Hello Noob. You’re officially a Lyft driver.” Once he became a Lyft driver, he began receiving regular emails encouraging him to, “Meet Someone New Today,” or reminding him of how his city had, “The Friendliest Passengers Around.”

These correspondences suggest that it is not just the image or the messaging of Lyft that is casual, but also its actual relationship to its drivers. Lyft even re-tweets drivers’ Instagram pictures and tweets, often starting conversations with the drivers themselves on social media. For example, in response to a tweet by a driver sharing his excellent performance review from Lyft, Lyft tweeted at him “Consistency [emoji of
hand making “O.K” gesture.” Especially in the Twitter interface in which a tweet by a company, celebrity, or individual has the exact same visual format, Lyft’s tweets read like tweets sent among friendly individuals with a strong, interpersonal rapport.

The flip side of these interactions, however, is that Lyft does its best to avoid interacting with drivers about the logistical or financial components of driving. Throughout the three mandatory training videos that drivers must watch, Lyft only mentions getting paid once, and they do not elaborate on how, when, or how much. Instead, they delegate this responsibility to the peer mentor, who can answer drivers’ operational or financial questions. Additionally, with the majority of logistical decisions made and announced through Lyft’s technology, Lyft attempts to dissociate itself from the visible position of boss or authority figure, instead framing itself as just a friend.

**Lyft Drivers As Your Casual Friends With a Car**

At this point, one could easily interpret Lyft actions as an attempt to obscure the nature of Lyft’s work in order so that they may provide the highest quality experiences with the least resistance to Lyft as a centralized authority. However, I would like to propose an alternative, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, interpretation. To do so, I will draw on a quote by John Zimmer from his interview with *PandoMonthly*:

“We started with people sitting in the front seat was because, a couple reasons: one we wanted to treat people equally, but two we think from a business perspective, it allows us to go after a larger opportunity...our goal is that all of you [the audience] become Lyft drivers. And if we were to ask everyone, how many of you would be willing to be something like a taxi driver where everyone sits in the backseat, or how many of you are willing to be a friend with a car, I think you’re going to get a lot more people that are willing to be treated like a friend with a car” (Lacey, *PandoMonthly* 2015).
What Zimmer reveals here is something new. In this quote, Zimmer says the idea and ethos behind, “Your Friend with a Car” is not just a romantic branding slogan to attract consumers or make them feel comfortable. It is not even just a way for Lyft to obscure the nature of work on its platform. To the contrary, Zimmer suggests that Lyft’s strategy is in fact doing exactly what this slogan claims they are doing: hiring and organizing “regular people” who would agree to pick up a stranger on their way to the grocery market, assuming there were the necessary trust and safety mechanisms in place.

In an interview with BuzzFeed just two months after Zimmer’s interview on PandoMonthly, Kira Wampler corroborates Zimmer’s statements (Bhuiyan 2015). As she is explaining the differences between Lyft and Uber, she remarks that they are not actually competitors at all, because they are pursuing two completely different markets. Uber, Wampler explains, is focused on the $11 billion taxi and limo market. Lyft, on the other hand, is pursuing the “personal transportation market”, which she claims to be valued at $2.25 trillion. In order to tap into this market, Wampler explains, Lyft has been launching a series of additions to its product with the intention of both making driving for Lyft easier, and more palatable for the “regular people” who may not want to think of themselves as “drivers.” One of these features, for example, is “Driver Destination,” in which you input the destination of where you are already going – your home, your office, or the grocery market - and you will only receive ride requests from riders along your route going in a similar direction. With this feature, Lyft claims it is one step closer to turning everyone into a Lyft driver.

The labor model that Zimmerman and Wampler are proposing is a model in which the “regular people” that Lyft represents can labor for Lyft through the daily activities they already perform, such as going to work or picking up their kids. This
model parallels the “prosumption” model used by Google and Facebook, in which Google and Facebook quietly and invisibly monetize the leisurely actions that users perform on their sites (Beverungen, Böhm and Land 2012). Facebook users do not conceive of their actions as labor, since they feel leisurely and fun (ibid.) Therefore, Lyft is not only attempting to further flexibilize the modes of flexible accumulation pioneered by companies like Google and Facebook, but actually translate their prosumption labor models offline. Lyft, like Google and Facebook, wants to transform labor into play. The key difference, of course, is that the labor that Lyft hopes to present as “play” is paid labor that unionized taxi drivers still perform to this day.

Even still, with this model in mind, we can now identify new meanings and functions of the strategies we have examined throughout this chapter. Up until this point, we have interpreted the ways that Lyft interacts with and represents its laborers as strategies designed to obscure the nature of laborers’ work, and these drivers’ relation to Lyft as their boss. Given Zimmer, Wampler, and generally Lyft’s mission to tap into the personal transportation market, in which people may actually be less likely to participate if they feel that they are engaging in paid service work, we can now identify a new dimension to these strategies. Yes, these strategies obscure the nature of labor, but perhaps this will create the space for people to see driving people in exchange for a fee not as work, but as play.

Conclusion

More so than either these companies’ identities or products, Lyft’s labor model is complex, layered, and still very much so nascent. By applying the frameworks of the digital economy, Lyft and Airbnb both have attained a new level of flexible
accumulation. With no turnover time, next to zero marginal cost or risk associated with scaling, and the flexibility to grow or shrink their labor supply at will, Lyft and Airbnb are uniquely positioned to grow and pivot rapidly. However, perhaps more interesting than these companies' unprecedented flexibility, Lyft claims to be building a labor model that transforms people's perception of work into play. In order to translate the incredibly successful "prosumption" model employed by online companies, offline, however, Lyft relies on the affective, emotional, and communal components of its company. According to Zimmer, Lyft has made the assumption that the potential drivers within the "personal transportation market" that they are pursuing will be more likely to drive for Lyft if Lyft is a community, if they are driving because they are socially invested, and if Lyft treats them not like laborers, but like members of the community. Should Lyft be successful in doing so, the "community" that Lyft has attempted to represent and create through its self-identity, product, and representations of its laborers will be essential to the process.
Conclusion

The sharing economy is an extreme movement. It has driven the dialectical tension of the Californian Ideology to its logical extreme, by embedding this very tension into its identity as an economic movement. “Sharing economy” is not a misnomer as much as it is reflective of the inherent contradictions that oscillate at the very core of this economic movement. Additionally, the sharing economy has taken branding strategies and the attempt to build affective, emotional connections with your consumers to its logical extreme as well. Not only does the sharing economy market itself as a community, but it in fact relies on its identity as a community in order to function. Without its extreme emphasis on community, the movement would be at even greater risk of legal concerns. Moreover, as we have seen through Lyft, building a community of laborers can actually generate a hyper-productive and self-regulating labor force. Airbnb and Lyft have applied these branding logics to every aspect of their business models. Finally, the sharing economy is extreme because it is attempting to define a new frontier of flexible labor. The sharing economy takes flexible accumulation to unprecedented levels of flexibility by attempting to organize the exchange of manual labor and physical assets as though they are the immaterial “click actions” that power digital companies like Google and Facebook.

From here, we can now return to the questions we set out to ask in the beginning of this project: what do these companies’ strategies indicate to us about capitalism in the digital era? As we have seen, the sharing economy claims to create a world in which “everyone” can share. But the key question we must ask moving forward is who is included in this “everyone”? Both companies, as well as the sharing economy more broadly, goes to great lengths to try to gloss over racial, ethnic, and class differences
between people. And yet, the subjectivities that both Airbnb and Lyft idealize are socio-economically and ethnically specific. Moreover, the economic barriers to entry for both Airbnb and Lyft prevent anyone without a new car that they can afford to maintain, or anyone without a clean, presentable house from participating on their platforms.

While Lyft and Airbnb are still young companies, we must be attuned to the questions of identity politics and class with respect to the sharing economy. If Lyft, for instance, were to succeed in turning everyone with a car that fits into the Lyft subjectivity into a driver, it could create a marketplace for ride-sharing among middle- and upper-middle class urbanites across the country. As fun and social as this could absolutely be for these drivers, it would also put taxi drivers at risk for lower demand.

In fact, with the rise of ride-sharing we have already seen a notable decline in the demand for taxis in major US cities including New York and San Francisco. In this hypothetical, and extreme, scenario, the middle class would have the opportunity to do business among itself, excluding the lower class from participating as either producers or consumers, all the while creating incredible surplus value for the capitalists who extract tiny bits of surplus value from the constant stream of transactions occurring across the country, and even the world.

I have intentionally posited this extreme hypothetical of class warfare in order to demonstrate the need for a richer understanding of not just how identity and class work in the “prosumption” model that the sharing economy is promoting when it is put into conflict with existing labor economies. Regardless of whether the sharing economy is a passing fad or the defining pivot in the capitalist system of our era, the questions it raises for labor and consumption in the age of the internet will persist. By continuing to analyze the strategies that these companies propose, we will be able to deepen our
understandings of the moves that capitalism makes today. And it is only by understanding these moves that we can begin to conceptualize methods for subverting them.
Works Cited


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