Black Mobility Matters: An Exploratory Study of Uber, Hacking, and the Commons in Baltimore

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Abstract

Questions about the city – its boundaries, fabric, size, scale, culture, economy, historical and political contributions – populate the expansive horizon of architectural theory. Its immediate denotation is elusive, but the city is frequently captured within images of living networks: complex organisms, ecosystems, hives, colonies, bundles of neurons. These images of "city as living being," present it as possessing essential organs connected by an indispensable circulatory system, regulated by a metabolism. Thus, the vitality and relative scale of a city can be measured from its transportation infrastructure and flow of capital. Many large-sized US cities survived the devastating effects of deindustrialization and white flight, maintaining adequate circulatory systems that connected urban residents to means of work. For the majority of medium-sized US cities – Baltimore, Cincinnati, Buffalo and Pittsburg to name a few – this was not the case. These cities suffered large declines in employment, population, and infrastructure maintenance, as they transitioned from an industrial to a tourist and service (FIRE) based economy. While mobile network technologies supplement existing transit systems in large-sized US cities, they exploit the hollowing out of medium-sized cities in the US post-industrial landscape. These technologies are attempting to both define urban labor and imagine how people connect to labor. In so doing they (re)imagine and (re)define the city itself, (re)organizing the way essential organs are connected and regulated. This article examines the economic and social practices of Uber and how it shapes, and is shaped by, the commons of medium-sized cities that revolutionizes traditional notions of urban

work and mobility, but not necessarily for the better in the long run. Later, the article explores how this imagining impacts the commons through differentiating Uber from Hacking, a long-standing though illegal solution to urban immobility in Baltimore. Through their comparison, the article proposes a civic-minded, open-sourced on-demand car service that capitalizes on Baltimore's car centricity and strengthens the commons through cooperative and mobile networks.