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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

# 5. A Nightnography of Food Couriers: Precarity and Inequality in After Dark Platform Work

*Julius-Cezar MacQuarie*

**Abstract:** Food couriers working after dark are an under-researched group in "platform capitalism," remaining relatively invisible in digitized cityscapes due to the nature of their night-time work. Drawing upon multi-sited in-person and digital nightnography in London (UK) and Cork (Ireland) and employing impressionistic mini portraits, this chapter documents experiences of precarity and inequality. It argues that existing literature often disembodies platform work, whereas today's post-circadian capitalist era demands and extracts capital in traditional (bodily) ways through new denominations. Food couriers, especially those working after dark, are under duress from navigating traffic, waiting without getting orders, and staying alert. The chapter also highlights the gendered nature of platform work and contributes to debates on the digitalization of precarity and inequality.

**Keywords:** Nightwork, Gig workers, Migration, Exploitation, Gender Discrimination

## Introduction

Food couriers often work in the after dark hours as "independent contractors" for platforms such as Deliveroo, JustEat, UberEats, Glovo or Getir. Yet, they are an under-researched category of workers in "platform capitalism." Who are they? Who works after dark? Who is more likely forced to take on such work? What do platforms demand of these workers? Are digitalized precarity and inequality any different than those experienced in other forms of work? Drawing upon multi-sited nightnography in London (UK) and Cork (Ireland), this chapter addresses these issues.

Brandellero, S., K. Krakowska Rodrigues and D. Pardue, *Urban Nightlife and Contested Spaces: Cultural Encounters after Dusk. Amsterdam*: Amsterdam University Press, 2025
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Nightwork is a continuously expanding category. Though work carried out in the after dark hours has been part of human existence (Gonlin 2022), it had long been associated with danger and the supernatural, with rhythms and rituals that shunned daytime habits, values and the established work rhythms regulated by seasons and daylight (Galinier et al. 2010; Shaw 2018, 28; Ekirch 2006). In the twentieth century, the advent of electrification in industrial societies has not only allowed for more diverse night-time activities and round-the-clock production but has also normalized nightwork by including it in the already established daytime work system (Baldwin 2012; Duijzings and Dušková 2022). In the twenty-first century, night-time services and nightlife sectors are spreading beyond the industries that have customarily relied on night-time production and have already expanded the "frontier of the night" (Melbin 1987), i.e., supermarkets, food chain distribution, or IT industries. After dark platform work is one of the last additions to this ever-developing domain—though how many of the platform workers spend their evenings or late into the night on platform work is hard to estimate.

Despite its potential for bringing about a "new" way to work, in which one could freely decide when and for how long to work, platform work is problematically structured on the basis of independent contracting without ensuring any employee rights (Schor 2020; Zia et al. 2021). Widely used "platform parasites" or "free riders," such as Deliveroo, Uber, Bolt, UberEats, or JustEat, make fortunes on the back of gig earners, many of whom are totally or partially dependent on these platforms (Schor 2020, 71). In this vein, these "new" ways of work on platforms (paid by the click or piece, with unpaid waiting time for orders), reproduce structural inequalities through "old" ways of workers' abuse (Cui, Li, and Zhang 2016; Scholz 2012). By focusing on after dark platform work, this chapter supports and, more importantly, complements this perspective. After dark platform work is shown to magnify independent contractors' precarity by reproducing—as opposed to disrupting or diminishing—bodily exploitation, entrenched inequality, and structural, gender discrimination.

## Nightworkers, "sorry, we missed you"[1]

Nightworkers are an under-researched category. In support of this claim, I briefly review relevant bodies of literature. Digital platform work has

1 *Sorry, We Missed You* is the title of Ken Loach's 2019 film, an essential/indispensable viewing for anyone wishing to understand how digital platforms impact the lives of Amazon drivers. The

skyrocketed since the 2008 Great Recession, and so has scholarship on "gig economy," "platform work" or "sharing economy." Outstanding scholarship (Heeks et al. 2021; Graham et al. 2020) that proposes fair work conditions for "gig" workers on digital platforms, for obscure reasons has so far failed to even mention nightwork, much less find and propose solutions to its unique problems and challenges. Moreover, this scholarship seems to be focused exclusively on male workers. James' (2022) recent bibliometric count revealed that, out of 9.7 million publications in the social and economic research fields, only 1 per cent discusses gender. The exceptions, studies of women's waged and unwaged labour on digital platforms (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 2000; Churchill and Craig 2019), emphasise that multi-layered precariousness affects self-employed workers, enveloping their entire lives in "subjective, existential" ways, regardless of the size of the labour market (Armano and Murgia 2017, 48, 56).

Moreover, in the growing field of night studies, nightwork has not been addressed systematically, with few exceptions (Duijzings and Dušková 2022; Shaw 2022; MacQuarie 2020). Furthermore, nightwork as a theme within labour studies has been marginally addressed. For example, anthropologists of labour inexplicably left out the dispossession experiences by nightworkers (Kasmir and Gill 2022). There are, however, calls to go beyond the diurnal trend in anthropology and other disciplines and highlight issues concerning migrant nightworkers (Nikielska-Sekula and Desille 2021; Martiniello 2017; Krase and Shortell 2021). There are also calls for more interdisciplinarity among nightologists (Acuto 2019).

Despite these limits, this engagement with the relevant literature and my previous anthropological fieldwork amongst migrants doing the "graveyard" shift in London's New Spitalfields market (MacQuarie 2023; MacQuarie 2019; Macarie 2017) enables me to contextualize the findings of this research. Studies of nightwork have foregrounded the links between nightwork and migration (Brandellero, Kenny, and Pardue 2022). Food couriers, as my research confirmed as well, are more likely to be migrants. Studies of platform work, in particular Schor (2020), classify workers in three categories on the basis of their income dependency: independent, with zero dependency; the partially dependent, increasing their income with revenue made on platforms; and the totally dependent, whose livelihoods depend solely on platform-based income. Schor (2020) points out that migrants are overrepresented among the last category, the "dependent" gig workers. Food couriers are, thus, more likely to be totally dependent on this type of work.

persons I encountered during my research shared similar experiences. In this chapter, Loach's film title is taken as a metaphor pointing at the scholarship's neglect of nightworkers.

Furthermore, to gain traction when addressing the problems created by digitalizing labour migration through platform-based work, this study draws on insights from several investigations (Wallis 2021; Altenried 2021; Popan 2021; Bojadžijev 2020), projects such as *Night spaces: Migration, Culture and Integration in Europe* (NITE), and the ambitious initiatives that aimed to restore hospitality, creative and nightlife industries and support their nightworkers, who were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in most parts of the world (Duvivier et al. 2020). Popan (2021) found that during the two years of the pandemic everyone became more and more dependent on foods delivered fast to their doors, and as such the numbers of couriers at Deliveroo, Glovo, JustEat (or Takeaways), Panda and UberEats grew exponentially, regardless of geographical location. In a time of painstaking immobility when many around the world were trapped by the pandemic, food couriers established new mobilities in less fragmented ways, spatially, and new ways to build solidarities. Thus, in contrast to online "crowdwork" or "microtasking" workers mostly hidden behind clicks and walls, dependent, precarious couriers can act solidarity that goes beyond advice and offers the potentiality for "mutual urbanism" on the street (Hall 2021), which is why Heiland (2020, 34) argues that platform mediated food delivery labour is a special case of platform labour.

## Case Selection

For all the practical reasons at an uncertain time, only a month away from the start of the Russian invasion into Ukraine, I left Romania, where I started researching platform workers, and temporarily settled down in London. This became an almost ideal global site from where to investigate the universal features of platform work. One month later, I moved to Cork and continued my ethnographic work in a locality that offered insights into how global platforms entered smaller cities and who they co-opted. In addition to juggling time constraints versus resources, I found myself concerned with developing tools that engage with the public to address the problems with nightwork experienced by nightworkers in global and smaller cities. Hence, this ethnographic comparison became all the more important while studying the global-local connections through ubiquitous platform work.

My fluency in the English, Turkish and Romanian languages, gave me easier access to migrant communities in both field sites. London and Cork attract large numbers of migrants. Among other nationalities, Brazilians and Turkish food couriers were predominant among couriers in both places.

In London, the boroughs of Southwark and Hackney were more central to my research as they have long history of migrant settlers belonging to an entrepreneurial milieu. Topographically, my fieldwork has been concentrated in Camberwell and Cambridge Heath, two semi-central neighbourhoods located to the south of the River Thames. In Cork, the city centre facilitated the couriers' journeys via the car and pedestrian bridges that link the inner city, where the nightlife quarter and food courts are based, and the surrounding suburbs, where the food orders came from via the apps.

As mentioned, nightwork in these two field sites is under-researched. Yet, in the first case, I draw inspiration from the policy work produced by Autonomy, which proposes design solutions to better the experiences of nightworkers by providing rest work centres and night nurseries for workers with children (Kolioulis et al. 2021). This, however, does not discuss how irregular migrant workers on platforms could make use of these centres, who presumably would be managed by "street-level bureaucrats" respecting the government's interests to curb down unwanted migration. Notwithstanding the limitations, this is a long overdue report, which depicts the struggles and offers solutions to the precariousness faced by food delivery, care, and sex workers, sectors of work in which migrants are overrepresented in London's night-time economy. Kolioulis and colleagues' (2021) findings highlight the health associated risks, lack of logistical support and socialization for these workers in London.

In the second case, there is even less to draw upon. By and large, the geographies of nightwork in Ireland remain largely unexamined. From the existing scholarship (Doyle, O'Brien, and Maguire 2017), it is clear that door men in Ireland's night-time economy work on precarious terms. Nevertheless, the rights for the "workers in precarious employment" seem not to be among the concerns identified in the recent Report of the Night-Time Economy Taskforce, Ireland (2021, 3) Night activities appear in other bodies of literature, too. Research on urban nightlife shows that dance music brings African migrants together to share Irish cities' cultural spaces (Young 2022). This is consistent with literature that focuses on tourism at night, another important sector of the night-time economy (Eldridge and Smith 2019; Smith and Eldridge 2021).

## Methodology

The ethnographic method is uniquely placed to "follow the people" (food couriers) and to "follow things" (streets) to establish the global-local

connections, despite not relying on "fixed and comparable units of analysis, as do surveys and comparative researcher" (Gille and Ó Riain 2002, 273). Streets at the "edge territories," Hall argues (2021, 115), offer the best point of view to analyse work in the margins. Moreover, the street is one of the most banal places where "encounters with capitalism" take place daily and nightly in plain sight (Achille Mbembe, in Hall 2021, 115). From the street vantage point, I compare the effects that digitalization of inequalities has upon precarious food couriers across two locations, London and Cork.

It is on the streets where I carried out nightnography, that is, in-person observation in the late hours after dark or at night (MacQuarie 2021; MacQuarie 2023). I also added a digital dimension to this rather traditional anthropological fieldwork. I combined "schmoozing" or informal conversations during non-participant observation or "hanging out" with: a) audio-video recording in the locations where wo/men (randomly selected for this piece) work, wait for orders or chat with other workers, or entering the site (dark kitchen or depo); b) night walking (with or without interviewing) along the streets where the outlets or depos are located; and c) cyber-notes (pedometer Pacer app to record my own distances and routes), as well as participants' app information for data triangulation—testing its validity and reliability by verifying what they say they did, with what the apps displayed on their devices upon which they relied for communicating with the platforms. Small talk with couriers is useful to ethnographers, as it validates what participants actually do, as opposed to what they say they do. Over several nights, I had conversations with half a dozen men and women in London (aged twenty to forty years old), of different ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Brazilian, Indian, Turkish). In Cork, I talked at leisure, filmed, and photographed over a dozen food couriers logged on different platforms (e.g., JustEat, Deliveroo), of Brazilian and Turkish descent. Most of the workers were approached as they were waiting for orders to come through their devices. Their waiting areas varied, but the spots in which they gathered were the main take-away restaurants (Lebish kebab and Shake Dog diner, in Cork) or McDonald's, KFC and the local Donner-Kebab take aways in Camberwell, London.

In the following pages, I foreground only some of the people I met during my nightnography to emphasise one aspect or another of this type of work. Their names have been anonymized to preserve confidentiality (Johnathan, however, verbally agreed to appear in the photo that I took of us). The impressionistic mini-portraits offer significant possibilities for connecting the particular in the "narratives of the immediate" (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007, 76–95) with the larger issues concerning the relationship between humans and algorithms. This bottom-up approach will build analytical

categories of embodied, gendered and invisibilized precariousness from the empirical insights.

## "Onboard" for Fieldwork

*April 2022*
*London*

Platforms welcome their "partners," that is, the couriers, "onboard" when they first log in. As COVID-19 social distancing restrictions were gradually lifted, I began conducting my fieldwork. In both sites, I located and then hung around in places where food couriers were visible, usually near or inside restaurants. In London, I also spotted and visited the less visible places, "dark" or "ghost" kitchens, near which couriers waited. At both sites, food couriers navigated the danger of busy traffic in the day, or unlit street corners at night. They rested inside restaurants, on mopeds parked on pavements, or in dead-end lanes, not yet designated as parking lots by the council. This was the way they could bear the countless hours of waiting for the next orders. This was also the time when I could talk to them.

In London, I carried out research in the boroughs of Hackney and Southwark. During one night scoping exercise in Camberwell, while feeling the pulse of the street life in this neighbourhood, I encountered many food couriers standing by the counter inside McDonald's or sitting on the bikes parked outside, on the pavement in front of the entrance. I approached Johnathan, a man in his thirties from Brazil with Italian citizenship. He was out on his second shift, delivering food at night. In his words,

> I work in two jobs. In the morning, I prepare bakery products for a restaurant. In the afternoons and late into the evenings, I deliver for UberEats or Deliveroo. [...] it's past midnight and I'm still in this McDonald's waiting for an order. It's been an hour since we spoke and [I'm] still waiting. I don't work [on] Sundays. That's for my family. But I am away from the family most days. This way, it pays the bills. [...] I buy my own insurance and I pay for the moped insurance. These companies don't pay anything for us.

Platform-mediated food delivery workers are a "precarious presence" on the streets (Hall 2021, 154). They are no longer hidden behind factory walls or in warehouses. Yet, despite being so visible on the streets they seem to remain absent for the authorities, unless immigration raids are executed,



Fig. 5.1: Johnathan with author in a McDonalds in South-East London, past midnight. Photo by Julius-Cezar MacQuarie c/o Nightworkshop.

as an interlocutor informed me that has been the case in several London neighbourhoods. The "new" ways of pushing workers into deeper precarity and inequality were central to my investigation, with a focus on how they build on "old" (yet ubiquitous) forms of labour extraction from the labouring bodies (Bauman 2002; Scholz 2012).

Close interaction with the couriers waiting for the next order also revealed that they did not occupy the same position. At the same McDonald's restaurant in Camberwell, I met Sacha, a JustEat captain. This company, initially a Danish platform, relocated to the UK in mid 2000s. Unlike companies such as Deliveroo, JustEat employs its couriers. Within its labour hierarchy, there are "captains," whose role is to oversee the activity on the streets and in the restaurants where couriers wait for deliveries. The JustEat algorithm takes all decisions and observes every move of the workers assigned within a five-mile radius.

Sacha was on duty patrol in the area surrounding the Oval depot. As I entered the restaurant, I found her sitting and constantly checking her JustEat phone app. She described herself as an Indian woman from Mumbai, in her forties, married and with two children (a fourteen-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl). Sacha was an accountant in India, and now she worked as one of the only three women "captains" based at the Oval depot. In her opinion,

> It's no different for women to do the job of a captain. But women do not work on this job because there is a misconception about women that they should do housework. When you have a 'can do' attitude, you can do anything. I can do anything. [...] I worked ten hours. Today, I do another ten. Tomorrow, Saturday, I instruct ten newcomers!

I asked her what she thought about having only three women among the fifty men captains at her depot. Sacha replied:

> I think women can be as good as captains, as men can be. In the JustEat hierarchy women also occupy senior positions, but the three women captains are the first to join the ranks above the bikers, since the company opened the oval depo. More women may follow.

Sacha disclosed that a captain's pay rate was £10.15 per hour (£1.70 per hour less than the London Living Wage rate), and that she gets paid to ensure that orders are fulfilled.[2] If there are any problems signalled by the algorithms, she was the contact on the ground. She explained that:

> Today is my turn to oversee our couriers' activity in this McDonald's. I ensure that orders are picked up smoothly. For this to happen, couriers must stay within their designated area ready to pick up the orders. I watch and resolve any problems with the food packages. Generally, things do run smoothly.
> This case hints at what other authors have already signalled out as a relationship that needs to be investigated, that is, the relationship between gender and discrimination in the "gig economy" (Barzilay and Ben-David 2017, 427). Despite my repeated attempts, I could not meet Sacha's female colleagues during my stay in London.

As mentioned, I also hung around in the less visible places of the "gig economy." Getir, for example, a Turkish-owned grocery delivery firm, has been branching out into fruit and vegetable warehouse storage and on-demand deliveries. In 2021, it opened its first "dark store" in the UK.

2 The *Real* Living Wage is an hourly rate of pay set independently, paid voluntarily by employers, and is updated annually (it is not the UK government's *minimum* or *national* statutory wage). London Living Wage 2024 rate is set to £13.15 per hour (up by £1.30 since 2023). UK Living Wage (for outside of London) is currently £12.00 (up by £1.10 since 2023). 13,000 UK businesses voluntarily pay a Living Wage to their employees to meet everyday needs. Online at: https://www.livingwage.org.uk/calculation, accessed March 17th, 2024.

Deliveroo, to give another example, has expanded its billion-dollar business through the creation of Deliveroo Editions, that is, "dark" or "ghost" kitchens. The Dulwich site in Southwark hosted five Deliveroo Editions kitchens where food was prepared and delivered. Customers could only place orders online via the websites of restaurants such as Five Guys, Pho, Chilango, ShakeShack, and Honest. The Deliveroo drivers picked up the food prepared within the walls of two units between 12 p.m. and midnight. The five kitchens were separate, but they shared one front desk, managed by Deliveroo. Each order was bagged and sealed with a Deliveroo Editions sticker and placed on the shelf belonging to the respective kitchen. Once completed, the orders were picked up by Deliveroo riders. As I waited to speak to the Romanian supervisor in charge, I observed through the window how riders waiting on their motorbikes by the front entrance, men of different ethnicities, were chatting with one another.

London, as a "glocturnal" city (MacQuarie 2023), offers migrant food couriers, especially to those totally dependent on platform work income, more opportunities to swap platforms and work for groceries stores, "dark" or "ghost" kitchens and restaurants in food or alcohol distribution. However, this is where the democratization of work or the manoeuvring the uncertainties of working on platforms ends for these precarious workers. As Hall observes (2021, 5–6), the "casualized urban labour market, sustained by technological platforms, such as Uber and Deliveroo, trades off the 'entrepreneurialisms' required of marginalized cultures." More importantly, given that Brexit has happened, and the UK no longer aligns with EU legislation, it is very probable that in the current British political climate, characterized by a hostile, anti-immigration regime, and an anti-poor agenda, no major efforts will be made in the foreseeable future to protect dependent platform workers to the extent that the European Commission has been considering of late. Any lack in implementing new laws to protect platform workers will affect workers across the UK. The negative social impact with its embedded gender inequalities will have a greater effect on women migrant platform workers who are more invisible and less paid than their male counterparts.

*April 2022*
*Cork*

Cork also attracts very high numbers of migrants. For example, many Brazilian and Turkish citizens choose to study English in Ireland because of the bilateral agreements between these countries, which facilitate student

visas that allow them to work twenty hours per week. I introduce here three Turkish students of English, Yıldırım, Özcan and Ufuk. They combine their language studies and daytime jobs (when off college), with evening and late-night shifts on platforms like Deliveroo, UberEats or JustEat.

Yıldırım was a graduate in data science from a prestigious Turkish university. He worked the 20 hours allowed by law as a daytime concierge. In addition, he worked illegally on someone else's account registered with Deliveroo. That person went on holiday and lent him the registered device. In his words,

> The name displayed here [on his Deliveroo device] is not mine. I rent this device from another Turkish guy. He rents his device every time he goes away on holiday. It's not fair in a way, because he makes money while on holiday from renting a machine that I cannot even register for. It's not fair, is it?!

Yıldırım summarized this situation as follows: "we are modern slaves, and work unprotected. Also, Police knows that we are doing illegal work. If they want to collect us, they can do it at any time." In this state of "semi-illegality" (De Genova 2018), he contravened the visa regulations and the taxation laws in the EU. Besides, Deliveroo offers little-to-no support to its "independent contractors," except for the one-time providing of the minimum equipment. As he explained,

> In three months, I did 5,000 km on my (electric) push bike; I got the clothes and the box for free for the first time, paid by Deliveroo. But after you have to pay; if the box tears up, which it does after a few months, from the rain and cold—you pay for it when that happens.

Yıldırım, like Johnathan in London and many other food couriers I met in these two field sites, needed to take a second job to break even. As a Deliveroo courier, and daytime hotel concierge on low income, he could not but continue working in precarious conditions. He could not stop even when he suffered from COVID-related health problems. In his words,

> I had Covid and still worked, even though I had high temperature. I covered my mouth and went on; I know the mask doesn't work, but who could stop working; I needed to pay the bills. So, I worked while infected with COVID. What could I do? I pay 700 euro to rent a room and have to pay expenses on top. I told my landlord that it's




Fig. 5.2: The Deliveroo device that Özcan and other couriers are using shows the only available outlets open past midnight in the light purple colour and in hexagonal shapes. The clock shows eight minutes past midnight. The device also displays the "Not busy" message sent by the algorithm-based system. These kinds of messages are updated every five minutes. The algorithm's advice to couriers in a "not busy" area is to try "exploring other areas nearby" with busier restaurants. Photo by Julius-Cezar MacQuarie c/o Nightworkshop.

> too expensive and he said I can go if I don't like it. Everything is so expensive in this town.

Another Turkish student-cum-worker, Özcan, was an accountant by trade in Turkey. One late night, standing on his bike, he told me that he was

> Waiting to pick up orders in an area where only Lebish kebab and Shake Dog diner are still open past midnight. But no one places any orders. Everyone is out partying. It's not like it was in the pandemic. But you see, on the [Deliveroo] app, it shows that there are places still open [at this hour]. If I get an order now, it pays 1.4 x per order.[3] If I take three orders in the next hour, then I make just over ten euro.
>
> We continued our chat until Özcan announced "It's past midnight, but no one placed any orders in the last hour since we've been talking. I might have to call it a day." We parted our ways.

3 2022 pay rate per piece delivered was €3.00, paid by the platform to the courier. Despite its 2021 Riders' Law, vanguard legislation on platform work, similar rates as in Spain were reported by Human Rights Watch. Online at: https://bit.ly/HRW_platformwork_report.



Fig. 5.3. Three Deliveroo food couriers waiting for orders in the City of Cork. Photo by Julius-Cezar MacQuarie c/o Nightworkshop.

Ufuk was the third Turkish man with whom I spoke on several occasions. He too entered Ireland legally with a student visa but worked illegally on a Deliveroo app registered to a name other than his. He could not register with a Deliveroo app because he did not fulfil the conditions. The person who rented it to him took a cut of his earnings. Ufuk did not pay taxes on the rest of the earnings that he made with Deliveroo. Ufuk pointed out how widespread this state of "semi-legality" was:

> All of us work more [that the legal period of 20 hours per week] to pay the bills. So, we have come to Ireland legally, but we are in illegality when it comes to work hours and for not paying the taxes. But that's the only thing that makes it worth for us to go on working like this. Otherwise, money is too thin. We are not entitled to register with companies like Deliveroo because of our student status. So, we all work on borrowed accounts for which we pay between forty to sixty euro per week.

The many similar stories that surfaced during my research confirmed that, on both sides of the English Channel, inequality and precarity spread along the streets and in the public eye, not only in temporal and spatial terms, but also across and among multiple locales. However, there is a risk that platform workers will remain invisible on the national and international labour regulators' agendas, due to the delays to implement new regulations to protect them.[4]

4 A new EU Directive to Protect Platform Workers' Rights has been put forward by the European Commission. Online at: https://bit.ly/3Q8l1sQ, accessed March 17th, 2024. This legislative piece is still awaiting hearing by the European Parliament.

## After Dark Platform Work

In the sharing economy, the "old" capitalist ways of exploiting labour continue to be swiftly employed. Low wages, especially piecemeal payment, result in precarity. The marginalization of workers through precarization contributes to their diminished sense of social worth, lack of respect and fairness, and unfair allocation of resources. These are the core features of social inequality. As a corrective note, during the COVID-19 pandemic, food couriers, many of them migrants, who flooded the streets during the day and deep into the night in developed Western countries, were classed as "essential" and valued. In this sense, as reductive as the category of "essential" may be, the COVID-19 crisis has served to draw close two previously distant conceptual categories, namely that of the migrant and that of the valued worker (MacQuarie 2020). Moreover, there are "new" ways of exploiting these workers, including surveillance and uncertainty. The digitalised aspects of this work are monitored, 24/7, by invisible algorithms that incessantly supervise these workers, whether they are on or offline. The monitoring continues even when workers are logged out of the digital applications. Some workers are discharged without notice if they do not log into their account regularly. In this vein, Schor (2020, 71) points out that the sharing economy is the capitalist mode of relations of production at its worst, "driving precarity to its limits."

Yet, the literature on the sharing economy tends to ignore the bodily aspects of platform work. Choonara (2019; 2020) inspired by Bauman (2002), argues that today's labourers' bodies are no longer tied to physical work, as it was the case in the "old capitalist society" (2019, 24). This chapter argues the contrary. This working environment dispossesses workers of their bodily capital, overusing their bodies until exhaustion. The bodily aspects of this work do not fall within the remit of platforms, but rest with workers, who are responsible for the maintenance of their bodies, sleep, and overall wellbeing to perform at the demand of the platforms in the absence of sickness cover, health insurance, and unpaid annual leave. Take for example, food delivery workers whose waiting time between orders delivered and taken anew is unpaid by the platform. Their bodies experience the countless hours of waiting to receive orders via the food delivery apps. While their bodies are not exhausted by carrying heavy loads, they are, nonetheless, under duress from uncertainty, waiting without getting orders.

After dark platform work brings the body into sharp focus. These workers' bodies are under pressure simply from being up and alert at night. From an anthropological-archaeological perspective, Gonlin (2022) argues that

night activities have long been part of human existence. Among researchers, there is a consensus that nightwork disrupts the 24-hour biological clock and increases the risks for bodily illness and somatic maladjustments due to lack of night sleep, which is an integral part of the body's functions (Boivin and Boudreau 2014; Arendt 2010; Archer et al. 2014; Costa 2001; 2006; Roden et al. 1993; IARC 2020). Despite the negative health consequences, the night has been incessantly colonized until nightwork has become an ordinary component in most sectors of the contemporary 24/7 economy, no longer the exception that it used to be in labour history. For workers, including after dark platform workers, the normalization of nightwork means that their biological, circadian rhythms and their emotional and social needs have been disregarded.

This chapter demonstrates that platform work is not "disembodied." On the contrary, today's post-circadian capitalist era demands and extracts capital in the same old (bodily) ways, but through new denominations. In my previous research at New Spitalfields night market, the foreman disciplined loaders' bodies, until eventually his methods forced workers into submission and exploitation (MacQuarie 2023). Regardless of whether a night market, digital warehouses like Amazon or the Deliveroo Editions "dark kitchen," these forms of work's successful trading is tied to the "labourers" bodies to keep work processes under control and extract a surplus of capital from their bodily labour to benefit venture capitalists (Bauman 2000, 120–1). This chapter argues that more research on the embodied aspects of platform work is needed, alongside established research on precarity and inequality.

Drawing upon research attentive to how precarity and inequality affect women and men separately (Lorey 2015; Pulignano et al. 2021), this chapter also offer insights into the gendered aspects of platform work. Though limited, these insights support the noted need to better understand women's contribution to platform work, capture identity processes and gender norms, and strive for the articulation of spaces and practices of resistance, support, safety, and care. (Collins and Bilge 2016; Anthias 2012).

The responsibility to further research platform work rests not only with researchers, but policy makers and investors behind the algorithms. The overall aim would be to improve the future of work and create decent standards for all, including the most invisible of workers, namely those who spend considerable amounts of time working at night. David Schwartz, a Romanian political theatre director and academic, reminds us that:

> We spend between a third or half of our lives at work. But we do not talk, watch films or plays about work. Love or home occupies less time in

> our lives than we otherwise think. I would like to show the public what happens at work. No matter what the profession or the job role.[5]

Through his plays, Schwartz aims to provoke the public to think about the challenges experienced by many who are shelving our food in supermarkets or delivering it to our doors, rain or shine, day or night. In the same vein, this chapter invites social scientists researching problems with platform mediated work and inequalities surrounding this fast-changing field to look for precarity and inequality hidden in plain sight. It is up to the human behind the machine to input a higher value into the algorithmic code. Hence, for a fairer, more equal future of the sharing economy, I concur with Schor (2020) that we need to reboot and reload a new trust-based, peer-to-peer transactional algorithm, that sets equities between parties (user-worker-platform), and democratic decision-making shared among people of similar membership.

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5 In June 2022, I interviewed David Schwartz about his latest play, *Livrator Bucuresti* (tr. Bucharest Courier).

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## About the Author

**Julius-Cezar MacQuarie** conducts PRECNIGHTS, a project funded by the European Commission that explores precarity in women migrant nightworkers in Ireland. His latest publication, *Invisible Migrant Nightworkers in 24/7 London* (2023) has been published with Springer Nature, in the IMISCOE-Springer Research Series.