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LIMINAL PRECARITY AND COMPROMISED AGENCY

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1. Introduction

The past years have seen a considerable growth of gig economies across the globe (Charlton 2021). This growth has been accompanied, if not indeed enabled, by a significant shift in the composition of the workforce that drives these primarily urban economies. While this workforce continues to be marked by its heterogeneity (Schor 2020), the people who service customers via an app are increasingly likely to be migrants (Alderman 2019; Bandeira 2019; Markham 2018). While reliable statistical data on the share of migrant workers in national gig economies is scarce (for an exception, see ILO 2021), qualitative research has started to document migrant gig workers' prevalence and their plight. Recent scholarship has examined migrant experiences in on-demand food delivery, ride-hailing, and domestic cleaning work across cities in Europe (Altenried et al., 2020; Altenried 2021; Van Doorn 2020a/b; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020; Metawala 2021), Latin America (Velasco and Martínez, 2020; Weber et al. 2021), North America (Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2021; Holtum et al. 2021), Africa (Hunt et al. 2019; Pollio 2019), and Australia (Veen et al. 2020). In China and India too, rural to urban migration supplies a steady flow of platform workers in the care, food delivery and logistics sectors (Chen 2019; Raval 2020; Tandon and Rathi 2021; Chen and Sun 2020).

The prevalence of migrants in the gig economy workforce makes sense from the perspective of the corporate platforms that govern this work: as these companies continue to pursue scale, shareholder value, and – increasingly – a road to profitability, they require a reliable labour supply that remains stable despite the progressive deterioration of wages and working conditions across markets (Van Doorn and Chen 2021). Given migrants' relative distance to the labour market, their limited familiarity with national labour regulations and institutions, and their restricted labour market mobility due to a frequently precarious legal status, they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and face more significant obstacles to resisting poor working conditions than native workers (Saucedo 2018). Although recent migrant-led organising efforts have forcefully demonstrated that migrant gig workers can and do contest platforms' unfair and exploitative practices despite such obstacles (Cant 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Dzieza 2021), many continue to – reluctantly or gladly – accept rides, deliveries and cleanings via their apps. The question, one that scholars are only recently beginning to explore, is why this

is the case: what are the push and pull factors that explain migrants' ongoing engagement with platform-mediated gig work?

This chapter examines what moves migrants in the Global North to take up gig work and stick with it for various periods of time despite its by now well documented precarious conditions, by investigating the role that gig platforms play in their life-building trajectories. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in three Global North cities – New York, Berlin, and Amsterdam – I assess the opportunities and challenges of app-based food delivery and domestic cleaning, specifically, as these are negotiated by migrant workers with a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds, educational accomplishments, and skill sets. Historically, both food delivery and domestic work have been characterised by informality and exemption from – or absence of – regulatory frameworks in all three national settings included here, shoring up the gendered and racialised exploitation of the immigrants and minorities who continue to shoulder most this work (e.g. Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Lutz and Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2010). Gig economy companies have taken advantage of this regulatory void by quickly scaling their business, mobilising platform architectures, venture capital, and cheap labour to turn previously marginal(ised) economic transactions into the basis of a capital- and data-intensive global industry. It was at this point that regulators started to take a more serious interest in the precarious conditions of this ostensibly 'new' type of work.

Even though precarity has been a prominent theme in the burgeoning gig economy literature, a focus on migrants' experiences of precarity in relation to locally embedded platform labour has so far been relatively scarce, with some notable exceptions from the Global North (e.g. Altenried 2021; Holtum et al. 2021; Lee 2021) and the Global South (e.g. Raval 2020; Hunt et al. 2019; Mpofu 2020). Moreover, when gig workers' agency in the face of their precarious circumstances has been a topic of research, most studies have examined individual and collective forms of resistance to these circumstances (e.g. Cant 2019; Tassinari and Maccarone 2020; Howson et al. 2020). As important and insightful as these studies are, also for understanding the collective power of migrant gig workers, in this chapter I focus on relatively minor and everyday modes of agency that are less spectacular than efforts at organised resistance yet are still critical to how migrants manage to sustain their livelihoods and affective attachments to a better future.

Ultimately, the kind of agency I am interested in here moves 'in, against, and beyond precarity' (Alberti et al. 2018: 448), in the sense that it pertains to migrants' struggles to make do and make things – including but not limited to app-based gigs – work in the space between survival and thriving. This is the space of migration trajectories encompassing periods of transit, arrival, and (provisional) settling during which ordinary life is reproduced even as it is reorganised. As we will see, gig platforms are integrated into these trajectories and indeed support them, although they also throw up new obstacles to migrants' (social and labour market) mobility. This generates scenes of struggle and opportunity in which the precarity associated with gig work intersects with prior experiences of vulnerability and insecurity beyond the platform labour context. We therefore need more capacious and nuanced conceptions of precarity and agency that have looser ties to the workplace, in order to get a better grasp of migrants' uniquely ambivalent relationship to app-based work. This is what I aim to work toward in this chapter, which is organised as follows: Section one offers a discussion of how the topic of precarity has been taken up in the gig economy literature and brings this research into conversation with some recent scholarship on migrant workers' precarity and agency. Section two then offers an account of the study's research design and methodology. In section three, which is divided into four thematically organised parts, I present and analyse a series of ethnographic vignettes that narrate the experiences of six migrant gig workers. Section four closes the chapter by discussing the main findings and introducing the

notion of 'liminal precarity' to rethink the ambiguous space between precarity and agency in these workers' lives, followed by some broader concluding reflections.

2. Studying precarity in the gig economy – what's migration got to do with it?

The notion of precarity has featured prominently in critical gig economy scholarship since it first emerged (e.g. Aloisi 2015; Cherry 2015; Dubal 2017). While not always using this specific term or fleshing it out conceptually, a growing number of studies has demonstrated that platform-mediated gig work is precarious insofar as it is marked by unstable pay, job insecurity, minimal worker control, risk-offloading, and/or a lack of labour protections and rights. Since it is beyond the scope and purpose of the present chapter to provide a comprehensive review of this literature, I will instead address some of its key insights and blind spots, in order to analytically frame the ethnographic vignettes presented in the next sections. First, however, I contextualise this discussion by briefly – and necessarily selectively – sketching the emergence and critical reception of the precarity concept.

Precarity and its discontents

While initially introduced in Italy during the 1980s, in the wake of the country's industrial decline, the term 'precarity' gained wider traction in the early 2000s, when it was able to affectively magnetise a new generation of European workers whose livelihoods and working conditions were marked by levels of insecurity previously unseen at such scale (Millar 2017; Alberti et al. 2018). It was able to mobilise these workers because it functioned as an evocative descriptor of a shared feeling, or predicament, offering a vocabulary to express what was only beginning to be theorised academically (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Since then, '[a]s labour's situation relative to capital has worsened, the prevalence of the term precarity has proliferated' (Alberti et al. 2018: 448), especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (Kalleberg 2018). The Great Recession saw a considerable increase in academic interest in precarity as a capacious political concept and analytical framework, perhaps most popularly represented by Guy Standing's (2013) coining of the term 'precariat' to denote the emergence of a new global contingent class. For its critics, however, Standing's contribution also represented how the burgeoning scholarly engagement with precarity had resulted in a 'significant conceptual overstretching' that threatened to weaken the notion's explanatory value (Alberti et al., 2018: 448). As it was called upon to do more analytical work, precarity was in danger of turning into an empty signifier that hindered rather than advanced the study of contemporary capitalism and class. Moreover, the push to universalise precarity as a globally shared condition of economic vulnerability that could serve as the ground for a new class configuration ignored earlier efforts to situate the concept historically as well as geographically – specifically I the ubiquity of labour informality and social insecurity in the Global South (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Munck 2013).

Despite such critical corrections, scholars from a wide range of disciplines continue to find analytical purchase in the notion of precarity, even if some have preferred to speak of precarisation to elaborate a more processual understanding of how people's lives are made insecure and vulnerable (Lorey 2015; Alberti et al. 2018). Additionally, theorising precarity as a relational concept allows one to link up 'the micro and macro' (Paret and Gleeson 2016: 280), or the subjective experience of precariousness and the political economic patterns and drivers of precarisation (Alberti et al. 2018), while also connecting the sphere of production to the still less frequently examined sphere of social reproduction (Pang 2019). The latter move widens the

analytical scope beyond practices of exploitation or subordination in the workplace and the labour market, to include an examination of 'how state regulations structure and reproduce conditions of precarity' (ibid.: 560). As I address in the following section, understanding precarity as 'the consequence of an unequal distribution of [state] protection within society, which leaves some groups more exposed to precariousness than others' (Alberti et al. 2018: 449), is particularly helpful for studying the multidimensional vulnerability of migrant workers (cf. Paret and Gleeson 2016).

The (differential) precarity of gig work: research from the Global North and South

If we follow Qi and Li's (2020) analytical schema, which identifies the labour market, the labour process, and labour's reproduction as three 'fields' where precarity can be studied, it is clear that critical research on platform-mediated gig work has so far privileged the first two at the expense of the latter. Indeed, perhaps the main contribution of much gig economy scholarship is its often-detailed accounts of the extent to which platform companies and processes of platformisation have changed the way workers sell their labour power and how this labour power is then managed remotely as a production input. On the one hand, research has focused on the contractual dimensions of gig work, particularly the impact of worker (mis)classification on access to labour rights and protections (e.g. Dubal 2017; Halliday 2021). On the other hand, studies have examined the labour process of app-based service delivery to elucidate how (algorithmic) management practices affect gig workers' income and job security and their ability to exercise control over their work (e.g. Woodcock 2020; Cano et al. 2021). As such, the gig economy literature has located the drivers and dynamics of precarisation primarily within the purview of platform-governed labour markets and processes, at the expense of a more relational approach that teases out how precarity is generated and experienced *on* and *off* the platform – and how these sites intersect (Qi and Li 2020: 509). This limited analytical scope is usually accompanied by the blanket assumption that gig work is degraded work and platformisation entails precarisation (e.g. Van Doorn 2017; Scholz 2017). Understanding precarity relationally, however, demands that it is not treated as monocausal or uniform, instead acknowledging its varied articulation in the lives of differently positioned gig workers who may already experience layered forms of precarity before signing up with a platform.

A relatively small body of ethnographic research has documented gig workers' experiences of precarity across sites of production and, to a lesser extent, social reproduction. These studies attempt to make sense of 'the multiple and often conflicting ways that individuals negotiate the precarious economics of their digital labor – creating pockets of differential precarity within a range of relationships and environments' (Malin and Chandler 2017: 388). In the Global North context, the work of Schor and her team stands out for mapping this manifold nature of precarity, showing how it is mediated by workers' 'platform dependency' and contingent on the type of platform labour performed (Schor et al. 2020). Their research highlights the heterogeneity of the gig economy and its workforce, providing evidence for the existence of a hierarchy in which drivers and delivery workers tend to experience lower income opportunities and worse working conditions than other types of providers, while their higher platform dependency intensifies their precarity (ibid.; see also Ravenelle 2019).

Although the study usefully moves beyond the literature's pervasive preoccupation with ride-hailing and delivery work (cf. Ticona and Mateescu 2018), providing a more nuanced picture of precarity, its inclusion of platforms with high asset requirements (e.g. Airbnb) at the expense of domestic cleaning or care platforms may have led to an overestimation of the

previously mentioned workforce heterogeneity. A number of recent studies likewise set in the Global North, including my own research, has found that many of those currently working in the expanding bottom of the platform economy hierarchy are migrants, whose socio-economic marginalisation renders them more platform dependent – despite being an internally heterogeneous group (Lam and Triandafyllidou 2021; Webster and Zhang 2020; Van Doorn 2020a; Altenried 2021). For instance, research by Altenried et al. (2020) shows how young South American migrants who arrive in Germany on a temporary visa find few job options besides app-based food delivery and cleaning work. While this often suits their needs, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the risk of working without access to a publicly or privately provided safety net once cleaning gigs dried up and doing deliveries suddenly became 'essential' yet potentially hazardous frontline work. As the authors note, such precarious circumstances demand 'the readiness to move on' (Altenried et al. 2020), yet such mobility will be delineated by the resources and opportunities different groups of migrants have available to them.

Meanwhile, ethnographic research conducted in different areas of the Global South has examined how gig work offers a particular mix of opportunities and challenges in urban settings where formal employment is the exception to the rule of informal labour arrangements and precariousness is a generalised yet unequally distributed condition for large parts of the population. This research generally offers a more complex and expansive picture of precarity that further loosens its causal relation to platform labour by teasing out how gig workers navigate multiple vulnerabilities, orders of worth, and discourses of entrepreneurship in pursuit of platform-derived 'marginal gains' (Pollio 2019; Raval and Pal 2019; Lazzolino 2021). As such, these studies not only continue the work of situating analyses of precarity geographically, but also problematise the generalisability of both commercial and critical narratives about the platform economy in the Global North (Raval 2020). They show how gig platforms operate differently in national and urban settings across the Global South, as they are integrated into local economies and social networks, balancing the threshold of formal and informal markets (Heeks et al. 2020; Qadri 2021). With respect to how migration shapes the growth and composition of urban gig economies, this scholarship also examines the various conditions and considerations that lead domestic, often rural migrants to take up app-based work in large cities while documenting their endeavours on and off the platforms (Surie and Sharma 2019; Prabhat et al. 2019; Chen and Sun 2020).

For example, in her study of ride-hailing drivers in Bengaluru, Raval (2020) found that a combination of agricultural distress, property-related caste hierarchies, and gendered breadwinner expectations drove young men to sign up with Ola and Uber. Echoing the findings presented in this chapter, many of these drivers considered ride-hailing a short-term commitment that could allow them to pay off loans, support their families back home, or invest in education. In other words, gig work was treated as a temporary means to other ends, itself a sacrificial form of investment in which hard work is meant to secure not just one's own (future) livelihood and security but also of one's kin. These findings lead Raval to ask two pressing questions: first, 'what count[s] as *good life* within academic and policy talk on "the future of work"' and, second, 'how do we retool precarity . . . as a non-fatalistic analytic' that extends 'beyond its automatic use to describe material and economic deficit to instead start thinking *with* precarity' (2020: 57, 65 – emphasis in original)? Although my research is situated in the Global North, I am likewise interested in exploring what such a 'non-fatalistic analytic' of precarity might look like in this context, despite the critical challenges of translating and comparing between vastly different settings. This effort may start with the recognition that precarity is as much a generative condition as it is restrictive or destructive. When seeking to think *with* precarity, it is instructive to examine this ambivalence in dialogue with migrant gig workers, by centring their experiences, aspirations, and compromised agency.

Centring migrant workers' agency in, against, and beyond precarity

To be sure, migrant populations are highly diverse, comprising many different backgrounds, education levels, legal status, and migration trajectories. In the Global North context, an extensive body of literature on labour and migration has nevertheless identified a number of common issues and dynamics that are pertinent to the present discussion. For instance, migrants' lack of local language proficiency (Polkowska and Filipek 2020), the non-recognition of their educational accomplishments (Cameron et al. 2019), and their restricted access to national welfare protections (Lafleur and Mescoli 2018) lead them to accept precarious employment. Furthermore, immigration policies mandating income requirements or proof of steady employment to qualify for long-term residence or family visas force migrants to stay in exploitative work arrangements for as long as these help them meet the state's demands (Könönen 2019; Anderson 2010). Despite their difficult position, migrant workers tend to stick with predatory employers because their wages, while low, are still relatively higher compared to their countries of origin (Mackenzie and Forde 2009; Polkowska and Filipek 2020). These predicaments have contributed to the emergence of a 'migrant division of labour' in global cities such as London (May et al. 2007). Meanwhile, studies highlighting migrants' agency in the face of degraded working conditions have shown how they use narratives of persistence, entrepreneurship, and respectability to counter discrimination and devaluation (Saucedo 2018; Wu 2016). However, low-wage employers also leverage these empowering narratives in order to maintain the very forms of structural violence and inequity that they respond to (Valdez et al. 2019).

The agency of low-wage migrant workers has received less scholarly attention than their precarity. This is unsurprising since these migrants have too often been positioned as victims determined by their precarious circumstances. Yet they obviously can and do exert various forms of agency – the question is rather what factors influence the extent to which they can do so and what these various forms look like. As Paret and Gleeson (2016: 282–283) assert, 'the ability for workers to exert agency depends on both their structural locations (as immigrants and workers, but also within other marginalised communities), their institutional context, and their subjective understandings of individual efficacy'. How these factors co-articulate will then establish what modes of agency are possible, ranging from (constrained) decision-making, strategising, and individual and collective forms of organising and resistance to more minor-key negotiations of affective attachments to people, places, and objects embodying changing ideas of the good life (ibid.; Carling and Collins 2018). As Carling and Collins (2018: 911) argue, aspiration and desire constitute prominent if under-researched drivers of migration, and I would add that these 'motive forces' likewise drive the expansion of gig platforms that are becoming part of global migration infrastructures (cf. Collins 2020; Altenried 2021; Van Doorn and Vijay 2021). Examining migrant gig workers' 'affective responses to the possibilities of different places [and platforms], the stories of others and the opportunities and constraints that people face in their lives' (Carling and Collins 2018: 918) can help to advance a non-fatalistic analytic of precarity by accounting for migrants' frequently compromised but not readily defeated agency within and beyond the platform's purview. With this in mind, I will develop the notion of 'liminal precarity' in my discussion of the ethnographic vignettes presented in the next sections, but first I provide an explanation of the study's research design and methodology.

3. Research design and methodology

The argument presented here derives from the findings of an ongoing five-year research project that investigates how digital platforms are providing new opportunities and challenges for

different groups of low-wage service workers in Amsterdam, Berlin, and New York City. These cities have been chosen because they are each prominent tech hubs with thriving start-up cultures and were early testbeds for a variety of gig and sharing economy platforms, making them suitable sites for studying the long-term developments and impacts of platformisation. Over time, these cities' public institutions have maintained an ambivalent and at times antagonistic relationship with the venture-backed firms that inserted themselves into the urban fabric (Pelzer et al. 2019; Seidl 2020; Cassell and Deutsch 2020). Besides such similarities, the three cities can be usefully compared given their different socio-spatial characteristics and their distinct political, economic, and legal climates (which are differently governed on urban, regional, and national scales).

In each city, I conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork, resulting in a total of 151 semi-structured interviews with app-based food delivery workers and cleaners (among other types of fieldwork data). I started in New York City in February 2018, then moved to Berlin in October of that year and returned to Amsterdam (where the project is based) in May 2019 for the final leg of the fieldwork period. Significantly, the empirical research thus took place before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, although I did follow up with several interviewees to inquire how the pandemic affected them – mostly via private messaging apps. Recruitment for the interviews took place offline as well as online. In public locations across the three cities, I distributed flyers that explained the aims of the study and offered a \$15/€15 gift card as compensation for participants' time. This method proved to have a limited yield, especially for recruiting domestic workers, so more effort was put into online recruitment, primarily via gig work-themed Facebook groups, LinkedIn, Craigslist, and other online markets for goods and services.

While the research did not start out with a focus on migrant labour, I specifically increased recruitment efforts in Facebook groups dedicated to the migrant experience in Berlin and Amsterdam once it became apparent that a large share of the participants in these cities had a migrant status or background. I also engaged in snowball sampling, relying on the social networks that I had access to. Although I had already noticed the large number of non-white and migrant food delivery workers in New York, I had at that time not yet structurally thematised migration in relation to gig work, and importantly, it proved to be very difficult to include members of the city's predominantly Latino, Chinese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and West African gig worker communities due to language barriers and a climate of fear among (undocumented) migrants living under the Trump administration. Only on one occasion was I able interview two Mexican delivery workers in Spanish, with the help of an interpreter. In all other instances, the interviews were conducted in English. These language barriers were much less of an issue in Berlin and Amsterdam, where most migrants spoke some workable level of English, German, or Dutch (the three languages I master).

In Berlin, 24 out of 25 interviewed cleaners and 24 out of 30 interviewed food delivery workers were migrants, the majority having arrived from Eastern and Southern European countries as well as Chile and Argentina. In Amsterdam, 11 out of 12 interviewed cleaners and 21 out of 28 interviewed delivery workers were migrants, again mainly from countries in Eastern and Southern Europe but also from Brazil, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (mostly international students). In New York, 6 out of 34 interviewed couriers were immigrants from Central America and West Africa, with the sample consisting mainly of African American and Latino participants. Similarly, 19 out of 22 interviewed cleaners were African American and Latinx with no immigrants featured in the sample. This absence can be attributed to how the previously mentioned language barriers intersected with the general difficulty of recruiting app-based domestic cleaners, who are much less publicly visible than delivery workers.

Research participants in all three cities worked via multiple different apps, often simultaneously. This was especially the case for food delivery workers. In this chapter, I focus on migrants' experiences with a select number of app-based platforms that were most prevalent in the interviews. In New York, I look at Relay, a local food logistics platform without a customer-serving interface, which was founded in 2014 and operates in several cities along the East Coast of the United States. The company is privately traded and has received funding from a small number of investors,[1] yet more details regarding its financial history and status are not publicly available. In Berlin the focus is on Helpling and Deliveroo. Helpling was founded in 2014, in Berlin, and operates in over 200 cities in 10 countries. Since its inception, it has raised a total of $95 million in funding from 12 investors.[2] Deliveroo was founded in 2013, in London, and operates in more than 800 cities across 12 countries, leaving Germany right after I finished my fieldwork in Berlin.[3] It has raised massive amounts of investment capital, most recently a $575 million Series G round led by Amazon. In March 2021, Deliveroo had a highly unsuccessful IPO, losing nearly a third of its value on the first day of public trading.[4] Finally, in Amsterdam, I likewise look at migrants' experiences with Helpling and Deliveroo, but also including Uber Eats, the Uber subsidiary that is available in over 6,000 cities across 45 countries.[5]

4. The trajectories of migrant gig workers in New York, Berlin, and Amsterdam

Negotiating between the recognition of inevitable space constraints and the desire to flesh out – and thereby do justice to – the stories and experiences of those who participated in this research, I have selected the narratives of six migrant gig workers for inclusion in this section.[6] This selection is based on the extent to which these workers (1) collectively represent the diverging backgrounds and migration trajectories found in the total interview sample, (2) offered sufficiently detailed accounts that enabled a nuanced analysis of gig platforms' impact on migrant precarity in the three cities, and (3) addressed issues and themes that were salient in the overall interview data. Despite the general heterogeneity of not just the research participants' demographic composition but also their experiences across cities, platforms, and types of work, it is the purpose of this section to highlight some overarching dynamics and concerns, which I have organised into four thematic sections: 'The best option available', focusing on migrants' lack of better income opportunities; 'A means to other ends', detailing how they leverage gig work to meet particular goals; 'A lifeline and a modicum of security', inquiring into the extent to which gig platforms can function as a makeshift safety net; and finally, 'The short end of the stick', which shows how these platforms not only have the capacity to ameliorate migrant precarity but also exacerbate it.

The best option available

Andrei, who moved from Romania to Amsterdam 12 years ago, appreciates that Uber Eats allows him to work as much as he wants, which was never an option in his other jobs. For him, this is a form of autonomy to the extent that it grants him the ability to maximise his earnings by working as much as possible. App-based food delivery also allows him to take breaks whenever he wants or to take time off without advance notice if there is a family emergency back in Romania. When he returns to Amsterdam, he is able to pick up where he left off. In our interview, he claimed to work over 100 hours a week, dividing his time between Uber Eats and an automobile repair shop. By working around the clock, he was able to rent an expensive apartment in the city centre, pay his bills and taxes, and send money to his family back in

Romania. He even managed to save some money for a rainy day. Andrei is proud of what he's been able to accomplish, considering that, upon his arrival in Amsterdam, he had just €14 to his name. He was homeless and slept on a small open boat, under a plastic tarp, for a period of eight months. As he couldn't afford to purchase a bike, he put one together using parts from two broken bikes he found on the street. Over the following four years, he would use it daily to cycle six kilometres to the restaurant where he worked (informally) as a cleaner, sending 75% of his paycheck to his family. He eventually managed to find an apartment after landing a construction job, which he combined with his cleaning work. When, after six years, his contract with the construction company was no longer renewed, Andrei decided to sign up for Deliveroo as a stopgap measure, yet what was intended as a temporary gig ended up becoming his (more than) full-time occupation. By the time Deliveroo deactivated his account following an altercation with a restaurant owner, Uber Eats had landed in Amsterdam and signed up Andrei during a heated battle for market share.

Gig platforms are characterised by relatively low institutional barriers to paid work opportunities, which forms a major pull factor for migrant workers like Andrei. These low barriers exist not only because platform companies frequently use an expedited, largely automated online hiring process they call onboarding, but also due to how some companies do not always strictly enforce formal requirements such as business licenses (which independent contractors need in order to operate in many European countries), social security numbers, or work permits. Mohammed, a Syrian refugee in his 30s who arrived in Berlin during Europe's 'long summer of migration' in 2015 (Altenried et al. 2018), found that his tenuous legal status and lack of German language skills presented formidable obstacles to finding paid work. Helpling, however, did not require proficiency in German, and neither did the company demand a business license. All they requested was a valid ID and they accepted the little documentation he had; five days after signing up online he could start accepting cleaning offers. Mohammed suspected that Helpling tactically waives the business license requirement in order to attract more cleaners. People who can obtain a proper business license would probably work elsewhere, he figured, or at least they *should* since, in his view, Helpling is for people who have few alternatives. Accordingly, he sees his arrangement with the platform as one of 'mutual exploitation', where each party tries to leverage the other to the fullest extent.

This was an attitude I encountered frequently across the three field sites. In New York, for instance, Kayode did app-based food delivery because, he insisted, it allowed him 'to work for himself' and make a lot of money as long as he put in the necessary hours and closely 'followed' and 'beat the system'. Five years earlier he had come to the US for business from Nigeria but decided to extend his stay in search for better income opportunities. During this period, he met an American woman and they decided to marry, granting Kayode a green card. As a permanent resident, he had better labour market access than many of the (often undocumented) Central American migrants who do food delivery in the city, yet many jobs would require him to return to school because his Nigerian diplomas are of little value in the United States. This was not really an option, primarily because his family back home relied on his remittances: 'I don't want to go to school because I have many people depend on me. I need something like easy to make the money, to start moving'. Food delivery apps met this need, providing him with a quick way to earn 'more than a lawyer or banker' would make in a week, as he (mistakenly) liked to point out. Up until a while ago, he used to be able to earn a weekly sum of $1,500 with one app alone, but now that 'business was slow' due to increased competition and declining payouts he relied on a mix of four apps to still reach about $1,000 per week. With a mix of pride and frustration, he explained that he really had to hustle in order to follow – let alone beat – the system:

> When they're doing promo [promotional offers; i.e. incentives], anyone that's promo or whatever, you swing with that one, go with that one. They do competition. That's how you're going to see it. When they're going cheap, you go this one, when this one cheap, you go that one.

Kayode switched between apps like he switches his e-bike batteries: when one no longer functioned according to his needs, he quickly replaced it with another. Having an e-bike with multiple batteries is a must if you work all day every day, like he does, despite the recurrent risk of getting fined or having your bike confiscated by police. At the time of my fieldwork, the kind of full-throttle e-bikes generally used by delivery workers were still ruled illegal under New York City government, and its revanchist campaign to crack down on their presence had a devastating impact the many migrants who depend on this work for a living (Anzilotti 2018). Kayode himself paid many $500 fines and had his bike stolen or confiscated four times over the past three years, each time buying a new one. When I remarked how costly that must have been, he looked at me and answered, with a sense of resignation: 'What are you gonna do?' This was a mantra of sorts during our conversation, used whenever he wanted to express not just his lack of options but also his resolve and can-do attitude. If you are determined to start moving to a new country, what you are going to do is make money, come hell or high water?

A means to other ends

For Kayode and many of his fellow West African migrants, food delivery apps are integrated into the tenuous path to where they aspire to be. As part of their local 'arrival infrastructure' (Meeus et al. 2019), these apps form plug-and-play devices whose instant payout option[7] and high earnings potential – however volatile – make gig work a much more appealing income opportunity than other available jobs. Overall, I met very few cleaners or delivery workers that saw app-based work as a viable permanent occupation. Gig platforms are instead treated as stopgaps or stepping stones to something better, even when this something is still only a shimmer on the horizon. Kayode, for one, had a very concrete idea of his future: what he was moving towards, by working hard and saving up as much as he could, was becoming a truck driver. I found this a surprising aim and told him as much, but he was convinced this was the right career move for him given that he wanted to work independently, already had secured a proper license, and believed interstate trucking could earn you as much as $300,000 a year:

> Some people told me that you can make like – I mean, it depends, I don't know. I want to work with the big truck then save, like in six months, I could save at least $100,000. Then I use it to open any business, buying a house, do whatever you want – it's common sense.

Instead of focusing on the curiously inflated figures Kayode has in mind or questioning what he considers to be common sense, what I find more interesting here is how becoming a truck driver serves as an aspiration that embodies the potential for personal transformation and upward social mobility (cf. Carling and Collins 2018). While his financial investment in the required license has helped him approach his goal, his affective investment in the good life image that accompanies it sustains his ongoing app-based hustle, giving him the drive to keep working in spite of the setbacks and disappointments that he considers to be part of the arrangement. He was determined to stick with food delivery for one more year, after which the points on his driver's license would be removed.[8] As soon as he regained a clean license, he was going to make his next big move.

Like Kayode, Elisa had a plan. She appreciated Helpling for the purpose it served to realise this plan: it had helped her forge a 'fresh start', by allowing her to quickly earn money in a new country – the Netherlands – and schedule her work around the care for her two children. Back in Brazil, she had been working as a financial analyst, while her husband earned an income as a professional musician. Both drove for Uber on the side in order to save some money and deal with the rising costs of living. Fortunately, her mom was happy to babysit. Besides growing expenses, however, Elisa also increasingly feared for the safety of her children, which eventually pushed her to try and move her family to Amsterdam – a city imbued with warm, hopeful feelings ever since she spent her honeymoon there. After arranging her Portuguese passport in Lisbon, she and her husband drew heavily on their savings to get settled in Amsterdam, but soon enough Elisa had to find a job. Despite speaking English and having a BA degree in economics, she ended up cleaning rooms in the city's Soho House, which, at 38, she found physically taxing. She also could not deal with the treatment, which she found degrading, so she searched for other kinds of cleaning work online and found Helpling.

In Elisa's experience, working via Helpling was much more personable and flexible compared to Soho House, and because the platform sent her a lot of cleaning offers right away, it also brought in much more money. She would have continued to be active on Helpling if it weren't for the fact that she needed an employment contract with set hours in order to prove that she was financially capable of sponsoring her husband's residence permit. After Zara, the clothing retailer, hired her for 30 hours per week and regularly forced her to put in (unpaid) overtime, she could no longer retain her Helpling clients and decided to quit the app indefinitely. When Elisa left Zara seven months later due to her frustration with being structurally underpaid and mistreated by management, she did not return to Helpling. Instead, her husband, who had already taken over some of her clients, increased his hours on the platform while she stayed with the kids and intensified her search for a better job, something in the financial sector: 'Because we just arrived, so that's what we have now, but things is coming better, I think, and so if I find a nice job, I don't need to clean anymore, so I'm going to do what I know to do'. Helpling formed a means to this end, rendering her image of the future good life a little more palpable. As she elaborated,

> I'm here for my kids, you know, like I came here to give them education, everything, so I'm able to do everything to stay here and continue our life here. So it [cleaning via Helpling] is not what I *want* but . . . it is what everybody can do when you arrive in a place and you don't know anybody and you don't know the job place. You just get money.

Kayode, Elisa, and many other gig workers I spoke with concur that these apps are attractive because they furnish a quick and relatively easy income stream, which forms a prerequisite for the realisation of their personal or professional aspirations. In other words, gig work *buys you time* by allowing you to get by for as long as you need to figure out or complete your next move, and in this way, digital platforms can afford social, professional, and spatial mobility in circumstances otherwise marked by constraints and being stuck (cf. Bélanger and Silvey 2020). However, as we will see, these platforms may also generate new obstacles to migrants' mobility and thriving.

A lifeline and a modicum of security

While Elisa did not intend to return to Helpling, she admitted that she had not deleted her app, just in case her job hunt was not successful. She was giving herself a few months, after which she would consider taking on new clients via the platform. This kind of anticipatory reasoning

was prevalent among migrant gig workers in all three cities. As they recompose their lives and try to find their bearings, these newcomers use gig platforms to ameliorate their economic insecurity while at the same time absorbing the risk of falling ill or getting injured on the job. Numerous interviewees described feeling a sense of reassurance knowing that they had one or more financial lifelines in their back pocket. Elisa even likened Helpling to a safety net, which I initially found curious insofar as the company, like most other platform companies, does not offer its workers the kind of insurances and protections usually associated with an employment contract. When I pointed this out to her, she countered that she did not receive sick pay or overtime at Zara either, and moreover, she and her husband were 'not thinking about this now', having only arrived in the Netherlands a year ago. Because gig work is usually seen as a temporary stopgap or stepping stone to a better occupation, migrants are willing to accept its lack of labour protections for the time being – even when this time stretches out indefinitely, as was the case for Andrei and many others like him. In these cases, migrants' frequently restricted access to their host country's social security system, combined with their previously mentioned distance from national labour markets, makes their position particularly precarious (Lafleur and Mescoli 2018). Only by working as many hours as possible and saving up every penny can they achieve an improvised, do-it-yourself version of social security.

Beyond labour protections and insurances, migrant workers do find other forms of safety and security in the gig economy, however nominal these may (be judged to) be. Elisa preferred cleaning homes for Helpling over informal cleaning gigs because its surveillance features gave her a sense of physical safety: 'When we have the platform we have some security. Because they know where you are, if something happens. Imagine I can go to the house and I go there and there is three men there'. This feeling of surveillance-based security is not only highly gendered but is also informed by Elisa's position as a migrant in a new city where gauging risk factors is more difficult than it would be in one's home town. Besides knowing the cleaner's geographical location, Helpling also has its clients' financial information, which, she argued, helps to deter incidents such as harassment, abuse, or wage theft. Elisa clearly had faith in Helpling's capacity and willingness to support its cleaners. While other interviewees were much less convinced that the company had their back, many nevertheless appreciated the peace of mind that comes with having a formal source of income.

For example, since joining Helpling three years earlier, Rita (39) had grown increasingly dissatisfied with how little the company did for her while continuing to take a commission on each cleaning. Nevertheless, she had no plans of leaving the platform. Rita moved to Amsterdam from her native Portugal about four years ago to accompany her boyfriend, who had found a job there in software development. As a college dropout with a history of meandering from one menial job to the next, she wasn't optimistic about her chances on the Dutch labour market and hoped that a language course – together with her formal *inburgering* (integration) trajectory – would help increase her employability. This was also her motivation to enrol in Zij aan Zij (Side by Side), an initiative of the Salvation Army that provides shelter and labour market support for precarious women. Although her situation was much less precarious compared to the other women in this program, who are mostly refugees and homeless, Rita figured that the volunteer work arranged by the program might perhaps lead to an entry-level job opportunity. It didn't, but a program manager did suggest she try out Helpling and helped her with the onboarding process. While sceptical at first, since she hadn't cleaned homes before, she nevertheless tried it out because she felt 'desperate' to start generating her own income, and after finding regular clients, she enjoyed the autonomy and solitude of her cleaning routine. This routine gave her a sense of stability, relieving some of the stress of being chronically insecure about her life perspectives. Even after she soured on Helpling, Rita felt reluctant to leave the platform because it

would mean losing the security of doing what was familiar to her and no longer having work that is on the books. Although she knew she could make more money doing informal cleanings, 'the legal thing' scared her, as did the bureaucracy that she'd have to navigate if she would set up her own cleaning business and become a truly independent contractor: 'I would need to pay someone to help, it seems a very tricky thing to sort out. Like, I can't even make my own taxes'.

As a newcomer with hardly any knowledge of local norms, laws, or procedures, Rita thus chose to play it safe with Helpling and, in her words, 'stay out of trouble' with the Dutch government, whose special regulation for home-based service provision 'essentially tolerate[s] informal employment by relieving household employers from any obligation to pay taxes or social security contributions' (Van Hooren, 2018: 13). Helpling simultaneously exploits this 'regulated deregulation' (Ferreri and Sanyal 2018) and Rita's reticence and desire to be secure, by promising formal intermediary services that, however, stop short of the kinds of assistance that would actually be of use to workers who are neither true employees nor officially self-employed (e.g. tax support). Moreover, it threatens its workforce with hefty fines if they try to accumulate an external client portfolio that the platform cannot extract rent from. The threat of a €500 fine for taking clients off the platform was indeed another factor that kept Rita tied to Helpling, as she was not just intimidated by the huge sum of money but also believed that the prohibited activity may actually be illegal under Dutch law. Ultimately, gig work is thus a scene of ambivalence for vulnerable migrants: while it can serve as a vital financial lifeline and an affective space of reprieve where they can cope and, in Lauren Berlant's terms (2007), 'coast' in a challenging new environment, it also limits their labour market mobility by tying them to the platform with a combination of carrots and sticks.

The short end of the stick

To be sure, the previously mentioned predicament pertains not just to the documented migrants who have so far been represented here – that is, those for whom institutional visibility is a necessary and relatively unproblematic aspect of getting settled in one's host country. The undocumented migrants who participated in the study expressed a similar ambivalence toward gig work yet for this group the stakes were even higher. Having a much more complicated relation to institutional visibility, especially vis-à-vis the nation-state, they saw some gig platforms as viable lifelines precisely due to their *informal* character, appreciating how these platforms' loose approach to documentation requirements allowed them to work while staying off the (national) government's radar. Echoing Mohammed's experience with Helpling in Berlin, Miguel managed to sign up with Relay in New York using only his individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN), rather than the Social Security Number (SSN), which is usually required for employment contracts in the United States. This was possible because Relay, like many other low-wage employers, did not actually hire him as an employee but misclassified him as an independent contractor whom the platform 'partnered' with. This arrangement forms a prevalent workaround, not just for Relay and its ilk but also for undocumented migrants like Miguel, for whom '[i]ndependent contract work and self-employment have . . . become default strategies for avoiding unauthorized employment, which runs afoul of immigration law' (Saucedo 2018: 122). Like so many of his Mexican peers who struggle as 'survival entrepreneurs' in informal economies (Valdez et al. 2019), however, he regularly experienced how his ability to strategise was compromised by the fact that 'self-employment is frequently less a positively chosen employment relation than one of the only realistic ways to generate an income' (Cohen et al. 2019: 5). Gig platforms are keenly aware of this fact, offering not just 'a stopgap to overcome exclusion' but an application facilitating the 'predatory inclusion' of marginalised, usually non-white communities (McMillan Cottom 2020).

Miguel (30), who arrived in New York about one year after he had crossed the border, in 2013, had gone through the good, the bad, and the ugly with Relay. He worked between 40 and 50 hours per week, using two accounts (his own and his friend's) in order to bypass the 35-hour weekly cap that Relay instated after getting into legal trouble for overtime violations (Shaak 2017). After his restaurant work fell away, Miguel needed to maximise his hours on the road to provide for his young family, which was also why he did not complain about Relay's opaque and volatile scheduling priority system. Although this system prioritises couriers like himself, who maximise their hours, it also factors in their rating by restaurants and their order acceptance and hourly completion rates. How, exactly, these variables are related and weighted in the determination of couriers' tiered access to the work schedule isn't clearly communicated, but over time, Miguel and his peers have learned to keep their rating as close to 100 as possible and not to reject too many orders – the 'too many' being contingent on their ratings and weekly worked hours. This has been a precarious, trial-and-error process. When, during any given week, Miguel experienced a drop in his worked hours, his ratings, or his order acceptance and hourly completion rates, this could – depending on the performance of other couriers – negatively impact the number of hours he was able to reserve for the following week. Moreover, when his rating dropped below an unspecified threshold, Relay could – and sometimes did – temporarily block him from the app without providing any opportunity to appeal or ask for more information. He summarised this insecure work situation (via an interpreter): 'Maybe today is good. Tomorrow, you don't know'.

Miguel also explained that during periods of low demand he could suddenly be kicked off the platform, with Relay paying for his reserved hours but obstructing his ability to stay logged in and earn more. This is because, unlike most on-demand food delivery platforms, Relay pays its couriers per hour rather than per order, which makes idle delivery capacity very costly at scale. While an hourly wage by itself provides a measure of income security, the previously mentioned lack of a reliable work schedule nevertheless offsets this advantage. Additionally, Relay's hourly wage is so low that many couriers are dependent on tips and extra hours to make ends meet. Previously, when the company paid $7.50 an hour – well below New York's tipped minimum wage of $8.30 – they had little difficulty obtaining these extra hours, but since the lawsuit-induced introduction of the hours cap and an associated hourly wage increase, to $9.80, available shifts seemed to have dried up. Miguel wanted me to know that, when demand is high, Relay still made him good money. Yet when demand is down, he risks getting caught in a vicious circle: besides the threat of getting booted from the app, fewer orders also drag down his hourly order completion rate, which may hurt his scheduling priority level, which can then lead to fewer hours and thus fewer orders (not to mention tips). The quickest way of countering this dynamic is picking up less-desirable shifts that others have dropped – for instance, due to inclement weather – and then accepting every incoming order with the aim of improving one's performance rates and maximising tips. This strategy leads to more risk-taking on the road, however, increasing the chances of accidents and injuries. Miguel got into an accident about a year before our interview, losing four teeth and injuring his arms after having hit a pothole while biking through a rainstorm. Having no accident insurance, he would have been in deep trouble if it wasn't for a bystander who found him, got him to a hospital, and ended up covering a large part of his medical bills – which were massive. With Relay taking no responsibility for what happened on the job, Miguel considered himself blessed to have this support of what he was convinced was his 'guardian angel'.

The accident took him out for a few months and really gave him a scare. As an aspiring professional musician, he particularly feared no longer being able to play the saxophone. Still, he was back on Relay as soon as he could manage, even increasing his hours to make up for lost

time and regain his priority status. Despite systematically getting the short end of the stick in this so-called partnership, the chance to make comparatively more money than elsewhere while having relatively more scheduling autonomy kept him tethered to the platform until something better comes up or his account gets deactivated. Miguel's approach to gig work closely resembles that of Andrei, whose Deliveroo account was indeed suddenly terminated. Both men aim to maximise their earnings because they face steep living costs in their respective cities and have (remote) family members to support, which makes such a severe penalty even more calamitous.

What particularly irked Andrei is that Deliveroo never bothered to hear his side of the story regarding the altercation at the restaurant. After the year of loyal service he had given the platform, after all those deliveries and the recurring talk of equal partnership, he did not expect that a single complaint would end it all in a few keystrokes. As he learned the hard way, these companies do not owe their workers anything, even those that have consistently proven their value. At Uber Eats, Andrei finds it hard to swallow that he is treated on par with students and other part-time workers who often quit after the summer, even though he completes two to three times as many orders per day as they do. By making reputation and performance metrics crucial for gig workers' income opportunities, platforms encourage their full mental and physical dedication at the expense of alternative pursuits and interests. At the same time, however, these companies do not reward dedicated workers who stay on the platform for a longer period of time. Instead, gig platforms are more focused on churning through a steady supply of replaceable migrant labour. As long as they haven't been disposed of and no real alternatives appear, these migrants will have to repeat their Sisyphean tasks.

According to Mohammed, what gig platforms lack is a long-term business plan, including a system that retains workers by properly valuing their seniority. This is why he sees no reason to remain with Helpling for much longer; there are just not enough carrots and too many sticks for him to stay on, given that he has no family to provide for and his wife's earnings will be able to absorb their drop in income. It also helps that Berlin is still a relatively affordable place to live compared to New York and Amsterdam. As someone who considers himself quite business-savvy, Mohammed finds it bad practice that, instead of rolling out seniority-based incentives or rewards (e.g. a progressive pay scale, a seniority-based benefits scheme, or a gradual reduction in the platform's commission), Helpling chooses to alienate its cleaners by temporarily deactivating them if they frequently cancel jobs or fail to respond to new cleaning offers. Once the company implemented its new 'Countdown Offers' feature, he found himself having to cancel appointments more often and thus risk a lock-out. This feature asks cleaners to respond to job offers and – instead of being matched with a client right away, as is the case for regular cleaning offers – wait 12 hours to find out if they have been selected from a pool of competing cleaners. This creates a situation where cleaners feel the need to respond to multiple Countdown Offers in order to maximise their chance of being selected, which can subsequently result in scheduling clashes and last-minute cancellations – especially when a cleaner only learns about being accepted right before the cleaning appointment. Whereas a cancellation used to mean one's performance score took a hit on the 'Reliability' metric, the platform subsequently discontinued this score and introduced a new system that gives cleaners a €15 fine if they cancel a cleaning fewer than 24 hours in advance. If they fail to show up without notice, they are charged €50.[9]

While Helpling did not implement such penalties in the Netherlands, its threats against cleaners who try to take clients off the platform and its rentier behaviour had made Rita resent the company. She saw it as a case of taxation without representation: although the company took about 25% of all her earnings, it did not provide her with the support she expected and actually fostered a work environment she experienced as antagonistic and disciplinary. Furthermore, a downside of Helpling's hefty 'take rate' was that it depressed the wage she was able to

take home herself, as she felt uneasy about raising her hourly wage knowing that her clients already paid a premium for her/Helpling's services. When Helpling asked for her feedback in a survey, she came up with a potential solution to this issue – one that resonates with Mohammed's suggestions:

> I actually suggested them to, easier than just, um, hire us would be to create a place from after a certain point, they wouldn't charge any fees. I don't know if this makes any sense, but they could eventually point us to a place where we could legalise our work with the clients but without their interference. They would charge like for a period of time but . . . because it's really unfair, I think they're entitled to a fee for a certain period of time, but not like two years.

Instead of indefinitely extracting fees from each transaction and threatening cleaners who seek to build their own client portfolio, Helpling could in this vision actually assist its senior cleaners with the disintermediation process and thereby help them on their way to becoming real independent contractors. But since facilitating a livelihood beyond the platform would herald the end of the platform economy, Helpling and other gig purveyors hold on to a business model that hinges on predatory inclusion and rent seeking. As the gig economy matures, migrant populations are increasingly bearing the brunt of this arrangement since they usually have the weakest bargaining position. 'Basically, they use our financial situations against ourselves, that's the feeling I have', Rita reflected near the end of our interview, 'because it's either this or nothing and we know that, we know that we have not, we don't have much choice'.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

Although I ended my ethnographic account by focusing on how gig platforms both prey on and exacerbate the precarious conditions that migrant gig workers have to navigate, I have also shown how these conditions are co-determined by forces extending well beyond the labour process or labour market, into spheres where labour is (haltingly) reproduced (cf. Qi and Li 2020). As these narratives have illustrated, migrants' experience of precarity is at once multiform, multicausal, and multiscalar (cf. Chacko and Price 2020), contingent on factors ranging from household situation, care responsibilities, and a city's affordability to local vehicle regulations, national labour laws, visa restrictions or requirement, and the threat of deportability. Yet my account has also demonstrated how, in the face of such overlapping vulnerabilities and constraints, these migrants exert various forms of compromised agency that enable them to make the best out of their situation but that may be overlooked if one is searching solely for expressions of resistance and collective solidarity. To be sure, during my fieldwork I also engaged with migrant-led gig worker collectives that were organising against poor working conditions (Van Doorn 2020b), yet the vast majority of those I interviewed were not involved in such activities. This does not mean they did not care or had no complaints, as evidenced previously, but rather it points to how many gig workers – migrants in particular – are just too pressed for time and caught up in their daily hustle to free up space in their heads and agendas for collective organising. Whereas some rather vent or boast among peers on Facebook or Reddit, others just decide to suck it up and make the most of it, at least for the time being, while keeping their eye on some prize hoovering on the horizon of the hopefully not-too-distant future.

Indeed, professional aspirations and the desire for a future in which the good life (however defined, as addressed later) can finally be enjoyed are prominent themes in the ethnographic vignettes. While not frequently conceptualised in terms of agency, such affective attachments drive

people to *do* things and to keep things (more or less) together despite having the odds stacked against them. I have shown how aspirations, desires, fears, vaguely elaborated plans, or affective estimations regarding certain places and types of work do not only drive migration trajectories (Carling and Collins 2018) but also lead migrants to try out and, for varying periods of time, stick with gig work. What the migrants profiled here share is the ambivalence of their affective and material attachments to gig platforms, which serve as a stopgap but also act like a trap, throwing out a lifeline that is not actually attached to anything. In their narratives we can see how platform labour both alleviates and exacerbates migrant precarity, often simultaneously, which makes it difficult to determine if and when to quit. Even quitting may not be that straightforward or permanent, as we learned from Elisa who – like numerous other migrants I spoke with – kept her cleaning app on her phone even though she hadn't logged on in months.

I believe that from these instances of ambivalence, indecision, and indeterminacy, it is possible to derive what Raval (2020) calls a 'non-fatalistic analytic' of precarity vis-à-vis platform mediated gig work. Another thing that the profiled migrants share, along with many other interviewees, is the idea that I caught them *in medias res*, as they were navigating a transitional period of heightened precarity during which they were attempting to find their bearings and compose a new life/livelihood. Gig platforms were, in this sense, seen as transitional media that supported this process, forming one element of a provisional arrival infrastructure (Meeus et al. 2019). The fact that these platforms also introduced new forms of precarity into their lives, by jeopardising their job and income security, was considered acceptable only *for the time being*, as long as it took to get to where they wanted and/or needed to be. As they were biding their time, the apps bought them more of it.

I suggest the term 'liminal precarity' to conceptualise this way of relating to one's precarious situation as a migrant gig worker. Liminal precarity denotes a subjective, affective state of mind rather than an objective state of affairs, although it does not preclude the latter. It is primarily an act of wishful thinking – a promise to oneself that the precarity experienced is transitory, part of the rite of passage that is the migration trajectory – which does not end upon arrival. Liminal precarity is also a bargain with oneself, in which the pros and cons of app-based work are thrown on the scale and deliberations about (un)acceptable working conditions and the proper time to move on are hashed out. It is an in-between space of intensified risk-taking and absorption under the understanding, or pretence, that the stuff one puts up with will be temporary. In the meantime, however, this space expands and goalposts are moved.

I thus see the notion of liminal precarity as a way to advance a non-fatalistic analytic insofar as it thinks *with* migrant's precarity, understanding it as a subjectively generative condition in spite of its objective modes of attrition. It gives access to scenes of compromised agency in which migrant gig workers endure and try to make the best of their precarious conditions rather than being overwhelmed by them, precisely because they hold on to the idea that these conditions will not last beyond a certain point that they have some control over. This is the point at which their app-supported investments are expected to yield returns. Even Andrei, whose stoic attitude kept him from fantasising about a future beyond platform labour, turned out to have a tentative exit plan, as I found out when he confided that he would like to open a restaurant with the money he was saving. Meanwhile, only Rita appeared to have no concrete plans for the future and reluctantly stuck to her Helpling routine, which she was driven to by the same anxieties and self-doubts that now kept her in her place. She had seemingly abandoned the idea that there was anywhere for her to transition toward and, like Andrei, settled for gig work indefinitely.

Beyond studying precarious gig work, finally, what is to be done? Returning to Raval's question regarding what counts as the 'good life' in academic and policy circles concerned with

the 'future of work', the answer will usually be either one of the following: that it is rooted in flexibility and can be achieved by technological means (Silicon Valley's solution) or that it is predicated on security and should be guaranteed through the standard employment contract (Labor's solution). What both answers share is the belief that precarity is primarily a workplace issue that can be eradicated straightforwardly and that gig workers need to be saved. Adopting an ethnographically informed 'non-fatalistic analytic' to study migrant gig workers belies both assumptions, however, urging institutional actors to pay closer attention to what migrants have to say about the opportunities and challenges of app-based work in relation to their broader experiences of precarity. This also means taking seriously their concerns regarding the potential repercussions of forcing platform companies to hire their workforce as employees. As my colleagues and I argued elsewhere (Van Doorn et al. 2020: 8), reclassification efforts 'should be preceded by a careful consideration of ways to minimise the harm to those who have so far been excluded from employment's protective scope', migrants in particular. Concretely, the migrants participating in this study worried about being limited in the number of hours they can work, not being able to make more per hour than minimum wage, not being able to reject orders/offers or log on and off whenever they want, and most prominently about being thrown off the platform in the workforce purge that can be expected to follow public enforcement of reclassification legislation. It should come as no surprise that this latter concern was especially pronounced among undocumented migrants, who would certainly lose access to a valued income source.

We should therefore ask who is saved and who is sacrificed when visions of the good life modelled on the Fordist citizen worker are enacted in the form of legislation intended to reform platform-governed industries whose workforce increasingly falls beyond this model's parameters. Asking this question does not mean ceding ground to Silicon Valley–inspired techno-fixes or platform lobbyists' third way solutions but should on the contrary push scholars and policymakers alike to join migrant gig workers in thinking *with* precarity's intersecting forms, which remain largely invisible when thinking solely in terms of platform-focused solutions. This should then result in a set of more radical and expansive policies that simultaneously combat exploitation by low-wage employers, exclusion and predatory inclusion by immigration laws, and other instances of institutionalised vulnerability that form structural obstacles to migrant workers' flourishing.

Notes

1 See www.crunchbase.com/organization/relay-delivery/company_financials (last accessed: 30 November 2021).
2 See www.crunchbase.com/organization/helpling/company_financials (last accessed 30 November 2021).
3 See https://uk.deliveroo.news/about/ (last accessed 30 November 2021).
4 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deliveroo#Funding (last accessed 30 November 2021).
5 See https://help.uber.com/ubereats/article/when-and-where-is-uber-eats-available-?nodeId=3f8de61e-09dd-4844-afb2-749c9ffc65a8 (last accessed 30 November 2021).
6 I have used pseudonyms to substitute for these workers' real names.
7 Most food delivery and ride-hailing apps have an instant payout feature, which allows couriers to cash out whenever they want, up to a certain number of times per day. For instance, Uber allows its 'delivery partners' to cash out through its Instant Pay feature up to five times per day, as long as they have at least a $1 balance. Note, however, that the company charges a $0.50 fee on each instant payment if the courier does not have an Uber Visa Debit Card by GoBank. See www.uber.com/us/en/deliver/basics/earnings/how-payments-work/ (last accessed 30 November 2021).
8 As the website of New York State's Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) explains, 'The Driver Violation Point System gives the New York State DMV a way to identify and take action against high

risk drivers. The DMV assigns points for certain traffic violations. If you get 11 points in an 18-month period, your driver license may be suspended. . . . Once 18 months have passed from the violation date, the points for that violation no longer count toward your total'. However, these points remain on one's driving record and may cause insurers to raise their premiums. See https://dmv.ny.gov/tickets/about-nys-driver-point-system (last accessed 30 November 2021).

9   See the Terms and Conditions for Helpling Cleaners in Germany, specifically §7.3: www.helpling.de/agb-reinigungskraft (document availably in German only. Last accessed 30 November 2021). See Van Doorn (2018) for a critical account of similar penalty systems on the North American cleaning platform Handy, particularly their impact on cleaners well-being.

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