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Recoding the city: cultural mediation of short-term rental platforms in the US

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the cultural mediation of short-term rental (STR) platforms in US cities. While many STR advocates emphasize ‘authentic’ cultural experiences and the support of local economies, less obvious are the ways that STRs like Airbnb can erode communities by transforming homes into hotels and neighbours into strangers. STR platforms have significantly disrupted many communities through increased gentrification, resident displacement, racial discrimination, and reduced city tax bases for the provision of services. As with all technological systems, STR platforms embody a politics that shapes human activities and relations. The platforms, in other words, present a set of scripts for the organization of practices and the configuration of space, tending, by design, toward impersonal commercial exchange and conceptions of neighbourhoods as resources for such exchange. I argue that as public infrastructures are absorbed into and recoded as platforms, the emerging ensemble normalizes market-over-rights-based orientations to city spaces and services. The process supports the formation of platform cultures that cast precarious gig-economy relations as necessary and enabling while obscuring the social inequalities and human suffering engendered by those arrangements. In attending to the mediation of STRs by communities and to contestations over platform meanings, politics and power relations become visible, allowing for the problematization of destructive platform configurations.

KEYWORDS Airbnb; digital platforms; infrastructure; mediation; gentrification; precarity; resistance; short-term rentals

Platformization of infrastructure

Much of the critical scholarship on digital platforms has concentrated on platforms’ increasing dominance and their problematic structuring of social relations. Whether with the plight of gig-economy workers (Rosenblat 2018, Ravenelle 2019), anti-democratic or extremist social media practices (Gillespie 2018, Marwick 2018), data-extractive surveillance functions (Andrejevic 2019, Murakami Wood and Monahan 2019, Zuboff 2019), or reductive
smart city projects (Kitchin 2016, Klauser 2017, Monahan 2018), the overall emphasis has been on the growth of monopolistic digital ecosystems that prioritize capitalist gain over public good. Academic concern with the labour dimensions of gig-economy work has been especially robust, interrogating how employment classification as ‘independent contractors’, coupled with increasing competition and emotional labour expectations, exacerbates workers’ economic precarity and stress (Friedman 2014, Webster 2016, Wood et al. 2019). These scholars have identified corrosive trends in how private platforms are becoming infrastructural – operating as indispensable systems facilitating core activities and services but in discriminatory ways and to the detriment of public values and the public good (Srnicek 2017, van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, Plantin and Punathambekar 2019, Monahan 2020).

Given the significant extant attention to gig-economy workers and the infrastructural properties of platforms, this paper takes a different, complementary tack by focusing on contestations over evolving platform cultures and their contribution to the platformization of infrastructure.¹ I argue that as public infrastructures are absorbed into and recoded as platforms, the emerging ensemble normalizes market- over rights-based orientations to city spaces and services. The process supports the formation of platform cultures that cast precarious gig-economy relations as necessary and enabling while obscuring the social inequalities and human suffering engendered by those arrangements.

I use the term platform cultures to signal the meanings and power relations emerging from materializations of digital platforms in specific contexts. The platform infrastructures associated with companies like Amazon, Airbnb, and Uber tend toward monopolistic control, where the companies – through their platforms – set the terms for interaction, exchange, individual roles, and ascriptions of value. Notwithstanding the significant constraints introduced by these platforms, they are never simply or uniformly imposed; rather, their logics are modulated by processes of cultural mediation whereby localities reinterpret their meanings and shape their deployment. By attending to the mediation of platforms by communities and to contestations over platform meanings, one can keep politics and power relations visible; one can perceive and problematize destructive platform configurations as well as identify innovative alternatives to them.

The material for this work comes from a platform ethnography that explores what happens when large-scale digital platforms collide with the built world.² The research project tracks the mediating effects of existing organizational forms, material infrastructures, and cultural practices in three distinct urban contexts: San Francisco, Boston, and Austin. Drawing upon empirical research, I analyze how local environments mediate platform capitalism,³ as well as what resistances and affordances are presented by existing
technological infrastructures and local cultural practices. Thus, the project is designed to avoid the allure of technological determinist explanatory frameworks when apprehending and theorizing platform-based technological change. While the project’s methods include document analysis, mapping, observation, and interviews in each city, the material for this paper come primarily from interviews with key informants spanning a range of positions and interests (industry, government, academia, labour unions, community groups, and non-governmental organizations). The main technologies discussed here are short-term rental platforms (e.g. Airbnb, HomeAway), although the larger project also includes transportation network companies (e.g. Uber, Lyft) and Amazon delivery services. Acknowledging their unique functions and politics, I nonetheless approach these platform domains as intertwined ecosystems that, in concert, reveal patterns in the changing relationship of people to cities, companies, and each other.

**Fraying communities: STR platforms in context**

Short-term rental (STR) platforms like Airbnb have majorly disrupted many communities in ways that can be difficult to detect from the outside. Airbnb alone has flooded cities with millions of independent lodging offerings in more than 100,000 cities around the world (Boffey 2017, Airbnb 2019), all the while fighting many of the regulations, labour agreements, and taxes placed upon other hospitality companies like hotels (Dickinson 2018, Marineau 2019). Some of the effects include increased gentrification, resident displacement, racial discrimination, and reduced city tax bases for the provision of services (Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky 2017, Barron, Kung, and Proserpio 2018, Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). While many STR advocates, including the companies, tout the benefits of ‘authentic’ cultural experiences and supporting local economies, less obvious are the ways that STRs can erode communities by transforming homes into hotels and neighbours into strangers. Speculators and real-estate investors have gravitated to the STR model as well, aggravating these dynamics while hiding behind the compelling fiction of individual homeowners renting out their primary residences to supplement their income. In recognition of these problems, many cities have now passed laws regulating STRs, for instance, requiring owner registration, limiting the number of nights per year that one can rent out a property, stipulating that it must be one’s primary residence, or – in some exceptional cases – banning ‘unhosted’ STRs altogether. Nonetheless, regulation is piecemeal and difficult to enforce, especially because unlike hotels, STRs are not easy to identify with the naked eye and, in most cities, STR companies do not cooperate by sharing data with city agencies.
The unequal effects of STRs are perhaps the most concerning. On the side of guest experiences, discrimination is commonplace, with black guests being reported to the police (Criss and Vera 2018) or routinely rejected even if it means a loss of income for hosts (Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky 2017). For example, through a controlled field experiment, researchers found that ‘[Airbnb] guests with distinctively African-American names are roughly 16% less likely to be accepted than identical guests with distinctively White names’, regardless of the race or sex of the host (Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky 2017, p. 1). On the community side, neighbourhoods with high concentrations of minority residents do not see any of the purported economic benefits to local restaurants or other establishments (Bivens 2019). Through the ‘hotelization’ of buildings, low-income minorities are finding themselves pushed out of their neighbourhoods by property owners seeking higher profits. Legal scholar Dayne Lee (2016, p. 230) explains this rationale:

So long as a property owner or leaseholder can rent out a room on Airbnb for cheaper than the price of a hotel room, while earning a substantial premium over the residential market or rent-controlled rent, there is an overpowering incentive to list each unit in a building on Airbnb rather than rent to [city] residents, thereby creating “cottage hotels”.

There is now near consensus in the academic community that STRs are contributing to resident displacement and neighbourhood gentrification, leading to racially biased housing markets (Wegmann and Jiao 2017, Nieuwland and van Melik 2020, Smith 2018, Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). While the identity and coherence of neighbourhoods suffer, the impact of these changes upon displaced residents can be especially damaging. In cities like Chicago, for instance, residents pushed to urban peripheries encounter a loss of informal social networks and community support (e.g. churches, childcare assistance) while simultaneously needing to undergo longer and more expensive commutes to reach jobs in the city (Smith 2018). STR companies endeavour to present their platforms as mere intermediaries facilitating innocent – or, better yet, culturally beneficial – exchanges among hosts and guests, but the cumulative damage of these many small-scale exchanges cannot be ignored (Interian 2016, Zale 2016).

As with all technological systems, STR platforms embody a politics that shapes human activities and relations (see Winner 1980). The platforms, in other words, present a set of scripts for the organization of practices and the configuration of space, tending, by design, toward impersonal commercial exchange and conceptions of neighbourhoods as resources for such exchange. At the same time, discursive tensions around the meanings and implications of STRs reveal that the black box is not yet closed, that the platforms can be recoded, reined in, or rejected. While the dominant narrative may be one of consumer convenience and savings, or of enriching experiences in authentic settings, community protest and regulatory pushback
contest these narratives. The sections that follow analyze some of these discursive tensions among stakeholders in order to better understand the cultural dimensions of the platformization of infrastructure.

**Short-term rental advocates**

Echoing the promotional language of companies like Airbnb, the industry representatives in my study emphasized the imagined benefits of facilitating exchanges among strangers. For instance, a former policy coordinator at one STR company argued: ‘The more mainstream short-term rentals become, I think, the more likely tourists are to get off the beaten path and have more authentic experiences in places, which I think is good for cultural exchange and *global peace*’ (SSA08, emphasis added).6 Another industry representative, hearing how Pollyannaish such pronouncements sounded, nonetheless clung to them:

> Pardon me if it sounds like I drank the Kool-Aid, but sometimes I actually do drink the Kool-Aid. There is this feeling of communities that are open to inviting people from around the world and creating community, and people want to be a part of that scene. (BSI07-2)

Such articulations reveal that the mythology of cultural exposure and authentic exchange remains core to the construction of STRs as agents of good, even if in actuality many guests never meet their hosts or interact with neighbours. The global peace discourse, which has become a technology industry cliché mercilessly mocked in shows like *Silicon Valley*, nonetheless animates the interpretive moves of industry insiders, symbolically offsetting, at least for them, any negative effects of their platforms.

Emotional appeals offer another popular compensatory move of STR advocates. Particularly in real estate markets like San Francisco, where housing affordability is a chronic problem for many residents, stories abounded of STRs providing a safety net for elderly residents. A representative of an STR advocacy group embellished this standard theme by stressing how STR exchanges could re-instill purpose in the lives of seniors:

> Seniors … are very house rich and cash poor, and home-sharing gives them a way to earn the extra supplemental income to maintain their home and age in place, which is a very important thing for seniors … That’s an economic benefit for seniors, but there’s also a significant emotional benefit too: as the kids grow up and go out of the home, loneliness is often a very big problem for seniors, and having short-term rental people, visitors from overseas coming in, it gives those seniors that I’ve spoken to, many seniors, a *new lease on life*. They meet a lot of young folk, young travelers from all around the world. These seniors can act as ambassadors to the neighborhood and introduce those travelers to what they like about San Francisco or the neighborhood they live in. (SSC11, emphasis added)
In this scenario, rather than operating as a tool of displacement or a threat to community, STRs become a life-saving mechanism that can rescue lonely seniors both financially and emotionally. This is a heroic narrative whose persuasiveness depends on the assumption that seniors were previously adrift in loneliness and deprived of nourishing interactions with others, or community, prior to the introduction of STRs. As I will show, such an argument anticipates and responds to claims by residents that the platforms are destroying their communities.

Playing the victim was also a common tactic. STR advocates were keen to deflect criticism by condemning the hotel industry as ‘monopolizing’ travel accommodation in cities. Advocates see STRs as a corrective to existing hotel monopolies, proclaiming that the hotel industry has illegally manipulated its prices to take advantage of consumers:

> the effect of short-term rentals in San Francisco has been to minimize the ability of hotels to price gouge at times of extreme demand … They don’t like the fact that they now have to consider [that] they’ve had their wings clipped when it comes to price fixing. (SSC11)

Upon losing some fights to forestall city regulation of STRs, industry representatives strive to maintain the coherence of their construction of platforms as fundamentally good; they do this by deflecting in a different way, acknowledging a few ‘bad actors’ in their midst:

> Yes, there are property managers who are co-hosts or who [merely] manage properties for some of the people that may have those second vacation homes, but … we always want to root out [truly] bad actors. If there are people that are coming in and buying up a bunch of empty units and truly disrupting in that way, we want to chase bad actors off of the platform that aren’t abiding by the rules. (BSI07-1)

On one hand, this is a classic case of what Roland Barthes (1972, p. 50) would call *inoculation*: ‘One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion’. On the other hand, the representative clings to the belief that most people (or companies) managing multiple properties are still maintaining the spirit of the platform because they are assisting individual owners with ‘second vacation homes’, not actually engaging in widescale property management and speculation. Thus, STR advocates perform challenging cultural work to position their platforms as fostering community and doing good even in the face of a growing chorus of oppositional counternarratives.

**Community opposition**

There has been a slow awakening to the problems catalyzed by STRs as many residents discover that their communities are altering in fundamental ways.
Gentrification and resident displacement are on the top of the list of concerns, but so too are worries about exacerbated racial inequalities and the increasing casualization of labour. While STR companies and advocates paint large hotel chains as the agents behind efforts to regulate STRs (Ghaffary 2018), grassroots community activism appears to be the primary driver for regulation and for changing the larger narrative about platform interests and effects. Of course, even when regulation is implemented, the illegibility of STR properties and the companies’ lack of cooperation in sharing their data with city agencies make enforcement an ongoing challenge.

Particularly in dense urban cities already suffering housing affordability crises, such as San Francisco or Boston, STR platforms have started tipping the scales for many communities, forcing long-term residents out. As one San Francisco-based labour union representative conveyed:

I think it’s really important to make that tie between displacement and Airbnb because otherwise it sounds like a very innocent thing. All of their press and rhetoric is – I don’t know, you would think that they’re responsible for world peace the way that they speak about their product. But then once you tie it to disrupting neighborhoods and evicting little old ladies, then it doesn’t quite work as well. (SSU06)

A community organizer in Boston shared this criticism, also calling out the ‘world peace’ rhetoric as a smokescreen for unsavoury profiteering at the expense of communities: ‘If they [STR companies] really feel like its “shared economy” is actually helpful [and] it’s actually creating a better world or whatnot, then they wouldn’t be spending the money into challenging the short-term rental regulation’ (BSC05). In recognition of how STR investment properties can disrupt even less-concentrated vacation-destination spots, some cities – such as South Portland, Maine and Santa Monica, California – have followed the lead set by European cities like Barcelona to ban or cap non-owner occupied STRs (Bouchard 2018, O’Sullivan 2018, Ramírez 2019). Thus, many places are now taking seriously the threats posed by STRs, illustrating the instability of the companies’ narrative line even as their market penetration accelerates (Molla 2019).

To illustrate to the gentrification and displacement critique, consider the example of Chinatown in Boston. The residents of Chinatown witnessed an astonishing growth in STR encroachment over the 2010s, with listings increasing by roughly 44 percent in 2017 alone (Jimenez 2017). With a little digging, concerned community members were able to discover that at least one quarter of those STR properties were run by commercial companies and that ‘[a]cross all listings on Airbnb in Boston, 45 percent of all revenue is earned by 12 percent of [commercial] operators’ (Jimenez 2017, p. 4). Given how lucrative the STR market had become for commercial operators,
landlords began increasing tenant rents by as much as 40 percent a year in order to push long-term renters out and free up the buildings for STR listings (Conti 2017). Thus, this was not gentrification in the classic sense because it was not more affluent owners moving in; instead, it was an illegal form of stealth neighbourhood rezoning (Conti 2017), where investors effectively ran properties as hotels without city approval to do so and without adhering to the safety requirements, labour laws, and tax obligations of hotels. For Chinatown residents, this signalled the rapid destruction of their tight-knit community, including, ironically, the ‘authentic’ character that STR companies champion and their guests claim to value.

For Chinatown residents, though, the unique character of their neighbourhood was more than a brand: it was a vital community, and one under threat. As one community advocate shared in an interview:

A lot of the privately-owned housing used to provide housing for low-income families. Now all of a sudden, a lot of them are being displaced … To me, it’s really contributing to destroying the fabric of the community. There are different people who live in Chinatown, but the sector that this served is the people who need Chinatown the most in terms of the social support, support not just from community agencies but also from neighbors and family nearby. That could sometimes include daycare, pick up of their children, to finding a job, to finding house care services, and other social services. (BSC05, emphasis added)

In response, community members banded together, forming the Chinatown Community Land Trust and partnering with advocacy groups such as Community Labor United and Boston’s Chinese Progressive Association to bring public attention to the problem. In 2017, community members staged a high-profile march to the Massachusetts State House to demand regulatory intervention. As my informant explained:

the reason why we need to regulate this is that it’s taking away housing from people and that we believe that housing should be a human right. But, in this case, because of this [STR] trend, … [housing has] been used as a tool for profit and nothing more. (BSC05)

In answer to these and other community pressures, Boston passed legislation restricting the number of STRs by prohibiting non-owner-occupants from leasing entire units and by requiring host registration to ensure compliance. Under these provisions, Airbnb would be assessed $300 per night for each illegal listing appearing on its platform. Airbnb quickly filed a lawsuit against the requirements (Logan 2018), and as of June 2019, nearly six months after the law went into effect, only 77 properties were registered in the city database (Logan 2019).

While the courts ruled that the fines could be assessed by the city, the biggest impediment to doing so is that STR companies like Airbnb refuse
to share listing data with regulators, making enforcement daunting if not impossible (Logan 2019). As an academic informant explained, companies like Airbnb could easily check to verify whether hosts are registered with the city, as required, and then reject their listings or share their data with cities, but they eschew adding any such friction to their platforms:

They just seem to be really, really determined to keep their data under lock and key. That just seems to be a constant in the platform economy in general for some reason … But if you’re in a city and you don’t have access to that data, then to try to enforce the rules, you’re acting with one hand tied behind your back. (ASA07)

This data-hoarding move by the STR industry is premised on claims of exceptionalism, that unlike hotel operators, STR companies contend that they are merely intermediaries that cannot violate the privacy protections afforded to their hosts and should not be conscripted into enforcing city regulations (Logan 2018). From the perspective of residents in places like Chinatown, however, the community’s viability may depend on locals becoming extensions of the state and surveilling their neighbours to ensure compliance:

In order to enforce it, we’re not sure if the city has the mechanism to enforce it. But, part of the community will have to play that role, making sure. It’s kind of like watching to see and make sure that people are not still running short-term rentals, running illegal hotels in the building. (BSC05)

Thus, a culture of generalized suspicion may be a byproduct of these agonistic exchanges.

Community advocates clearly play a crucial role in mediating the deployment of STR platforms: they destabilize industry discourses by voicing their own experiences, collecting and interpreting data, and organizing actions. Still, much damage has already been done to neighbourhoods like Boston’s Chinatown. It is also an open question whether the community will be left with a stronger sense of solidarity and empowerment or whether perceived imperatives for vigilance and self-policing, coupled with understandable fatigue, will further attenuate its sociality.

Although regulatory interventions may be the end goal for many communities alarmed by the ramifications of STRs, there are many paths to that destination. Artistic and activist interventions offer some of the most colourful and powerful ways of generating awareness and problematizing the status quo. In the 2015 leadup to a vote on regulating STRs in San Francisco, for example, protestors staged a rapid takeover of Airbnb’s facilities in the city (Dreyer 2015). The activists released clusters of black balloons into the large central atrium of the building, many of the balloons lifting red, house-shaped signs with sayings like ‘Evictions, Love Airbnb’, ‘Homelessness, Love Airbnb’, or ‘Entitlement, Love Airbnb’ (see Figure 1). Next, jazz musicians marched in, playing a chaotic, festive tune on their brass instruments,
followed by individuals carrying boxes of pizza to feed tenants and the homeless who participated in the event. For the next hour and a half, the diverse group occupied – or, in their words, ‘shared’ – this central space, using a megaphone to educate listeners about the harmful effects of STRs and tell their personal stories of communities under threat. Tech workers watched from the balconies above, some of them filming with cameras while others stiffly crossed their arms or put their hands on their hips in seeming annoyance at the workday interruption. Police and security guards monitored the scene but neither interfered nor made any arrests (Wong 2015b).

This activist intervention unfolded the day before San Francisco voted on Proposition F (known as the ‘Airbnb initiative’), which would have restricted individual STR offerings to 75 days per year and obligated STR companies to provide the city with detailed data about the number of stays, their duration, and their rates (BallotPedia 2015, Booth 2015, Griswold 2015). As the artist and one of the organizers behind the protest, Leslie Dreyer, explained, ‘We’re sending the message that [Airbnb] has to follow the law like everyone else … There’s a broad array of problems, but it’s based on a culture of entitlement where they don’t have to follow the law’ (Booth 2015).9 Airbnb and other STR companies fought aggressively against this legislation, spending roughly $8 million on ads, consultants, social media campaigns, and community canvassers to redirect blame onto the city for its complicity in the housing crisis and for supposedly not spending tax revenues on city

**Figure 1.** Leslie Dreyer, ‘Evictions, Deregulation, Entitlement, … Love, Airbnb’ (2015).
improvements (Booth 2015). Airbnb’s passive aggressive ‘Dear San Francisco’ ad campaign drew particular ire due to its proud proclamations of its tax contribution juxtaposed against struggling city services. For instance, large billboards and bus-stop ads declared things like:

- Dear Public Library System, we hope you use some of the $12 million in hotel taxes to keep the library open later. Love, Airbnb. (Hern 2015)
- Dear Parking Enforcement, please use the $12 million in hotel taxes to feed all expired parking meters. Love, Airbnb. (Hern 2015)
- Dear Public Works, please use the $12 million in hotel taxes to build more bike lanes, like this one. (Wong 2015a)

Public backlash was immediate, particularly on social media, with residents mimicking Airbnb’s epistolary form to respond with posts like,

Dear Airbnb, I’m happy to hear that you paid your taxes this year. I did too! Isn’t it awesome? … However, had you donated that $8 million you spent fighting Proposition F directly to the public libraries you love so much, that could have made a bigger difference. (Wong 2015a)

The artistic intervention at Airbnb’s headquarters similarly mocked the ad campaign with each of the balloon-raised messages concluding with the tagline, ‘Love, Airbnb’. In the face of vocal criticism, the company quickly pulled the ads and issued a tepid apology that again reiterated the fact that Airbnb pays taxes (Hern 2015).

Proposition F failed to pass, and Airbnb revelled in the win, claiming it was a ‘victory for the middle class’ (Griswold 2015). Nonetheless, public awareness of the problems of STRs grew, finding a receptive and concerned audience among residents and policymakers in the generally progressive political climate of San Francisco. Thus, the city subsequently, in 2016, reached a legal settlement with STRs that allowed the enforcement of an earlier law limiting listings to ‘one host, one home’. This law requires that the owner be a ‘permanent resident’ who resides in the unit at least 275 days a year and it also limits the number of rental days to 90 if the owner is not present on the property. Effectively, this prohibits owners from renting out vacation homes or investors from buying up properties to use as STRs. Moreover, in 2018, a San Francisco law went into effect requiring hosts to register properties with the city and for STR companies to manage that registration process, including removing unregistered properties from their platform or risk a fine of up to $1000 for each illegal listing.10 Airbnb listings in the city were cut almost in half (from over 10,000 to 5,500) when the registration requirement went into effect (Said 2018a). San Francisco has since cracked down on illegal listings in a serious way, including fining some landlords $2.25 million for operating 14 apartments as Airbnb hotels (Said 2018b). Nationally,
San Francisco’s regulatory arrangement with STRs is among the strictest, yet it is also held up as a gold standard (even among platform-industry representatives) for cooperation among cities and platforms. Emerging from within a decidedly progressive political milieu, the cultural work of community members, activists, and artists in San Francisco was able to challenge the industry narrative and contribute to a beneficial recalibration of city relationships with platforms.

**Platform entwinement and the casualization of labour**

Workers in the traditional hospitality industry of large-chain and boutique hotels are also under assault by platform cultures in cities. In the realm of short-term rentals, the reasons for this may have less to do with direct competition, especially for large hotel chains that still dominate business and professional convention markets (Thompson 2018), and more to do with broader ecosystem effects from wide-scale platform use of all types. The housing affordability and displacement problems of STRs often directly hit service workers like those in hotels, pushing them further away from their places of employment and necessitating longer commutes, which can in turn increase commute costs and exacerbate traffic congestion and pollution in cities (Florida and Bendix 2015).

11 Hotel workers have also encountered increased precarity as a result of the popularity of transportation network companies and other gig-economy platforms. A service-workers union representative in San Francisco explained these dynamics for front-end hotel workers:

> We in the hotel industry have seen a major impact on certain classifications of our members, specifically bellmen and doormen at hotels who are no longer hailing cabs for people. People are getting picked up at the curb by Uber and the other TNCs [transportation network companies], and that’s had an impact on their income, in terms of gratuities and tips, et cetera, that they would use to make a living. (SSU07)

Back-end workers, such as room service and kitchen employees, face similar threats even in unionized workplaces:

> [A large San Francisco hotel] had a couple of years back eliminated in-room dining. They had eliminated room service in the hotel and laid off our members who performed that work, and they said this is no longer something that guests desire … Well, scroll forward another year or so, and the hotel had installed in each guest room a tablet, like an iPad device, that was linked to, I think, Grubhub or one of these food delivery companies, and solicited from the guests, ‘If you want, essentially, room service, here’s how you do it: click on this link, and the food will be brought right to your door’. Well, that was unacceptable to us [in the hotel union] because, essentially, they had replaced, they had supplanted work that was being performed by our members with
union wages and benefits with work that was being performed by nonunion vendors. (SSU07)

For unionized establishments, labour unions have scrambled to catch up and integrate negotiations of technology platform disruptions into their collective bargaining. For instance, my informant related that having already lost room service workers, the union has been negotiating for unionized hotel workers, like bellhops, to bring delivered food to guests’ rooms to preserve those positions and allow those workers to benefit, potentially, from associated gratuities. In non-unionized workplaces, employees are at the whim of corporate profit imperatives.

These examples reveal how a broader ecosystem of digital platforms compounds worker precarity and threatens community vitality, especially if workers are pushed out of communities because of job insecurity or housing unaffordability. There may be some sectors, such as the hospitality industry in less-hostile labour environments, where unionization could push back on some of these forces, but mainstream digital platforms seem predicated on the casualization of labour, either directly, through the gig economy, or indirectly, through dispersed support services. As one academic informant explained:

If you’re shifting business from unionized hotels to Airbnbs, then that’s just one more thing that’s eroding the power of organized labor because people who are using Airbnb or other platforms, they’re not hiring unionized employees. They’re hiring people in more casual arrangements to clean the rooms and do all that kind of stuff. (ASA07)

Seen from a holistic perspective, even seemingly discrete platforms like Airbnb and Uber intertwine to produce platform cultures that are anti-labour by default:

If you think about it, unionization is the opposite of what the platform economy does to labor, which is turn everyone into a little micro-contractor who’s selling off little bits and pieces of their time to all these different platforms. It’s hard to see how that works with unionization. It [unionization] just depends on a long-term commitment to employment at a particular location. (ASA07, emphasis added)

Whether employers’ relationships with workers or owners’ relationships with renters, the atomized model of impersonal, short-term exchanges is in tension with both labour and community solidarity. It is a model predicated on convenience and extraction, not commitment and investment.

While community opposition, labour negotiation, and legal regulation each illustrate the ongoing mediation of STRs in cities, industry responses also highlight some unexpected adaptations to platform logics. For instance, in clear competition with Airbnb and others, the Marriott hotel chain has created its own home-sharing service with offerings in top vacation spots
like London, Lake Tahoe, and Bar Harbor (Bloomberg 2019). Catering to a more affluent and likely older clientele, Marriott vets and approves higher-end properties for rent and allows customers to gain credit in the company’s loyalty programme for such stays. Both the Hyatt and Accor hotel corporations have also invested in home-sharing platforms (Bloomberg 2019). These developments indicate an industry-wide blurring of approaches to guest accommodations as traditional hotels grasp at outsourcing arrangements in an attempt to capture some of the STR market, no doubt shedding labour expenses and commitments along the way. This articulation of ‘The Airbnb Effect’ could signal a race to the bottom for labour relations and community sustainability if hotels become more like STRs than distinct alternatives to them.12

Another variation, this time from real-estate investors and developers, exploits provisions in city zoning to run STRs as distributed hotel rooms within residential buildings by offsetting those rooms with simultaneous investment in multi-family apartments. One might think of this as the STR equivalent of carbon offsetting schemes:

And, you’re also starting to see the emergence of these companies like Lyric, which Airbnb just invested in, and Sonder, which have interesting business models that I’m personally not a huge fan of, but are interesting nonetheless. Which is [that] developers will build multi-family housing and basically cross-subsidize the units by setting aside some percentage of units as permanent short-term rentals, which make more money and, technically, I guess, could cross-subsidize other units in the building. And, supposedly, these companies are getting permitted as hotel rooms, like distributed hotel rooms, not short-term rentals, which is super interesting. So, I don’t know if that’s a trend that’s going to take off, but I do think [that] maybe we will start to see new construction where buildings have kind of like multi-use floors. (SSA08)

This possibility represents not only the legal blurring of hotel/STR categories but also the institutionalization of STR models in built form. As infrastructures, buildings in this case, are redesigned to reflect and accommodate platform logics, they entrench those relations, making community opposition of the kind described above that much harder to imagine.

**Conclusion**

It is increasingly apparent that large-scale digital platforms are fundamentally reshaping relationships among people, communities, companies, and governmental entities. As they attain dominance, platforms become infrastructural and indispensable, operating as ‘obligatory passage points’ (Callon 1984, Latour 1988) for commercial exchange and normalizing platform-mediated interactions for access to services or employment opportunities (i.e. within the ‘gig economy’). At the same time, as this paper has shown, existing infrastructures, such as those of city buildings or neighbourhoods,
are becoming platformized and reprogrammed as resources for capitalist gain, often to the detriment of communities. The platformization of infrastructure is a process of pulling existing public resources into the platform sphere and harmonizing them with industry objectives through the use of technological protocols, policies, and laws. Dominant platform logics recast city infrastructures as discrete, private resources best managed through platform-based exchanges for maximum profit. Industry articulations then seek to soften these extractive formulas by stressing alleged benefits to communities. Those holding alternative conceptions of cities or communities are disadvantaged as long as platform logics prevail, which is why opponents so frequently attempt to decentre industry framings. Culture is key to these processes. It is through the circulation of potent narratives that technological change is fuelled, rationalized, and periodically confronted. Thus, as this paper has illustrated, narratives provide accessible articulations of the politics of infrastructure by highlighting both the contingency of platformization, at least in the present moment, and the visceral threat of long-term community erosion brought about by platformization. Inquiry into the cultural dimensions of platforms further reveals the contextual terrain upon which power relations manifest and contestations play out.

This paper has explored the mediation of short-term rental platforms by communities. By focusing on contestations over platform meanings, a picture emerges of malleable technological systems that can be regulated or rejected according to the will of city residents and policymakers. In other words, community members concerned about the damaging effects of STRs reject technological determinism and instead present platforms as tools of expropriation and little more. In progressive political contexts, these messages can find purchase, particularly if residents more generally are worried about housing unaffordability and gentrification eroding the character and composition of their cities. Thus, in San Francisco, where even the affluent are being priced out of housing (Ghaffary 2019), the city was able to leash STRs like Airbnb and begin to arrest some of the damage being done. Granted, as STR advocates would point out, the housing affordability crisis is much deeper and will not be solved by this measure alone.

As encouraging as examples of STR regulation might be, the platformization of infrastructure continues and many of its problems persist. STR companies fight regulation every step of the way and, with few exceptions, refuse to share their data with enforcement offices, making it incredibly difficult and costly for cities to implement effective changes. Platform companies also mutate and adapt to new regulatory environments, for instance by developing novel hybrid configurations to function as distributed hotel rooms that coexist alongside multi-family units. Major hotel chains have also ventured into this field, offering their own platform-rented spaces throughout tourist cities. Along the way, these practices intensify the economic precarity of
service workers who are reduced to independent contractors and denied the protections of formal employment, let alone unionization. As I have discussed, platform cultures normalize these arrangements by reifying the myth of individual convenience, authentic exchange, and resident empowerment while obscuring the consequences. Much damage has already been done to communities as their residents have been forced out and their support structures eroded. The survival – or creation – of diverse communities premised on sociality may depend on harnessing counternarratives and collective action to reframe the place of platforms in society.

Notes

1. See also Bratton (2016), Kitchin and Dodge (2011), Plantin et al. (2018), and Murakami Wood and Monahan (2019) for further discussions of how public and private infrastructures are becoming platformized. In the online context, Helmond (2015) makes a similar case for how the larger web has been aligned with platform needs on the level of code. As Gehl and McKelvey (2019) remind us, both public infrastructures and private platforms are vulnerable to parasitism by actors pursuing unsanctioned or unexpected ends. With my project, the accent is on the parasitism of private platforms upon public infrastructures and social systems.

2. My approach to platform ethnography takes inspiration from the investigative work of artist Ingrid Burrington (Burrington2016a, 2016b) who flags the stunning invisibility of ubiquitous telecommunications infrastructures and heavy ‘cloud’ industries, which can nevertheless be located and traced to their communication and transportation predecessors. In my project, I study platform dynamics in urban contexts through the triangulation of (1) content analysis of industry, media, and government documents; (2) key-informant interviews; and (3) site visits and spatial mapping of platform densities and flows across urban regions.

3. The term platform capitalism signifies monopolistic digital ecosystems that connect users for commercial exchange, produce data and accrue value from those exchanges, and compel users to participate in those ecosystems or risk exclusion, all while reconfiguring existing markets to the logic of the platform (Langley and Leyshon 2017, Lobo 2014, Olma 2014, Partin 2020, Pasquale 2017b, Srnicek 2017).

4. In total, 34 semi-structured interviews were conducted for the project from March to September 2019. Interviews ranged from 29 to 166 min in length, with the average being 70 min long. For more information about the project and its methods, see (Monahan 2020).

5. ‘Unhosted’ means that a property is completely vacant and reserved for guest use only.

6. Participant IDs used throughout this paper give some information about each person. The first letter indicates the city that best coincides with the participants’ area of geographical expertise (Austin [A], Boston [B], or San Francisco [S]). The second letter communicates their platform-based expertise (Amazon [A], short-term rentals [S], or transportation network companies [T]). The third letter aligns with their approximate organizational affiliation (Academia [A],
Community [C], Government [G], Industry [I], NGO [N], or Union [U]). The final two digits of the ID are simply consecutive numbers assigned to interviewees in each city.

7. From my data, a prominent variation on this theme simply substituted the young for the elderly: it positioned cash-strapped recent college graduates as able to move to cities and become successful young entrepreneurs by harnessing the potential of digital platforms like Airbnb and Uber.

8. See Monahan (2020) for analysis of a similar pattern of data hoarding by transportation network companies such as Uber and Lyft.

9. Others involved in the Airbnb protest were ‘[The] Housing Rights Committee of SF, Coalition on Homelessness, Causa Justa Just Cause, California Nurses Association, SF Tenant’s Union, Plaza 16, [and] Brass Liberation Orchestra’ (Dreyer 2019).

10. Technically, this arrangement was the outcome of a legal settlement between STRs and the city after STRs sued over the initial registration requirement in 2014 (American Legal 2019, Dent 2018, Guy 2017).

11. In the San Francisco context, for example, a service-workers union representative observed: ‘There’s been a mass exodus of working people who are now traveling further and further afield just to get to work in the service sector of other industries in San Francisco’ (SSU07).

12. While it has yet to truly take off, a co-op STR model based on community ownership and investment could serve as a platform-facilitated alternative to Airbnb and others. The European-based ‘Fairbnb’ promises to do just this by committing ‘50% of its revenues to support local community projects of your choice such as social housing for residents, community gardens and more’ (Fairbnb 2019).

13. Platforms do not simply provide leverage for companies to pursue these neoliberal forms of capital extraction; through platform dominance, companies also claim authority over the terms and mediums of exchange, thereby controlling the very terrain for contestation (Sadowski 2020, Pasquale 2017a). As van Doorn (2019, p. 14) asserts, ‘platforms like Airbnb are not just exploring the soft power exercised through urban policy and governance but also experiment with new and still dimly registered forms of sovereign power that secure them a lasting grip on the socio-material fabric of contemporary cities and their households’.

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