

# Reviews

## ***Spent Behind the Wheel: Drivers' Labor in the Uber Economy***

Julietta Hua and Kasturi Ray

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**P**lanning research on ride-hailing has mostly examined travelers' responses to the service, such as whether Uber and Lyft complement or compete with public transit. *Spent Behind the Wheel* looks at another side of ride-hailing, focusing on the labor conditions of professional taxi and ride-hailing drivers and challenging the corporate notion that working as a driver can lead to increased economic freedom. Authors Julietta Hua and Kasturi Ray, professors of women and gender studies, apply their disciplinary backgrounds to their book, which they describe as "best understood as a feminist legal and cultural study of professional passenger driving in the wake of the gig economy" (p. 20).

The book works from a central premise established in feminist labor scholarship in which an individual's capital value is not exclusively generated from productive activities but also from life processes: Some lives are more valuable when they support and sustain other lives. The result, the authors argue, is a profession that is rife for driver exploitation through the precarious nature of employment, the financialization of life for others through insurance schemes, and discrimination based on race and disability. *Spent Behind the Wheel* works its way through each of these topics in its four chapters, concluding with thoughts on the ongoing legal challenges to driver employment classification in the ride-hailing industry.

Hua and Ray take a theory-first approach, using close readings of legal cases, observation of driver union meetings, and a select number of interviews to further an understanding of how racial power accumulates wealth by valuing certain lives only when they serve others. This creates a strong argument-driven tone to the book. In many cases, they use the evidence to



support their arguments effectively, particularly with respect to labor conditions. For example, Chapter 2, "Financializing Driver Lives," draws on the feminist literature on reproductive labor—that is, paid or unpaid caring work—to show how slavery informs modern-day insurance in the gig economy. Slavery existed for others to own the bodies performing work, whereas insurance exists for others to own the future potential of bodies by protecting against risk. The chapter illustrates how these conditions played out for professional drivers at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when drivers who were primarily immigrants and people of color were unable to escape daily exposure to the virus. The final chapter of the book effectively argues that both drivers and passengers have a common advocacy cause: Drivers incur disability because of driving conditions, and passengers incur discrimination because of the lack of accommodations.

At times, however, the book's arguments are less convincing, particularly when they are not backed by strong evidence beyond a case summary or an interview quote. For example, Chapter 3, "Driver Criminalization," examines systemic racism within the ride-hailing and taxi industries. One example illustrates the financial and personal harm that regulations place on professional drivers, explained through the lens of racial power dynamics. For example, drivers face penalties for refusing to pick up passengers; enforcement actions in New York City in the late 1990s targeted the mostly person-of-color workforce. But the complex nature of the regulation's effects makes it difficult to argue that drivers were disproportionately harmed. Although the consequences of pickup refusal were often dealt unjustly, without hearings, the program was necessary in the first place because Black passengers were more likely to be refused a taxi hail. Evidence from a taxi driver interview describes the problem as not as extensive as the regulators implied because rides were refused more often based on destination rather than race. However, 15% of rides were still refused based on race, and although taxi pickup locations are strictly regulated in New York City, space is intertwined with race everywhere in the United States. The chapter argues that driver and passenger risks are "entangled" and "structured into the industry, rather than in opposition" (p. 82). This is true, and it is difficult to imagine a protective system that creates rights for both parties without introducing some element of perceived unfairness.

Nevertheless, *Spent Behind the Wheel's* application of feminist theory to ride-hailing is forward-thinking and valuable. It remains incumbent on planners to consider how the book's approach and findings can inform future empirical studies. An immediate practice-oriented takeaway from this study is that professional drivers face precarity along multiple dimensions. Regulations and operating practices across both taxi and ride-hailing industries have protected passenger rights, often at the expense of driver rights and wellbeing. Planning efforts that include ride-hailing as part of the landscape of transportation options must engage with this reality,

and additional research in the transportation and planning fields must inform how to do so.

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