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## **Performing the Sharing Economy**

**Lizzie Richardson**

### **Abstract**

The sharing economy converges around activities facilitated through digital platforms that enable peer-to-peer access to goods and services. It constitutes an apparent paradox, framed as both part of the capitalist economy and as an alternative. This duplicity necessitates focusing on the performances of the sharing economy: how it simultaneously constructs diverse economic activities whilst also inviting the deconstruction of ongoing practices of dominance. Such performances hold open the question of what the (sharing) economy is, suspending it as a space for both opportunity and critique. Drawing on participant observation at a sharing economy 'festival' and analysis of the vocabularies of online platforms, the paper outlines three performances of sharing through community, access and collaboration. It argues through these performances that the sharing economy is contingent and complexly articulated. It has the potential to both shake up and further entrench 'business-as-usual' through the ongoing reconfiguration of a divergent range of (economic) activities. Whilst offering an antidote to the narrative of economy as engendering isolation and separation, the sharing economy simultaneously masks new forms of inequality and polarisations of ownership. Nonetheless, the paper concludes in suggesting that by pointing to wider questions concerning participation in, access to and production of resources, the sharing economy should not be dismissed. Instead, it should serve as prompt to engage with 'digital' transformations of economy in the spirit of affirmative critique that might enact the promise of doing economy differently.

**Key Words:** sharing economy, performance, community, diverse economies, work, commons

### **Highlights:**

- The sharing economy is framed as both part of and beyond the capitalist economy
- Therefore it is framed as a performance: both constructive and deconstructive
- Sharing is held to perform through community, access and collaboration
- Performance shows the contingent, complex articulation of the sharing economy
- Affirmative critique can enact its promise of alternatives to business-as-usual

### **1. Introduction**

The sharing economy refers to forms of exchange facilitated through online platforms, encompassing a diversity of for-profit and non-profit activities that all broadly aim to open access to under-utilised resources through what is termed 'sharing'. The sharing economy constitutes an apparent paradox. It has been framed both as part of the capitalist economy and as an alternative: simultaneously 'neoliberalism on steroids' (Morozov, 2013) and a remedy for a hyper-consumerist culture (Schor, 2015). This duplicity points to the heterogeneity of economic activity as evidenced in analyses of the entanglements of culture and economy (Amin and Thrift, 2007; Berndt and Boeckler, 2011; Floysand and Jaboksen, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Jones, 2015; Muller, 2015). Such work shows how economies are diverse formations that appear through and are

driven by a variety of passions, metaphors and practices that cannot be reduced to individual/corporate competitiveness. Thus the seemingly paradoxical nature of the sharing economy indicates the necessity to examine ‘the continual emergence of new capitalist niches, cultures and forms of agency’ rather than any ‘capitalist monolith’ (Tsing, 2000: 143-44). This dynamic between monism and pluralism in framings of the (capitalist) economy is given an additional orientation through the ‘digital’ (Dalton, 2013; Rose *et al*, 2014). The digital dimension of the sharing economy opens up the possibility of new appearances and practices of economy. In part this concerns the novel articulations of the economy that are manifest in the complex relationship between the virtual and the material (Crampton, 2009; Dodge *et al*, 2009; Kinsley, 2012; 2014; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Zook and Graham, 2007). Equally, it involves the new products that are made, circulated and consumed via digital means (Kitchin, 2014; Wark, 2004; Wilson, 2012).

Together, these reconfigurations of the scope, scale and intensity of economic interactions illustrate the importance of examining the *performances* of the sharing economy. The capacity to be both alternative to and continuation of business-as-usual opens the relationship between the label of the sharing economy and what this label refers to and/or enacts. Such an interest in performances of the economy has been more or less explicit in recent economic geography (Barnes, 2008; Christophers, 2014; Jones and Murphy, 2010). The turns to both practice and relationality draw on elements of performance, with a focus on smaller actors and their role in constituting the places of the economy (Muller, 2015; Jones, 2014). Together with this, there is a body of work on geographies of finance that has used the vocabulary of performance in order to examine the complex realities of financial markets (Coppock, 2013; Pollard, 2013). There also remains a focus on performance as a way to understand processes of differentiation within the labour market (Crang 1994). The vocabulary of roles is important here to think through the ways in which individuals must act within or without particular normative gendered and ethnic positionings (McDowell, 2015; Pratt, 2012). A broad aim of such scholarship is to hold open the question of what the economy is by engaging performance as a constructive and/or deconstructive mode of ‘ontological reframing’ (Gibson-Graham 2008). Constructively, this involves the performative possibilities of (alternative) scriptings of economic knowledge ‘to bring new worlds into being’ (*ibid.* p. 614). Deconstructively, this points to the importance of ‘reading for difference’ that might undermine ‘the performance of dominance’ (*ibid.* p. 624) and expose economic diversities. Building on Gibson-Graham’s approach, I evoke performance to suspend and interrogate the moments of contradiction and diversity in the sharing economy where ‘conflicting identity models clash before they are resolved into possible and impossible identities’ (El-Tayeb 2011: 242).

At issue is what the label of ‘sharing’ does. On the one hand, such labelling operates as an opportunity in the promise of the sharing economy as an antidote. It performs a narrative of collaboration and community in order to reject stories of the economy as engendering isolation and separation. On the other hand, the label opens a space for critique as the sharing economy fails to act out its role. Whilst articulated through the rhetoric of sharing, this vocabulary might be framed as masking new forms of inequality and polarisations of ownership. Therefore my argument is that the sharing economy is contingent and complexly articulated. It

has the potential to both shake up and further entrench ‘business-as-usual’ through the ongoing reconfiguration of a divergent range of (economic) activities. To elaborate on this, the article puts forward three performances that aim to illustrate both the ‘constructive’ potential of the sharing economy, as well as ‘deconstructing’ its contradictions. Firstly, the enactment of new spatialities of community, secondly the role of the consumer as accessor (not owner) and thirdly performances of collaboration through work. The data from which these performances emerge is drawn from attendance at a sharing economy ‘festival’, together with analysis of the vocabularies and activities of sharing economy platforms. As such, the performances outlined below are not intended to exhaust the acts of the sharing economy. Instead I offer them as partial and provisional beginnings but nonetheless with their own truths, that contribute to wider critical geographical engagements with digital technologies and ‘economy’. Next the article will provide an overview of some of the parameters of the sharing economy, suggesting that it can be traced through the cultures of production and consumption associated with both diverse economies and cyber (sub)cultures. This will be followed by a note on method, before three performances of the sharing economy are fleshed out.

### **2.1 Sharing Economy: definitional difficulties, auspicious antecedents**

The sharing economy is a ‘floating signifier for a diverse range of activities’ (Nadeem, in Schor *et al*, 2015: 13). This ‘semantic confusion’ (Belk, 2014a) has also resulted in a proliferation of names for these activities such as the collaborative; gig; on-demand; and crowd-sourcing economy. A variety of definitions are available in more popular literature (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Gansky, 2010). For example, Stephany (2015: 205) suggests the sharing economy is constituted by ‘the value in taking under-utilised assets and making them accessible online to a community, leading to a reduced need for ownership.’ From a more policy orientated perspective, in a report commissioned by the UK government (2014: 13) Woskko defines the sharing economy as ‘online platforms that help people share access to assets, resources, time and skills’. The commissioning of the report itself is an indication of the current hype around the sharing economy in Western Europe and North America, also exemplified in PricewaterhouseCooper’s valuation of the global sharing economy at £9bn, with a predicted rise to £230bn by 2025 (Cadman, 2014). Regarding academic definitions, it must be noted that there is a dearth of literature specifically using the term. Instead, aspects of the sharing economy are explored, especially in relation to changes to consumption. For example Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) consider the shift to access-based consumption and Belk (2014a; 2014b) explores consumers as collaborators. Belk (2014b) argues that such collaborative consumption occupies a middle ground between sharing and marketplace exchange, with elements of both. Elsewhere, Schor (2015: 14) suggests that the sharing economy is constituted by ‘economic activity that is Peer-to-Peer or person to person, facilitated by digital platforms’. Some have argued for a shift away from the term altogether and instead view sharing as a subset of a wider collaborative economy movement (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). However, despite these questions around the term, one of the attractions of the label of sharing is that it is both weighty and flighty enough to capture the breadth and depth of these ‘new’ configurations of economic activity.

Another way of anchoring this floating signifier then is through some of these activities regularly evoked in relation to the sharing economy. Perhaps the most well known is the 'sharing' of space in the model of AirBnB. AirBnB enables users to book and advertise often personal accommodation, reportedly facilitating about 40 million room nights in 2014, with the company's revenues set to exceed half a billion dollars in 2015 (Piper Jaffray, 2015). In addition to space, other key sectors identified by Woskow (2014) of sharing economy growth are transport, time and skills. Also included by Owyang (2014) in his 'collaborative economy honeycomb' infographic, are money (including crypto-currencies, crowd funding and money lending) and goods (such as peer-to-peer market places like the platform Etsy). Returning to the example of AirBnB is useful for considering three key elements of the sharing economy. Firstly, the company is paradigmatic in offering an online 'platform': a digital intermediary that reduces the costs of connecting a diverse array of potential consumers and producers. The hypothetical impact of this is that, assuming relatively constant demand, supply is able to increase meaning that prices can decrease. Thus AirBnB has very quickly built up a greater choice of rooms in terms of location, price and amenities, than many global hotel chains. This is linked to the second element of the sharing economy: it is peer-to-peer. This means that AirBnB 'hosts' are also 'travellers', or more generally that client and service provider are (theoretically) interchangeable. This would exclude access-based consumption models such as ZipCar which are not peer-to-peer. Thirdly, AirBnB is access-based: it is premised upon the ability to buy access to (rather than ownership of) a resource or service (in this case, hospitable space) for a period of time. This criterion would exclude peer-to-peer marketplaces (such as Etsy) in which products are purchased for ownership. Thus, whilst the first element is almost universally present in definitions of the sharing economy, this is supported by some combination of either or both of the latter two.

Given this lack of consensus around definition, another way into the sharing economy is to consider its past. At the time of writing this article, Wikipedia suggests that the term 'sharing economy' started to appear in the mid-2000s, attributing it to the work of lawyer Howard Benkler on 'shareable goods'. More recently, the term can also be traced to Rachel Botsman's viral TED talk on the topic. However, rather than tracing the term, its emergence can be framed as a confluence of two broad mobilisations of 'sharing' within different contexts: diverse economies and cyber (sub)cultures. Regarding the former, practices of sharing might be seen as central to both the theory and the practice of post-capitalist economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010). As a theoretical position, a diverse economies perspective means a recognition of economies as 'intrinsically heterogeneous spaces composed of multiple class processes, mechanisms of exchange, forms of labor and remuneration, finance and ownership' (Healy, 2009: 338). For Gibson-Graham (2008), this is both an ontological and an activist project, the argument being that our categories for framing the world have performative effects. That is, doing economy differently ties together the stories of economy we tell, the knowledge of economy that we construct, and the 'diverse' economies that we practice. Gritzas and Kavoulakos (2015) suggest that the diverse economies perspective focuses attention on alternative models often based around networks of exchange (eg of currency or food) that are small-scale. There is, therefore, often a strong invocation of 'community', a commons that might be shared in and out.

However, rather than implying harmony or political unity, community is anti-essentialist, more of an orientation towards ‘the interdependence of subjects and economic practices’ (*ibid.* p. 7).

The imagination of community in these alternative economic spaces is vital to both their practice and their connection with the sharing economy. As is indicated below, the sharing economy is performed through a similar understanding of community, that plays up differences as much as similarities. Practically for diverse economies, such community is contingent and differentiated through the variety of models of ‘alterity’ in operation (Jonas, 2013). These models might be of attachment to a specific community as an alternative in addition to, as a substitution for, or as oppositions to the ‘capitalist’ landscape (see North, 2010). As such, diverse economies establish sharing as an economic practice concerned with varying iterations of participation in community and the division of its resources. However, it remains an open question as to how to situate the sharing economy in relation to this diverse economies perspective. The difficulty lies at least in part in the question of how the diverse economies perspective is read, namely whether emphasis is placed on difference *from* or difference *within* ‘capitalism’. If difference from ‘capitalism’ is important through ‘projects of economic autonomy and experimentation’ (Gibson-Graham 2008: 614), then the sharing economy might fall short of the criteria of inclusion. Whilst premised on the disruption of business-as-usual, the connection of high-profile (self-defined) sharing economy platforms to venture capital seems to make any suggestion of autonomy from ‘capitalism’ inaccurate. Yet, if difference *within* ‘capitalism’ is given more emphasis within the diverse economies perspective, then the sharing economy might fit the bill. It exposes how ‘digital capitalism is sneaky, contagious and often costumed in its material manifestations’ (Halpern 2014: 7), in ways that might have both homogenising and diversifying tendencies, as I will go on to discuss.

In the second context for practices of sharing - cyber (sub)cultures - diversity and community are also key themes. In fact, elements of cyber culture (understood broadly as the imaginations and practices associated with computing) resonate strongly with the political project of diverse economies. If a diverse economies perspective works to recognise forms of otherwise excluded activities as ‘economic’, cyber cultures have also been invested in alternative economic imaginations. The possibilities of peer-to-peer networks (Oram, 2001) lie at least in part in heterarchy as opposed to hierarchy (Woods, 1996). That is, in the imagination of (economic) space as a ‘self-organising system of order comprised of self inventing and self sustaining individuals, the structure of which changes continually according to changing needs and conditions’ (*ibid.* p. 287). Thus, as De Landa (1996: 192-93) wrote some 20 years ago, computer networks enable ‘meshworks of small producers’ that operate through ‘some measure of self-organisation’. This analysis led him to the premonition that such non-linear possibilities of computing ‘may one day play a crucial role in adding some heterogeneity to a world-economy that is becoming increasingly homogenised’ (*ibid.*). Such imagined heterogeneity within shared connection is in part facilitated through the always present potential for openness; a potential embodied in the figure of the hacker. The term ‘hacker’ came into wider circulation in the 1980s, ‘denoting tinkerers who were enthusiastic about computers’ (Karanovic, 2012: 189). Both hacker identity and activity have been vilified from their inception, broadly because of security risks posed to and through

information as property (Ross, 1990; Thomas, 2003). Nonetheless, hacking also has an illustrious positive history, associated with the ‘hacker ethic’ which included sharing code, together with promoting decentralisation of and access to computing and the creation of digital commons (Levy, 1984; Stalder, 2010; Reagle, 2010).

To some extent then, the sharing economy might be understood as a mainstreaming of this cyber culture. The imagination of networked and connected space as transformative and emancipatory are at least partially realised in the sharing economy. The ability to crowdsource resources has dramatically improved the quality and efficiency of services in a number of industries (although not without consequences to which I will return). Likewise, the openness and participation symbolised by the hack are at work both in the rhetoric of community and in the innovative practices of exchange and usage that solve (economic) ‘inefficiencies’. However, such a narrative of mainstreaming must also be approached with caution. Under question are both the conceptualisation and the process of ‘mainstreaming’. With the former, this concerns which ideas, metaphors and practices are moving from margins to mainstream. The vocabulary of sharing and collaboration does not do justice to the complex array of digital media variables such as interactivity, storage, replicability and mobility that are transforming everyday ‘economic’ interactions (Baym, 2010). Indeed, we might see in such variables a ‘stark contrast between a rich set of technological concepts and a meagre pair of sociological concepts’ in communities and networks (Postill, 2012: 178). Thus, whilst there may be a mainstreaming of the imaginations and practices of cyber cultures, our understandings of and vocabularies for narrating these changes remains uncertain.

Regarding the processes of mainstreaming, the prevalence of ‘hackathons’, ‘hackfests’ and ‘hacklabs’ (Briscoe and Mulligan, 2014; Leckart, 2012) is a demonstration of the uptake of hacking as a positive practice. However, hacking as collaboration for free innovation is ‘only one option among diverse business models’ pursued by hackers (Karanovic, 2012: 190; Turner, 2006). Thus any mainstreaming of cyber culture through the sharing economy is just as much an appropriation of hacking as ‘outlaw innovation’ beyond in-house R&D, as it is a diffusion of any utopian ‘hacker ethic’ (Ettlinger, 2014; Flowers, 2008). Together then, diverse economies and cyber (sub)culture offer challenges to ownership that are also found in performances of the sharing economy. Broadly, they undermine understandings of ownership as individualising and separating. So in relation to the diverse economies perspective, there is a strong emphasis on ownership in common. Ownership is realised through participation in and connection with resources rather than through their isolation. With cyber culture, ownership as closure or containment is disregarded. At the more radical end, this is a rejection of ownership completely (in ‘piracy’), with the more sanitised dimension manifest in the drive to ‘open’ forms of (intellectual) property. Such an ethos towards ownership as common and/or open is taken forwards in the performances of the sharing economy that emerge from OuisShare Fest.

## **2.2 Sharing Economy: methodological challenges**

OuiShare Fest was a three day event held at Cabaret Sauvage in Paris in May 2015. OuiShare is a non-profit ‘think and do-tank’ for the sharing economy founded in 2012. The festival is an opportunity for OuiShare to enable knowledge sharing and build community around the ‘common’ vision of the collaborative economy. It brought together (self-proclaimed) sharing economy innovators such as Uber and ZipCar, with public officials (e.g. one of the sponsors was French train operator SNCF) and grassroots activists. The topics for discussion were broad and demonstrate the diversity of activities currently associated with the sharing economy: collaborative consumption, open source, makers and fab-labs, co-working, crowdfunding, alternative currencies and horizontal governance. As a participant observer, I attended a variety of the short talks and workshops that constituted the program. I tried to gain a sense of the diversity of interests and understandings of the sharing economy at the event by going to a combination of ‘plenary’ talks, and the more specialist workshops focusing on a topics from technology and activism; manufacturing revival; open knowledge and cryptocurrencies. These formal elements were supplemented by informal conversations such as over lunch. I draw here on three ethnographic vignettes taken from these experiences of the festival. The value of reflecting on OuiShare Fest is that it is a conscious performance of the sharing economy. The event brings together those who identify as participants in the sharing economy without necessitating a consensus around what the sharing economy is.

In addition to these vignettes, I also draw on a ‘textual’ analysis of online sharing economy platforms. This predominantly involved an examination of the language and images used on these platforms at the time of writing in order to understand the framings of sharing that they put forward. Again, my focus has been on those platforms involved in the self-referential ‘meta-performance’ of the sharing economy: namely AirBnB and Uber, as covered in the global media; together with the ‘virtual offices’ of co-working spaces such as WeWork and CentralWorking. As such, there are two significant limitations with this methodology, especially within the context of understanding the extent to which the sharing economy might intersect with a diverse economies perspective. The first is that whilst there is value in exploring these conscious performances, they nonetheless might mask other ways of telling the story of the sharing economy. As indicated in the history of cyber cultures (above), sharing of and through code/space has long been occurring, and has been narrated in contradictory ways (eg hacking). In this light for example, one story of the sharing economy could be told through Couchsurfing, rather than AirBnB (e.g. Molz 2012). The second limitation is that such a methodology does not focus on the activities of the sharing economy. An examination of the highly localised and uneven ways people may engage with the potentially ‘placeless’ nature of digital platforms, seems necessary for understanding the complexities and diversity of economies that are being performed. Whilst such an extension of the methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, I will point towards a broader research agenda in the conclusion. Thus as indicated above, my approach is admittedly partial, suited to this research as one preliminary framing for geographical engagements with ‘the sharing economy’.

### **3. Performing Sharing through Community**



*“I’m sitting in one of the marquees with my lunch. I came in because I thought it was a session called ‘Is there an App for Democracy?’ Listening to the discussion now, I’m not sure this is the right session. There are four people sitting on the stage. One of them sounds like he is British. He’s talking about working in London, for the [Conservative] Mayor of London’s office on technology and transport. He seems to be deliberately pitching himself as contrary to the political views held by the others on the panel, in particular when he states that he proudly voted Tory in the recent general elections in the UK. When asked about some of the challenges for technology and politics in the future, he calls on the panel and the audience to look around them and take OuiShare Fest as an example. He states that he is Sikh (he is not White and is wearing a turban) and says that we need to increase the diversity of the workforce in technology. Without stating it, he draws attention to the Whiteness of the event.”*

A first performance of the sharing economy is in the enactment of community. Both the technological function and the marketing language of sharing economy platforms are orientated around community. The session ‘Is there an App for Democracy?’ was one example of the utopian strand of conversations at OuiShare Fest that considered the possibilities of the technologies of the sharing economy for facilitating greater political participation. This interest draws upon the ability of sharing economy platforms to build communities of people around (potentially) progressive causes. The most obvious examples of this are platforms such as *Crowdfunder* and *change.org* that enable the crowdsourcing of (financial) participation in projects and campaigns. However, the progressive possibilities can be unevenly felt, as the racial dynamics of OuiShare Fest indicated. The performances of sharing enacted through community therefore are contingent upon participation; the ability of individuals to contribute to something larger than themselves. Sharing economy platforms enable this participation by providing new ways for attachments between people to take place through space. Whilst technology-facilitated networked socialities have long been a reality (Castells, 1996), there has been a deepening of these practices as mobile technologies have created ‘a logic of continuous connectivity’ (Wilson, 2014). Here connectivity is more than a function facilitating being in one place and connected to an elsewhere. Rather it works as a sensibility in which *being in place* is necessarily *to be connected* such that connectivity is belonging (i.e. if you’re not connected you cannot belong). In this thorough entanglement of the virtual and the material (Kinsley, 2014), digital footprints equate to ‘real’ footprints. Constant connection means that online and offline self are difficult to distinguish. The sharing economy utilises this merger of online and offline through connectivity to facilitate proximities between strangers, thereby fostering participation in a community orientated around a particular service or resource.

Such participation in community is achieved through the cultivation of a disposition that is assured through technology. To unpack this, I want to focus again on the example of AirBnB, although the thrust of the argument stands in relation to other sharing economy platforms. Broadly, the cultivation of a disposition refers to the necessity to make meeting strangers desirable or at least acceptable. Therefore, this might be framed as a form of governing or capitalising on affect (Thrift, 2010). As a platform, AirBnB’s brand sells the ability for strangers to meet and stay in each others’ homes. One reason that this is desirable for the guest is that

strangers, or hosts, are authentic. Their home and local knowledge provide a unique experience for the guest, that at the same time is one of familiarity; AirBnB hosts ‘create a sense of belonging around the world’ (AirBnB). Thus, guest and host are stranger-participants in a community orientated around the value of sharing unique experiences, the possibilities to ‘belong anywhere’ (AirBnB). As indicated above, the peer-to-peer function of the platform means that this situation can be switched: host becomes guest and vice versa. Of course, this performance of community as a crowdsourcing of uniqueness is by no means the main motivation for participants on the AirBnB platform. A major factor for guests (often more important than any ‘authenticity’) is the combination of price and location which mean that accommodation offered on AirBnB is better value. Equally, the image of the welcoming host can be a fallacy. The AirBnB platform is increasingly being used to rent out properties short term by landlords, moving away from any sense of the reciprocity implied by peer-to-peer exchange. Nonetheless, regardless of these differing motivations, sharing economy platforms do require participants to be receptive to encounters with strangers.

It is here that technology plays a role as an assurance structure (Parigi and Cook, in Schor *et al*, 2015). The peer-to-peer nature of the sharing economy means that the institutional structures that offer (a sense of) security to both client and service provider are bypassed. In particular, the trust built through institutions, at least in part through the routinised proximities that they facilitate (D’Este *et al*, 2012; Grabher, 2002; Martin, 2000), is at risk of being lost. The relative importance of face-to-face interaction for such trust formed the basis of much debate concerning the necessity of proximity for economy in a new media age (Amin and Roberts, 2008; Pratt, 2002; Rallet and Torre, 1999; Storper and Venables, 2004). For some, proximity was understood as a decisive factor in establishing trust (Ettlinger, 2003), whilst others argued for a more a relational understanding of trust that took the emphasis away from the specificities of a single site (Murphy, 2006). The role of trust in the sharing economy extends these debates. Trust remains important but is built through the technology. In the vocabulary of AirBnB, ‘trust is what makes it work’, with the function of the platform being to ‘make it easy to get to know hosts’. In practice, such trust involves the construction of an online profile that has a basis in a ‘verified ID’, which includes both connection to (online) social networks and scanning official ID. A further dimension is added through the accumulation of profile reviews that are visible to other guests and hosts. Even in examples that do not involve the same intensity of ‘stranger’ interaction (such as Uber or WalkMyDoggy), the platform still operates as a form of technological assurance as the intermediary for the financial transaction.

Thus, the performance of sharing through community is enabled through the economies of trust built through the platform. Such economies of trust both open and act as a barrier to participation in community. This is because the sharing economy platforms operate on the basis that trust is important in proximities, but can be built prior to face-to-face interaction (Masum and Tovey, 2011). In other words, it is necessary to recognise that there is more than one understanding and site of production of trust in operation. On the one hand, the ability to participate in community is premised upon a user’s capacity to demonstrate that they are trustworthy, a demonstration which itself requires the prior sharing of information (including often a user’s photo,

job and marital status). Such a process forecloses the possibility of participation through the platform - the potential to be trusted - for those who are unable to provide (or to share) satisfactory identification that tells the 'right' story. On the other hand, the sharing of experience face-to-face only occurs after trust has been established online. Again this works to limit participation but this time at the site of the peer rather than the platform. The establishment of trust operates to reduce uncertainty, stripping away some of the serendipity involved in meeting people, and in fact enabling the active selection or rejection of encounters (Parigi and Cook, 2015). Far from 'net neutrality', originally meaning that 'content on the internet should not be differentially processed' (Crampton, 2009: 96), some have argued that such formulations of 'trust' result in cases of 'digital discrimination', for example on racial grounds in the case of AirBnB (Edelman and Luca, 2014). Thus the performance of sharing through community provides the potential for a greater volume and intensity of participation in shared experiences and resources. Simultaneously though, it can limit participation through a prescription of 'trustworthy' attributes that can overdetermine the sorts of sharing activities that might take place.

#### **4. Performing Sharing through Access**

*"The introduction to the afternoon's events is in full swing when I enter the main tent. I find somewhere to sit round at the side which means I have a slightly obscured view of the stage. This doesn't matter too much though as there are two giant screens displaying what is occurring on stage (despite it being a relatively a small venue). I look around and see that not many people are on their phones or laptops in the audience, something of a surprise as I expected people to be sharing the event on social media. But the lack of devices is explained when one of the women on stage says that they are having trouble with the wifi, as is the way with these large temporary events. She suggests that those who are able to connect through French mobile networks might share their access to the internet with those who cannot."*

The second performance of sharing is through access. The sharing economy is played out in the possibility of access as both a practice and an ideal. The partial nature of such access is thrown into relief through the problems with wifi at OuisShare Fest. The intermittent availability of wifi pointed to wider questions concerning the temporal and spatial limits to access as practice. Access to wifi (or a mobile high speed internet connection) is desirable if not essential for much of the activity of the sharing economy (as defined through the presence of online platforms). Yet, if the sharing economy is (to be) the global phenomenon some claim (for examples see Parsons, 2014), the elephant in the room is the ongoing 'digital divide', both between and within countries (Graham, 2011; Graham *et al*, 2012). Thus the uneven provision and intermittent availability of mobile internet as both means and ends of access point to the contingencies of such access. Equally, the common resource of wifi at OuisShare Fest also raised questions regarding the implications or meaning of access. In particular, access to the wifi commons was supposed to provide the same functionality as ownership. That is, it would offer the user the same capabilities as if this were their own connection. The possibility of shared wifi at OuisShare Fest therefore points to the way the ideal of access to a commons is performed as a solution to the perceived limits to and/or impossibility of ownership. So just as the contingency in per-

formances of sharing through community lies in participation, the acts of sharing through access are orientated around the uncertainty the ‘commons’.

A key modality of the sharing economy concerns access to common resources. This builds on the free access built into the digital commons of cyber culture (Stalder, 2010). Most prominent amongst these ‘common’ resources are space (residential, commercial), transport (cars) and labour (taxi drivers, ‘taskers’). Agyeman *et al* (2013) argue that the cutting edge of the sharing economy lies in this sense of a commons in which collective ownership and co-production are prioritised over commercial interests. Of course, the question of what constitutes ‘the commons’ is much harder to answer (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012), meaning that it might be better understood as heterogeneous, an ‘affirmation of singularities’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 124) rather than any coherent sameness. In relation to the sharing economy, the multiple articulations of a ‘commons’ are constituted through the different (economic) models of access. At one end of the spectrum there are access-based consumption platforms in which users pay for the experience of temporary access to a privately owned resource, such as a car in the ZipCar model (more on this below). At the other end of the spectrum there are platforms that are themselves common resources, such as the workers who own shares in the self-employment platform Loconomics. These heterogeneous possibilities of access correlate with the idea behind open source software that ‘is configured fundamentally around the right to distribute not the right to exclude’ (Weber in Crampton 2009: 93). Thus, whilst the focus on distribution theoretically aims to improve access to a resource; it also drives the development of economic models that profit from such access. In this ‘openness paradigm’, decentralising and distributing an invention become the grounds of ‘value extraction’, rather than the product itself (Ettlinger, 2014: 94).

Therefore, access in the sharing economy plays out the latency of the ‘appropriation of wealth produced in common’ (Jeffrey *et al*, 2012: 1249) through the tension between public and private. In other words, there is a tension in the notion of the commons between ‘municipal co-operatives as an extension of ‘the public’ and community engagement strategies which are likely to lead to an extension of ‘the private’” (M. Shaw 2014: i15). Thus if the claim that we are entering the ‘post-ownership economy’ (Belk, 2014b: 1599) is true, the contingencies of commons access mean that this does not necessarily imply a more equitable distribution of resources. In fact as Orsi (2012) has pointed out, the sharing economy as represented through the big names of AirBnB and Uber is constituted by private companies funded by venture capitalists, further entrenching the inequalities associated with ownership. Nonetheless, access to common resources, whether publicly or privately owned, can be framed as having broader benefits in a world where such resources are finite. Here, access is thought to be a means to improve the quality rather than quantity of our engagements with materials. In this ‘economy of better not more’ (New Economics Foundation, 2012), there is scope for a more sustainable less resource-intensive model of consumption. Thus this is why ventures such as ZipCar are included in the sharing economy, despite some arguing that this is ‘pseudo-sharing’; privately owned car rental that does little to upset models of ownership (Belk 2014a). However, by providing a more flexible and convenient resource than traditional car hire models, ZipCar makes temporary access more attractive, with the pre-

sumed implication being reduced demand for automobile production overall. The performance of sharing through access does therefore point to a shift in cultures of ownership, even if not a state of ‘post-ownership’.

This shift is characterised in the pseudonym of the ‘on-demand economy’ (Stein, 2015) which involves a move from ‘you are what you own’ to ‘you are what you can access’ (Belk, 2014b). That is, liquid consumer identity projects are more suited to the transience and flexibility of access (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). This has been facilitated by a move away from the historical stigma associated with access, or so the story goes. As is illustrated in the etho-politics of owner-occupation in the UK housing market (Flint, 2003), the cult of ownership is as much built around an ethical as an aesthetic project. Ownership was held to necessitate an ‘ethic of care’ for individuals and neighbourhoods (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). In contrast, in the sharing economy, access becomes the means of ‘self-realisation’ (Lee in Schor *et al*, 2015: 17), following the broader trend towards an ethics built around the relational processes of consumption as much as the end product (Mansvelt, 2010). However, this shift towards more processual identification through access is complexly articulated in the relationships between the individual, the public and the private. Rather than individual choice, access is often the only option available, particularly in costly, densely populated urban areas where the sharing economy thrives. Thus access as a form of cooperation works as a solution to ongoing questions of urban service provision (Pinch, 1985), instead of any political drive towards redistribution or mobilisation (Lee in Schor *et al*, 2015). In fact, the growth of access to privatised commons in urban areas might be understood both as a response to and symptom of the decline of access to public common resources, certainly within the UK context, such as libraries, leisure centres and lighting (R. Shaw, 2014). Instead ‘models of access mediated by the marketplace’ (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012: 881) are replacing public resources and also finding new ways to extract ongoing revenue from private resources. Sharing through access then might be a choice or forced, and takes different forms that articulate a variety of configurations of the commons.

## **5. Performing Sharing through Collaboration**

*“To the right of the stage there is a standalone whiteboard on which two women are writing and drawing. I didn’t notice this earlier. I go over to take a closer look at what they are doing. Together they are recording, through a combination of words and pictures, what is going on on-stage. I wonder what the purpose of this is, perhaps I have missed the mention of them being there. The main attention they seem to be getting is from a cameraman who is occasionally filming them, and a few attendees who wander over every so often to have a look. I wonder how they pick out together and instantaneously the speech and events they are going to illustrate on the whiteboard. It is an act of crafted recording, leaving a mark, that is at the same time transient. It seems that there is no systematic attempt to record them recording. The whiteboard gets wiped clean once they have filled it up and although a few people take photos every now and then, this doesn’t appear to follow any particular pattern.”*

The final performance of sharing is through collaboration. The sharing economy operates through people working together to produce something. Such forms of collaboration can involve the sort of co-production exemplified by the two illustrators at OuiShare Fest. The two women were working together to come up with visualisations that storied the event. In this instance, such co-production was occurring in 'real-time': both participants were working on the project at the same time and also in the same place. Even when not in a formal collaboration, 'co-working', being in the same location as others (often in a similar field), can provide serendipitous co-production. The growth of co-working spaces capitalises on these long recognised advantages of proximity for innovation (Grabher, 2002). However, digital technologies mean that such co-production does not have to take place at the same time nor in the same place (Leadbeater, 2009). In this light, the illustrators at OuiShare were a quirky return to the analogue in a world of digital collaborative drawing applications. Such applications can culminate in production and market, for example through the company Threadless in which 'art unknowns become art totally-knowns' when designs are crowdsourced and printed onto t-shirts (and other 'canvases'), so that participants can 'make great together' (*sic.*) (Threadless). This points to another reading of collaboration in the sharing economy in which working together equates to a greater fragmentation of production. Here collaboration takes place at the (digital) site of the platform that brings together people working on different versions of the same task. Thus performing sharing through collaboration dramatises the contingencies of production in which working together is reconfiguring understandings of shared times and locations.

Collaboration in the sharing economy encompasses open and decentralised practices that blur (and casualise) production and consumption. The 'collaborative economy' is often used interchangeably with the 'sharing economy' to point to the way the crowdsourcing of goods and services involves forms of cooperation. This might include 'people coordinating the acquisition and [/or] distribution of a resource for a fee' (Belk, 2014b: 1597), together with cooperation that involves borrowing/lending for free, such as Neighborgoods which allows users to borrow and lend items within their local community. This capacity to both borrow and lend is indicative of the way collaboration in the sharing economy further entangles production and consumption, the blurred boundaries of which are significant in cultural economy approaches (Amin and Thrift, 2004). This is epitomised through the peer-to-peer nature of the sharing economy, in which the interchangeability of consumer and producer further entrenches the potential for consumer practices to yield 'considerable productive energy' (Amin and Thrift, 2007: 147). The compulsion to consume is easily translated into a compulsion to produce as (for some) production becomes pleasurable akin to a form of consumption. So as Stein (2015) articulates, it is fun to start your own 'corporation', meeting strangers when you let them hire out your car or when you cook dinner for them in your own home. That is, there is an aura to these analogue acts of making (Luckman, 2013), that despite their calculated occurrence through digital means, affords a degree of variability from 'algorithmic' living. Here the distinction between work and leisure is at least partially upset as sharing through collaboration can make both production and consumption a 'casual' affair.

Yet, this casualisation through collaboration is marked by an ambivalence that extends more broadly to the spaces and times of work associated with the sharing economy. This is that the makings of cooperation can simultaneously establish greater fragmentation. To unpick this, let's turn first to the promise of collaboration in the sharing economy, which is that it makes work better: it produces more quality and/or quantity of labour. The idea that collaboration improves quality is built into digital design through open development (Raymond, 2001). This denotes the way in which decentralised peer review of code (often through hacking) can lower costs and improve software quality. Such potential of collaborative work is one driver of the growth of co-working spaces that are framed by some as part of the sharing economy (Gandini, 2015). Apart from solving the problem of access to office space in high density urban areas, such workspaces claim to offer workers/consumers participation in a 'community of creators' (WeWork) that will enable them to 'work better' whether 'in private or collaboratively' (Central Working). Productive collaboration is facilitated through the consumption of events and activities that aim to blur the office space with play to enable worker self-actualisation (Brooks and Bowker, 2002). Indeed, Central Working proudly include a testimonial from a 'community member' on their website stating that the environment is nurturing *because* 'there's no barrier between work and life.' In terms of the quantity of labour, aside from the greater productivity potentially achieved through more people working to complete a single task, the promise of collaboration also lies in the possibility a greater number of tasks overall being completed when the pool of potential workers is multiplied. This is achieved through the crowdsourcing of labour through sharing economy platforms such as Uber and TaskRabbit that empower 'temporary contractors' by connecting them with consumers (Walker in Schor *et al*, 2015).

However, in both the improved quality and quantity of work promised by collaboration through the sharing economy there is also greater fragmentation. Collaborating to improve the quality of work might be incapsulated by the outsourcing of R&D in what Ettliger (2014) terms the 'openness paradigm'. Rather than problem solvers working 'in' a company, there is a further dispersal of work through a 'new tier in the division of labour facilitated by new communications networks' that entails 'unregulated freelance work' (*ibid.* p. 100). Equally, in collaboration through the crowdsourcing of labour to carry out tasks that require skills that are in ample supply (such as driving through Uber), there is a proliferation of highly localised and parcelled work (Schor, 2015). In this 'gig-economy', such fragmentation means that liability and risk are unclear and often unequally shared (Lee, 2015). Thus, the question here is who benefits from such simultaneous collaboration and fragmentation. Whilst there are certainly advantages in the micro-entrepreneurship offered through the crowdsourcing of labour, the critique is that it predominantly benefits the platforms driving such 'fissuring' of the workplace (Weil, 2014). As the ongoing debates in the global media around Uber's contested status as an employer demonstrate (eg in California), sharing economy platforms claim to be just that: a staging for connection or a marketplace that is definitely *not* an employer. This means drivers are working *through* rather than *for* Uber (or potentially being stripped of customers if they do not use the platform), with the implication being that they are not subject to the same safety-net benefits accrued by conventional workers (Walker in Schor *et al*, 2015). Meanwhile, Uber (and other sharing economy platforms) benefit from com-

missions taken from the marketplace they provide, but without having to meet the regulations imposed on conventional employers. Thus the performance of sharing through collaboration is contingent: it provides opportunities for a greater quality and quantity of work but poses vital and unanswered questions concerning the conditions of, access to and profits from such labour.

## 6. Conclusion

The sharing economy converges around activities facilitated through digital platforms that enable peer-to-peer access to goods and services. It has the seemingly paradoxical potential to both shake up and further entrench ‘business-as-usual’ in a variety of areas of economic activity. Drawing on cultural economy approaches (Amin and Thrift, 2004), the argument has been that the sharing economy is best understood as a series of performances rather than a coherent set of economic practices. In their contingent and complex articulation, these performances help explain the paradoxical potential of the sharing economy, in that they construct diverse economic activities whilst also inviting the deconstruction of ongoing practices of dominance (Gibson-Graham 2008). Building on forms of sharing present in conceptualisations of diverse economies and cyber (sub)cultures, these performances highlight some of the challenges and possibilities of the ‘digital’ for 21st century economies. One concerns the appearance of community through performances of sharing. Community is mobilised as a frame to facilitate novel forms of participation in the economy, but at the same time has the potential to produce and/or entrench discrimination and barriers to engagement. Another is the performance of sharing through access. Rather than ownership, access is privileged as the primary form of consumer expression through connection with common resources. However, such access often denotes greater concentrations of ownership when such a commons is private rather than public. The final performance is sharing through collaboration where (innovative/mundane) production increasingly takes place through open and decentralised labour practices. Whilst this provides opportunities for a greater quality and quantity of work, it also opens up unregulated spaces of employment that might be exploited by sharing economy platforms.

Thus, in using the lens of performance, the aim has been to provide ‘more room to move, enlarging the space of the ethical and political’ (Gibson-Graham 2008: 615) in relation to the sharing economy. Performing sharing enables an understanding of how two seemingly contradictory driving forces of economic activity can occur simultaneously. That is, the sharing economy is ‘genuinely collaborative and communal’ yet at the same time ‘hotly competitive and profit driven’ (Nadeem in Schor *et al*, 2015: 13). The performances that make the sharing economy use digital technology to extend the ‘well-established repertoires and rhetorics of local exchanges’ (Walker in Schor *et al*, 2015: 15) such as neighbourhood tool-sharing and time banks. However such a reality might also be understood as a conjured appearance, the ‘latest example of insurgent sentiment being used to sell the bona fides of profit-making corporations’ (Lee in Schor *et al*, 2015: 17). Thus, the sharing economy is the ‘self-conscious making of a spectacle [that] is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds’ (Tsing, 2000: 118), that despite (or because of) technology ‘is always culturally specific, creating a magic show of peculiar meanings, symbols, and practices’ (*ibid.* p. 119). Together then, in ac-



knowledging the spectacle of the sharing economy through a focus on performance, some of the problems *and* the possibilities of such activities have been emphasised. Whilst undoubtedly enabling a considerable concentration of wealth for financial backers of the more profitable platforms, the sharing economy must nonetheless be viewed pluralistically rather than monolithically. It both promises and enacts possibilities of doing economy differently. This is because the performances of the sharing economy play out wider questions concerning participation in, access to and production of resources.

As Schor (2015: 15) argues ‘information, ecological assets and social relations are at the core of 21st century economies’ and ‘these resources are not well organised via private property and profit maximization, as a considerable body of economic theory shows’. Thus, there is value in approaching the sharing economy in the spirit of affirmative critique, in which a little utopianism might aid its enactment as an ontological project (Berlant, 2004; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Weeks, 2011). Such a project would in part involve further analysis of the various performances of sharing outlined above, expanding these provisional readings. Equally, if we recognise the plurality of economies encompassed by these performances, a broader aim might involve using ‘the sharing economy’ as a prompt rather than the target of geographical research. Instead of seeking to delimit the sharing economy, the focus of research could be on how digital technologies can extend, reconfigure and upset a diversity of existing economic practices. Given the role of mobile communications in significantly altering to the spaces of economy and our perceptions of them, such research would require a variety of different methods, crossing the qualitative-quantitative ‘divide’ (DeLyser and Sui, 2013). In addition to this plurality of methods, the increasing casualisation and ‘commercialisation of the intimate’ engendered by digital platforms suggest that bringing a more ethnographic approach to bare on these reconfigurations of economy would be particularly helpful. As well as building on existing methods examining the cultures of technology in geography (e.g. Kinsley 2013), such research could also draw on methods used to understand the experience of mobility (and mobile working) (eg Laurier 2004; Cresswell 2011). Overall, my aim has been to open the sharing economy as an exemplary performance of ‘a culture dominated by economic imperatives but yearning for more cooperative ways of doing things’ (Nadeem in Schor *et al*, 2015: 13), and to suggest it is through the affective possibility of this desire for a different world that our critiques should be channelled.

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